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The 'Theological Nihilism' of Friedrich Gogarten. On a Context in Karl Löwith's Critique of Carl Schmitt

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This essay discusses the philosopher Karl Löwith's critique of the jurist Carl Schmitt and the theologian Friedrich Gogarten. My aim is twofold: first, I want to reconstruct Löwith's thesis in his 1935 article on Schmitt's 'occasional decisionism' (updated to include a critique of Gogarten in 1960), together with a reading of some central texts by Schmitt and Gogarten; second, I want to raise some critical points regarding Löwith's claims through these readings. While I agree with Löwith that aspects of Schmitt's and Gogarten's thought helped hastening the nihilistic tendencies they themselves claimed to counter, I believe that his diagnosis of their decisionism as nihilism misses important nuances in their work, nuances crucial to the problematization, historicization and philosophical analysis of nihilism. Ultimately, I find that the main point of contestation between Löwith and Schmitt/Gogarten is not whether the latter two affirm modern meaninglessness, but rather whether history can and should be invested with meaning in the first place.

Introduction

The conceptual history of nihilism seems to be a history of perceived loss of meaning. Beyond this, not much seems to be agreed upon within the study of the concept – neither its actual effects, its development, nor least of all its inherent meaning (or lack thereof). Following from this lack of consensus in interpretation, not much can be agreed upon when it comes to the issue of responding to and acting under conditions of nihilism. Nihilism has been described as a modern phenomenon, as post-modern, as something inherently human, as a consequence of secularization and the scientific world-view, and as the essential feature of monotheism, especially Christianity – to name just a few diagnoses.[1]

I would suggest that a constructive way of looking at the phenomenon of nihilism is to take a closer look at its conceptual history. My suggestion is that more

interesting than the designation of nihilism is the problem presented by this designation – that is, the form of the question, which may be more illuminating than the contents of the answer. I will make this case through a critical reading of an important text from the conceptual history of nihilism. In a way, it is perhaps fitting that such an examination should deal with the author of a book entitled *Meaning in History*. This particular work, however, will not be my main focus here.

In the 1960 reissue of Karl Löwith's critical essay on the work of the jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt, 'Der Okkasionelle Dezisionismus von C. Schmitt' (originally published in a shorter version in 1935), the conservative protestant theologian Friedrich Gogarten makes a somewhat unexpected appearance towards the end. For Löwith, Gogarten is a theological representative of a nihilistic tendency within German thought, of which he views Schmitt to be a politico-theoretical expression. Those familiar with the history of the concept of nihilism and its connection to the decline of traditional religious authority and belief may be surprised to find a proponent of such authority and belief being labeled a nihilist. Even more interesting is that Löwith seems to be choosing Gogarten as another exemplary German nihilist, without any other specific connection to Schmitt.

However, Schmitt makes a clear reference to Gogarten as a prominent thinker of secularization in the 1934 foreword to the second edition of his *Politische Theologie*, and Gogarten makes ample references to Schmitt in his work on the political aspects of theology. Without necessarily questioning Löwith's claim of a connection between the two men (which has obvious merits), I would here like to expand upon this connection between Schmitt and Gogarten. But I will also raise some points that are not brought up by Löwith in his comparison between the two.

While I agree with Löwith that aspects of Schmitt's and Gogarten's thought helped hasten the nihilistic tendencies they themselves claimed to counter, I believe that his diagnosis of their decisionism as nihilism misses very crucial nuances of their work, nuances that may be useful in both the historicization and philosophical analysis of nihilism.

In what follows, I will therefore attempt a critical approach to Löwith's reading of Schmitt and Gogarten, using elements of their respective works to bring out such nuances. This essay will not attempt to grapple with Löwith's conception of nihilism in general, but rather concentrates on a problematic point in his reading of Schmitt and Gogarten. I start out by describing some aspects of the early work of Schmitt, which I then relate to Löwith's critique. From this, I raise some questions regarding certain elements of Löwith's critique, elements that I then use to move on to a discussion of some Schmitt-related features of Gogarten's theology. In Schmitt's deeper connection with Gogarten, unrecognized by Löwith, I find reasons to question an all-too facile analysis of nihilism. Mostly, these reasons can be related to the view of modern principles of responsibility. From this, I conclude that the differing analyses of Löwith and Schmitt/Gogarten must be related to their differing problematizations of historical meaninglessness.

While once influential in the reception of Schmitt's work, Löwith's analysis seems to be regarded as dated and is largely discarded in contemporary discussion.[2]

Löwith's critique of Schmitt, and diagnosis of Gogarten, remains a noteworthy document in the conceptual history of nihilism, as well as a relevant contribution to the historicization of the phenomenon itself. Therefore, I claim, Löwith's essay, as well as its respective objects, is worth critical reconsideration. This essay therefore first and foremost aims to make a contribution to the study of the concept of nihilism. But I would like to add that while the study of nihilism benefits from the reading of Löwith, Schmitt and modern theology (and not just Gogarten), so the study of Schmitt would benefit from reading him as a theorist of nihilism.

