

**Authenticity, Repentance and the Second Coming:
“The Moment” in Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Rabbi Soloveitchik**

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In the following lines, I would like to examine a single notion, ‘the moment,’ as it is put forth in the thought of Kierkegaard and then adopted by Martin Heidegger and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, to demonstrate one case of the possible fruitfulness of biblical exegesis for philosophical reflection. All three thinkers employ this notion in different ways and for different purposes, exemplifying the philosophical possibilities concealed in readings of the Bible.

Søren Kierkegaard, the great Danish thinker, offered an existential notion of ‘the moment’ to modern philosophy. The departure point for this notion is his reading of Corinthians 15:52: “It will happen in *a moment, in the blink of an eye*, when the last trumpet is blown. For when the trumpet sounds, those who have died will be raised to live forever. And we who are living will also be transformed.” This biblical verse inspired Kierkegaard to present ‘the moment’—“blink of an eye,” or “*Oieblik*” in his native Danish—in an existential form, denoting the elevation of a mere instant in time to a decisive moment that can presage