Carl Schmitt: Anti-romantic Decisionist

Carl Schmitt (1888–1985) has been called both 'the crown jurist of the Third Reich' and 'the newest classic of political thought'. He remains highly controversial, mostly because of his support of the Nazi regime in the years leading up to the Second World War and because of blatant anti-Semitism, but also partly because of the ominous character of his theory. By this latter reason alone, he may hold the right to the title of 'the German Hobbes of the 20th century'.[3]

The most famous feature of Schmitt's thought is his conception of the fundamental political distinction as that between friend and enemy. That is, not pertaining to an essence, but rather to the intensity, of a relation.[4] It is this conception that has meant most for the revival of Schmittian thought since the early 1990s, a period during which several of his most central works have been translated and his texts have become an increasingly common point of reference in the international discourse on political theory. Since 9–11, Schmitt's definition of sovereignty as ultimately related to the control over the state of exception has become almost as infamous as his concept of the political. And if this was not enough, the same book that features Schmitt's definition of sovereignty also nebulously claims that 'all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts',[5] a claim clearly resonating with contemporary reappraisals and problematizations of modern secularism.

Karl Löwith (1897–1973) was a German philosopher, close to and inspired by Martin Heidegger. Owing to his Jewish descent, Löwith was forced to leave university after Hitler's rise to power. He went into exile, first to Italy and later to Japan and the USA. After the Second World War, Löwith returned to Germany. While originally interested in applying phenomenology to social and political analysis, he developed a critique of Heidegger's philosophy following these experiences of Nazism, exile and war. The essay on Schmitt can be read as a part of this project.

Löwith would later grow more interested in the relationship between the philosophy of history and theological visions of historical teleology. His probably most famous work, *Meaning in History* (first published in English 1949, in German 1953), puts forward the thesis that western philosophy of history to an important extent is a secularized version of biblical and prophetic discourses. Löwith's later interest in theology may have played into the choice to include Gogarten in a postscript to the article on Schmitt.

Originally published under the pseudonym Hugo Fiala in 1935, during the Italian part of his exile, Löwith's article, 'The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt',[6] forms something like a general assault on the Schmittian system. Or, rather, not *system*, since part of the critique is grounded in the well-argued position that Schmitt's political thought does not amount to a system at all. Instead, Schmitt is construed as an 'occasionalist', an adherent of a principle of radical contingency and an idea of substanceless subjective opportunity as the proper understanding of activity.

This accusation strikes home, not least because the characterization of occasionalism used by Löwith is originally Schmitt's own. He had formulated it in a 1919 indictment of romantic political thought, *Politische Romantik*. There, Schmitt had argued that the romantic lacks the ability to view the state and political activity as something beyond the occasionalist interventions of such a substanceless subject, an agent that *occasionally* intervenes in historical events, *subjectively*. The romantic can only view the world as an arena for self-realization and hence cannot form a proper understanding of the political events surrounding him. For him, reality is mainly an aesthetic experience, not political.

It could be said that in *Politische Romantik*, Schmitt attempted to diagnose and criticize bourgeois political subjectivity, while his almost simultaneously authored book on the history of dictatorship in Western legal thought, *Die Diktatur* (1921), was an attempt at criticism of the objective political constitution of the bourgeois world.[7] These two projects coalesce in *Politische Theologie*, originally published in 1922, which burrows further into the foundations of bourgeois thought. Here, Schmitt attacks the hegemonic legal positivism and parliamentary liberalism of his day. He reverses the conceptual order of these theories and places the instance of decision over the rule of norms. This reconceptualization and its prioritization of decision over norm is the basic feature of the alternative legal theory Schmitt labels 'decisionism'.

What Schmitt calls 'normativism' in liberalism and positivism tends to de-emphasize the importance of the decision, trying to erase elements of personal authority, viewing these as elements of irrationality in the legal and political system. The emphasizing of decision over norm is Schmitt's way of arguing the importance of a personalized authority in the struggle to counter the impersonal, depoliticized character of modernity. In Schmitt's view, romanticism, liberalism and positivism all meet in the tendency to remove subjectivity and personality from politics.

Following from this, Schmitt accuses modern political thought of having difficulties grasping the nature of the political and juridical decision in general and therefore sovereignty in particular. He regards this as a result of the secularization of thought. Immanence is the structuring metaphysical principle of modernity according to Schmitt, and it can be seen in the naturalism of the sciences, where all causes must be explained in a naturalized way (whether the sciences are natural or human sciences), as well as in the political principles of mass democracy, where representation is thought of as shared identity between the rulers and the ruled.

The modern concept of sovereignty was constructed during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the works of Bodin and Hobbes, metaphysical contemporaries

of the Cartesian Ego and the absolute monarchy of the early modern state. All these thought-structures featured strong elements of transcendence, whereas the sovereignty of Schmitt's day, as well as ours, was thought to be formulated within the immanence of legal systems and democratic representation. This, according to Schmitt, is both politically and metaphysically impossible.

The secularization of thought and the turn to immanence are the central features of the Schmittian analysis of modernity, two trends emphatically brought forward in Schmitt's paper describing modernity as 'The Age of Neutralizations and De-Politicizations' from 1929.[8] Here, he describes the development of Western thought as emanating from an escape out of the conflicted domain of theology in search of a neutral, uniting ground following the religious wars of the seventeenth century, a movement going through moral theory, economy and ending in technology as the escape from one domain seems to have brought the conflict with it, and hence resulting in a politicization of each new domain. However, Schmitt never answers the question of whether this longing for neutralization and depoliticization could be fulfilled. He seems to be open to the possibility of an actual technological neutralization of human thought, even if it is obvious that he views this as a great loss for – and even a threat to – mankind as such.

Schmitt's early thought thus grounds its historical analysis in a confrontation with the political development of the nineteenth century and the growing dominance of the European bourgeoisie. The central question is how to envisage the political decision, the *Entscheidung*, in effect: the subjective political dimension. In short, Schmitt's political theory can be read as an attempt to understand the possibility of modern authority, that is: *responsibility*. Schmitt's returning question is 'who decides?', which is, according to him the ultimate formula regarding the problem of sovereignty, but clearly therefore also a question of who is ultimately responsible. Decisionism claims that this ultimate responsibility always falls on a person, never a mere norm.

What 'The Age of Neutralizations and De-Politicizations' brings to this is an analysis of how the philosophical and political development of the nineteenth century fits into a broader, longer historical development and what can be expected to follow from this development. The modern turn to technology risks the neutralization not only of the political, but of the human spirit and the ability of personal decisions as such. In this, Schmitt's analysis is strikingly similar to other diagnoses of nihilism from his time. Universalization, secularization, economization, technologization and instrumentalization are all aspects that were brought up under the rubric of 'nihilism' in the face of modernization by this generation of German thinkers, both on the right and on the left. For some, Nazism seemed the salvation from nihilism. For others, it was nihilism in its highest form. Schmitt and Gogarten – for a while at least[9] – ended up in the first camp, Löwith in the second.

Carl Schmitt: Atheological Occasionalist?

It is the tenets of *Politische Romantik* and *Politische Theologie* that form the main background to Löwith's criticism of Schmitt, as he poses the problematic relationship

between *occasion* and *decision* in Schmitt's work up to 1935. The structure of Schmitt's occasionalist – because Löwith views Schmitt also as an *occasionalist* and not just a decisionist, an argument that I will return to shortly – theory is homologous to a form of active nihilism that Löwith traces in some 'like-minded' twentieth-century German thinkers.[10] This *active* nihilism is described as a form of thought that tries to affirm the meaningless emptiness of the modern world, to face up to the challenges of nihilism by resolutely locating itself in this emptied-out world. Along these lines, Schmitt had claimed that, viewed from a normative standpoint, the decision is born out of nothingness – '*aus einem Nichts geboren*' (Ref. 5, p. 37f.).

Although Schmitt was not late to affirm the inescapable necessity of myths for modern politics, not least nationalism,[11] Löwith concludes that his political thought did not manage to formulate a new proper foundation for modern, political activity. The ground remained a void. In this, the nihilism of Schmitt's theory becomes clear according to Löwith (Ref. 10, pp. 34, 44; 139, 146). This is what opens up Schmitt's thinking for supporting Nazi ascension to power, its tendency to become 'nothing other than a *decision in favor of decisiveness*' (Ref. 10, p. 44; 146, emphasis in the original). Now, Schmitt's most ambitious biographer to date, Reinhard Mehring, gives no less than 42 possible and partly contradicting motives for Schmitt's joining the NSDAP and supporting the Nazi state, including anti-Semitism, opportunism, patriotism and cynicism (Ref. 7, pp. 311–312), but one could of course argue that Löwith's analysis would fit as one among these motives, alternatively encompassing several of them.

However, there is one difficulty in Löwith's designation of Schmitt as an *occasionalist* decisionist. Löwith maintains that Schmitt's 'theological' references from the nineteenth century, his anti-romantic, anti-bourgeois designated predecessors, foremost Kierkegaard and the reactionary catholic Donoso Cortés, were far distanced from Schmitt's position and that he misquotes and misconstrues them in order to call upon them to defend his own, nihilistic position. Schmitt's decisionism is ultimately to be regarded as a profane one, since he believes 'only in the power of decision' – not in theology, nor metaphysics, nor humanitarian morality (Ref. 10, pp. 37, 40; 141, 144). Thus, Löwith can claim that 'Schmitt's own concept of the specific character of the political is characterized generally by the fact that it is first of all a polemical counter-concept to the romantic concept and that in addition it is a secularized concept bordering on the theological one' (Ref. 10, pp. 32; 137 – translation modified). Schmitt's concept of the political is therefore to be viewed as 'anti-romantic' and 'atheological' – '*untheologisch*' – according to Löwith.

To call Schmitt an anti-romantic thinker is hardly contestable, but Löwith's view of Schmitt as atheological is more problematic. Since Schmitt's death, the role of theology in his thought has been almost as central to the debate about his legacy as his collusion with Nazism. Today, few would dispute that Schmitt's close ties to theologians and his appeal to theological concepts are important factors to weigh in when his political theory is analyzed. An important commentator such as Heinrich Meier even claims that political theology defines the center and the context of Schmitt's thought.[12]

Löwith seems to be reading Schmitt's claim regarding the secularized concepts of modern state theory as a one way development, as if secularization meant that something once religious simply has become non-religious. This not only contradicts the majority of readings of Schmitt, but also Löwith's own analysis of modern philosophies of history in *Meaning in History*. Clearly, secularization is a concept containing a double meaning and a genealogical claim. Maybe one could say that it raises a question rather than resolves it. If something is actually secularized, what is it that actually comes with it from its old religious context? This is what is at issue in *Politische Theologie*, which can be read as a meditation on the transformations of political thought and the implications thereof for legal theory. What can be made of a theological content in an 'atheological', decisionist context? It is here that Löwith's appropriation of Gogarten for the deepening of his critique becomes interesting.

Gogarten: Theological Decisionism as Nihilism?

After the war, Löwith seems to have been content with his analysis of Schmitt. And he obviously believed that the reading of Schmitt as an occasionalist affirming nihilism had a bearing not only on Schmitt's theory, but also on Heidegger's existentialism and Gogarten's dialectical theology. What unites Schmitt, Heidegger and Gogarten in this reading is what Löwith called the 'pathos of decision in favor of bare decisiveness', which helped pave the way 'for decision in favor of Hitler's decisiveness' (Ref. 10, pp. 61, 159). This pathos was not only a political one, Löwith adds, as it also characterized dialectical theology and existentialism. In what follows, I will leave out Löwith's criticism of Heidegger and focus on Schmitt and Gogarten.

What, then, ultimately connects Gogarten with Schmitt, according to Löwith? 'Their common heritage is the staunch conviction that all traditional goods and orderings, contents and measures, and the equating of the "world" with the historical human world, which is implicitly contained in these, have become null and void.' (Ref. 10, pp. 70, 169) Gogarten and Schmitt have their 'prototype', their 'geistiges Vorbild', in Kierkegaard, Löwith claims, but unlike him, they do not view their extreme position of existential decision as a *corrective* to their age. Instead, they establish their own extremism as a new norm.

Löwith categorizes Gogarten as a 'decisionist', closely related to Schmitt in the rejection of liberalism. Gogarten, according to Löwith, rejected all ideas of any sort of possible mediation between God and man, since 'Christ's role as a mediator forbids all mediation' (Ref. 10, pp. 68, 167). Löwith does not expand upon it, but he mentions Gogarten's project as a part of Karl Barth's dialectical theology, an important movement within the new orientations of thought during the Weimar republic. In reality, Gogarten was not as much a follower of Barth as a co-founder of this movement, which would split on questions regarding the role of the churches under the new regime in 1933. Barth condemned Nazi initiatives within the church, proclaiming its un-political status, while Gogarten initially defended the attempt to use the church for reestablishing and strengthen German national sovereignty.

Löwith's extremely short summary of dialectical theology amounts to describing it as rejecting mediation between God and man, but this in a somewhat reductionist way manages to encapsulate what unites the early works of Barth and Gogarten. They both prohibit any attempt at analogical thinking, they both claim God's transcendence as absolute and humanity as fallen and sinful. Theology here becomes an impossible attempt to directly conceptualize God's revelation, and what remains is to give witness to the 'impossible possibility' of transcendent incarnation in the immanent world (a line of dialectical reasoning that gave the movement its name).

In his essay on 'European Nihilism', Löwith likens Barth's dialectical theology – which is said to only see 'powerlessness and sin in the creatural world' – to literary modernism, which Löwith regards as inherently nihilistic. He claims that modernism does not give shape to a 'human cosmos', conveying instead 'a disheartening truth about human beings, in connection with which the human being as such disappears'.[13] One has to assume that this goes for Gogarten's dialectical theology as well.

But if Gogarten, as Löwith puts it, rejected all mediation between God and man, between the 'impossible' mercy of God and a sinful, fallen mankind, why would Gogarten turn to the political and affirm aspects of Hitler's ascension to power? Löwith attempts no such explanation. His analysis of Schmitt's support of Hitler's consolidation of power comes down to the immorality and abstract formalist decisionism of the jurist's occasionalism.

As I have indicated above, this is to some extent a probable explanation of Schmitt's actions, although it can benefit from a bit of non-apologetic nuancing, acknowledging the complexities brought forth by Reinhard Mehring, also mentioned above. But what are we to do with Gogarten's political turn? Is Löwith's description of Gogarten's theology as an 'occasionalist decisionism' correct? And to what extent is his characterization of Schmitt's political thought as anti-romantic and atheological also applicable to Gogarten?

Gogarten: Theological Order Thinking in the Face of Nihilism

Gogarten is just as adamant in his attack on 'romantic' theology as Schmitt is in his on the political thought of romanticism. Now, much of the liberal theology of late Wilhelmine and early Weimar era had styled itself as being anti-romantic, but Gogarten went further, condemning modern theology for being romantic in itself. Both mysticism and the scientific study of the religious sociology and anthropology of Christianity follow the romantic view of religion as inherently cultural and aesthetic, according to Gogarten. For him, both ways of conceptualizing 'religion' tend to negate actual, concrete acts of faith.[14] Both mysticism and religious sociology are weakening theological responses to the modern crisis of faith, neither of them able to transcend the individualizing tendencies of bourgeois society.

Gogarten's theological analysis of modernity actually draws on the work of Schmitt, something that is very visible in his turn to political theology during the late 1920s and early 1930s.[15] In works such as *Wider die Ächtung der Autorität* (*Against*

the Disavowal of Authority) and *Politische Ethik* (*Political Ethics*), Gogarten argued that Christian society requires authoritarian rule, since only proper and visible authority in society establishes the foundation for true belief in the ultimate authority of God. Modern, democratic society does not offer the necessary limitations to man's appetites and can therefore not properly help mankind to understand that the thirst for freedom is a sign of man's utter sinfulness, mankind turning against its creator and His will.

What Gogarten wants to establish is an alternative, ultimately Christian, political ethics. In his view, modern, liberal morality forms claims of 'one does so and so', while the true Christian ethic demands that 'you shall!' (Ref. 15, p. 8). While the image of Man in modern thought and ethics is a positive one, objectivizing guilt and sin in certain unwanted actions, traditional Christian thought rather *subjectivizes* sin, making it into the grounding human condition. Human evil is to be understood in the light of God's goodness. Sin is not a moral category, but the very essence of human freedom, since it regards the ability to distance oneself from God's will (Ref. 15, p. 71). The love of God and the love of one's neighbor are to be understood as the same thing. Practicing love for the neighbor is in practice being for the other, as being for others is in form the same thing as being for God (Ref. 15, p. 105).

However, Gogarten draws some possibly unexpected conclusions from his idea of 'being for others'. He uses this idea as the grounding principle of state. The protection of human love and being for others is to be found in the being together in society, in community, and therefore in relations of authority (Ref. 15, p. 108f.). The protection of these binding ties is the primary responsibility of the state. And this is why the modern disavowal of authority, visible as a cult of individuality, is so dangerous and ultimately anti-Christian according to Gogarten. The individual who wants to be free most of all misrecognizes his sinfulness. Without proper Christian authority, there is no protection from 'the chaos of natural life' (Ref. 15, p. 116). This is probably what Schmitt alludes to when he makes a reference to Gogarten's work on secularization in the foreword to the second edition of *Politische Theologie*.

But it is not only liberal individualism that is in danger of eradicating the proper foundations for a good state, according to Gogarten. The state can also deteriorate from overstepping its boundaries. Its proper charge is maintaining peace and assuring the rights of a Christian community and the people, but in this it must not forsake its principally exalted character. The state must give man's political existence a form, but it must not attempt to form man's existence. Gogarten embraces the societal orders of family, economy, work, churches and even of the people as *Volk*, as a national principle. Modern nationalism, however, goes too far in its objectification of societal order. Neither the individual, nor the nation is the bearer of autonomous, natural goodness and rights – both are essentially sinful and must be controlled by virtuous authority. The competing alternatives of liberalism and radical nationalism are therefore both as bad for Gogarten: neither individual, nor nation, but exalted authority is to ground his political ethics (Ref. 15, p. 209).

Of course, this is to some extent undoubtedly political decisionism. But it has little in common with Löwith's image of Gogarten as an *occasional* decisionist, driven by a

formless affirmation of power for its own sake. Gogarten was clearly very concerned with the declining influence of the collective orders of German society and what he saw as a loss of clearly defined responsibilities for sovereign and subjects. In fact, a proper theological grounding of these orders is just what he aims at in his politico-theological work. It is obvious that his authoritarian decisionism led him into very bad company, but it was not the result of a disavowal of established orders. And I would like to add that this to some extent also goes for Carl Schmitt, an adamant proponent for presidential authority within the boundaries of the Weimar constitution at the eve of the republic.[16]

Schmitt's decisionistic theory was formalist and authoritarian, but it was concerned with the established order. When the street fighting of the late Weimar republic, the breakdown of parliamentary representation, and the unclear status of where the ultimate sovereign power resided are not recognized as the true intellectual background to Schmitt's occasionalist decisions, moralistic calls for a more appealing ground for thought may become possible. They are, however, a bit facile and may not help to recognize the true challenges of either modernity or nihilism. What characterized the political thought of Schmitt and Gogarten was first and foremost their attempt to find historical grounding, not to dissolve it. Their engagement with modern negation, with that which Löwith calls 'nothingness', was an attempt to uphold order in the face of it, not to affirm it. What they saw in National Socialism was principles of order, not the revolutionary overturning of society. As the German historian Rüdiger Safranski has noted, this marks the difference between Heidegger's and Schmitt's intellectual engagement with the movement: Heidegger wanted metaphysical revolution, Schmitt wanted order.[17]

Löwith's Critique: A Critical Assessment

Nihilism is an issue not only *in*, but also *for* Schmitt and Gogarten. In actuality, their work can be seen as a struggle with and against it. However, as Löwith's critique shows, their attempt to counter nihilism with personalist, decisionist authority seems to have rather hastened the processes they viewed as nihilistic. But as the discussion above has shown, Löwith's critique of Schmitt and Gogarten leaves some stones unturned. Something is missing in this analysis of occasional decisionism, and it is at least partly the historical dimension of secularization that Löwith confronts in *Meaning in History*. By not acknowledging Schmitt's wrestling with theology and what this entails, vital elements of not only decisionism, but of modern political thought go unchallenged in Löwith's essay.

Heinrich Meier claims that Schmitt's moral decision only becomes discernible when placed against the backdrop of the historical challenge Schmitt believes himself and his age to be facing (Ref. 12, p. 22). The same goes for Gogarten. Löwith might contend with this analysis of historical necessities, but he does nothing to address the circumstances surrounding the writings of these 'occasional decisionists'. Thereby he actually tends to reproduce the ground of nothingness he identifies in modern German thought.

Löwith accuses Schmitt and Gogarten of not supporting any institutions or traditional forms, but does this not go for himself as well? Or even more so for himself? A word almost missing in Löwith's critique is the term *concrete*, used with noteworthy regularity by both Schmitt and Gogarten. Löwith concludes that Schmitt's turn from decisionism to what he calls 'concrete order thinking' amounts to an acceptance of the Nazi regime, but in the decisionism of the earlier Schmitt, as in Gogarten and also Heidegger, it is the concreteness of the decision that is the desired goal of their decisionistic reductionism – not abstract decisiveness.

This is not to say that Löwith's critique of the three 'decisionists' is unfounded: their decision in favor of concrete decisiveness did lead to support for the establishment of a totalitarian regime. One can easily agree with Löwith that decisiveness in itself makes no guarantees against that which many would categorize as nihilism, but it is obvious that the longing for concreteness in the face of abstraction also does not.

The later work of Gogarten connects secularization with nihilism; or, rather, it connects secularism with nihilism. Christianity's absolute split between this world and the next creates the secular and upholds it as secular, but when faith in the transcendent is abandoned for faith in the this-worldly, this world and its orders turn absolute. Secularism negates the other-worldly, sanctifies this world and makes any appeal to a higher order impossible.[18]

It is of no small interest to note that this line of thought is missing from Löwith's *Meaning in History*, a book that was translated into German as *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen* (which translates back as *World History and Redemption*) in the same year as Gogarten's revised theories of secularization were published in *Verhängnis und Hoffnung der Neuzeit* (translated as *Despair and Hope for our Age*). Instead, Löwith's indictment of the horrors of modernity, also targeting secularization, entails a questioning of mistaking events in worldly history, *Weltgeschichte*, for instances of redemption, *Heilsgeschehen*.[19]

As I have shown above, Gogarten's concerns about the loss of transcendence are mirrored already in Schmitt's *Politische Theologie*. What drives Schmitt's polemic with liberalism and bourgeois thought is an engagement with modern metaphysics of immanence. In this polemic, questions of form are not substanceless. In actuality, Schmitt's polemic concerning the form of decision is in his view nothing less than a defense of human subjectivity as such, especially in politics. What Löwith calls active nihilism, Schmitt's decisionism, therefore contains its own remainders of a humanism.

This is even more obvious in Gogarten's political ethics, aimed at founding these ethics in a Christian anthropology of sinfulness. In the case of Schmitt, the appeal to existing principles of order are weaker than in Gogarten's case, but in his work, the very principle of order and political existence as such is brought up against a historical challenge of abstraction and dissolution. Both Schmitt and Gogarten appeal to a model of thought in which *Heilsgeschehen* can still be gleaned from events of world history and oppose secularism and modern metaphysics as nihilistic. It could be claimed that the appeal to higher meaning in history entails an expression of hope for and belief in responsibility *for* as well as *in* history.

This is a hope and belief that Löwith finds vain and whose waning in late modernity he welcomes. His ideal is rather more like that of the 'moderate ancients' with whom he contrasts the modern searchers for meaning in history (Ref. 19, p. 4). To him, the engagement with the rationality of the cosmos seems more healthy than the quest for meaning in history. It is perhaps not strange that Jürgen Habermas found it fitting to call Löwith's 'retreat from historical thinking' a 'stoic' endeavor.[20] This might be the ultimate root and proper core of the disagreement between Löwith (the Stoic) and Schmitt/Gogarten (as Christians): the question of whether the search for meaning or the loss of it is to be interpreted as the defining problem of nihilism.

Löwith is correct in identifying that both Schmitt and Gogarten ultimately came to affirm something that their own work to some extent predicted as a result of modern tendencies. Nazism did not defend order as defined by Schmitt and Gogarten, it destroyed it. What Löwith gets wrong is that neither Schmitt, nor Gogarten made any concessions when it comes to principles of concrete responsibility in authority. Actually, the reverse is true. It was their very engagement in discerning proper authority in face of waning social responsibility, their affirmation of a clear and, in actual persons and instances, incarnated responsibility *qua* authority, that led them to initial affirmation of the Nazi regime. And for this, they are forever responsible.

Conclusion

What we can learn from this is not suitable for simple moralizing condemnation. That is the easy part, and it will not help us to properly understand the challenges of figures such as Schmitt and Gogarten. When we disengage them from their historical circumstances, we also risk repeating the de-substantializing tendency that forms the basis of Löwith's criticisms. From a Marxist perspective, Georg Lukács identifies a similar tendency in Löwith's attempt to write the history of German nineteenth-century philosophy in *From Hegel to Nietzsche*. With a Hegelian quip, Lukács concludes that Löwith's account of the relationship between Marx and Kierkegaard is 'a night in which all cows are black'.[21] And that night, in Löwith's view, is history itself, all its possible meanings painted black.

This brings up a line of thought that might contribute to an opening up of the discussion on nihilism. In a book on the theological conflicts during the Weimar republic, the theologian Jack Forstman brings up a nuance contrasting the dialectical theology of Karl Barth with that of Friedrich Gogarten. While Barth refers to God as 'the wholly other', Gogarten refers to God as 'the Lord', *der Herr*.[22] For Löwith, this distinction seems irrelevant, and it is in keeping with his general idea of the de-substantializing of thought as grounds for nihilism to not make much of this distinction. Even if he contrasts Barth's anti-Nazi stance in 1933 with Heidegger's affirmation of the new regime, he also seems to view Barth's theology as affected by the same modern malaise.[23]

But if Heidegger, literary modernism, Barth and Gogarten, and so on, all are afflicted by nihilism, do not nihilism and modernism, and with it even modernity itself, become indistinguishable? Can we then go on claiming that there are not things

like strains of contrasting nihilisms, in the plural? The cases of Schmitt and Gogarten, and what might be their modern theological corrective in Barth, point to this. There seems to be at least one choice in tackling nihilism, a choice between something of a Stoic and something of a Christian stance.

In the opposition brought to the fore here, both sides succeed in grasping the other as the very expression of what it intends to counter. Following this observation to the end, one may even raise the question as to what extent the very conception of nihilism is nihilistic. What we can learn from this exchange is that even here, one question remains and seemingly eternally returns: who interprets, who decides?

References and Notes

1. For a conceptualization of nihilism taking account of these tendencies, see W. Slocombe (2006) *Nihilism and the Sublime Postmodern. The (Hi)Story of a Difficult Relationship from Romanticism to Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge), especially chapter 1. For a contemporary rereading of nihilism and an appropriation of its assumed effects of the crisis of meaning in an affirmation of non-vitalist science and 'eliminative materialism', see R. Brassier (2007) *Nihil Unbound. Enlightenment and Extinction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).
2. See R. Mehring (1994) Der philosophische Führer und der Kronjurist. Praktisches Denken und geschichtliche Tat von Martin Heidegger und Carl Schmitt. In: *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, nr. 68, bd. LXVIII, 1994, pp. 334–335.
3. H. Schelsky (1981) *Thomas Hobbes – Eine politische Lehre* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot), p. 5.
4. C. Schmitt (2002) *Der Begriff des Politischen. Text von 1932 mit einem Vorwort und drei Corollarien* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot), p. 27.
5. C. Schmitt (2004) *Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot), p. 43.
6. Here read as published in K. Löwith (1984, 1935/1960) Der okkasionelle Dezisionismus von C. Schmitt. In *Sämtliche Schriften Bd. 8. Heidegger – Denker in dürftiger Zeit. Zur Stellung der Philosophie im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung), If uncommented, quotes are from the English translation by G. Steiner as 'The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt', In: R. Wolin (ed.) (1995) *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism* (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 137–169. The original article, published in 1935, only discussed Schmitt. The final version with the reflections on Gogarten in the *Sämtliche Schriften*-edition was originally published in the anthology *Gesammelte Abhandlungen. Zur Kritik der geschichtlichen Existenz* (Stuttgart: W. Kolhammer Verlag) in 1960.
7. Cf. R. Mehring (2009) *Carl Schmitt. Aufstieg und Fall. Eine Biographie* (München: C.H. Beck), p. 110 f.
8. Published as 'Das Zeitalter der Neutralisierungen und Entpolitisierungen' in: C. Schmitt (2002) *Der Begriff des Politischen. Text von 1932 mit einem Vorwort und drei Corollarien* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot), pp. 79–95.
9. Gogarten never joined the NSDAP, Schmitt joined after the *Machtübernahme* in early 1933 and worked actively with regime up to 1936. He never left the party.
10. K. Löwith (1984, 1935/1960) Der okkasionelle Dezisionismus von C. Schmitt. In: *Sämtliche Schriften Bd. 8. Heidegger – Denker in dürftiger Zeit. Zur Stellung der Philosophie im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche

Verlagsbuchhandlung), p. 42. G. Steiner (1995) The Occasional Decisionism of Carl Schmitt. In: R. Wolin (ed.) (1995) *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 146.

11. For instance in the last chapter of C. Schmitt (1996, 1923) *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot).
12. H. Meier (1998) *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt. Four Chapters on the Distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press), p. xii.
13. K. Löwith (1995, 1941) European Nihilism: Reflections on the Spiritual and Historical Background of the European War. In: R. Wolin, (ed.) *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism* (New York: Columbia University Press), transl. G. Steiner, p. 198. 197.
14. Cf. F. Gogarten (1977, 1922) Wider die romantische Theologie. In: J. Moltmann, (ed.) *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie. Teil II. Rudolf Bultmann, Friedrich Gogarten, Eduard Thurneysen* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag), pp. 140–153.
15. Cf. the references to Schmitt regarding Marx and 'techno-economical thought' in F. Gogarten (1932) *Politische Ethik. Versuch einer Grundlegung* (Jena: Eugen Diederichs Verlag), p. 153.
16. Cf. for instance C. Schmitt (1996, 1931) *Der Hüter der Verfassung* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot).
17. R. Safranski (1994) *Ein Meister aus Deutschland. Heidegger und seine Zeit* (München: Carl Hanser Verlag), p 283.
18. F. Gogarten (1996, 1953) *Verhängnis und Hoffnung der Neuzeit* (München & Hamburg: Siebenstern Taschenbuch Verlag), p. 143.
19. K. Löwith (1949) *Meaning in History* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press), p. 203.
20. J. Habermas (1971, 1963) Karl Löwiths stoischer Rückzug vom historischen Bewußtsein. In: *Philosophisch-politische Profile* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp), pp. 116–140.
21. G. Lukács (1962, 1954) *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand Verlag), p. 20.
22. J. Forstman (1992) *Christian Faith in Dark Times. Theological Questions in the Shadow of Hitler* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press), p. 174.
23. K. Löwith (1995) Heidegger: Thinker in a Destitute Time. In: R. Wolin, (ed.) *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism* (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 75–76 K. Löwith (1995, 1941) European Nihilism: Reflections on the Spiritual and Historical Background of the European War. In: R. Wolin (ed.) *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism* (New York: Columbia University Press), transl. G. Steiner, p. 219.

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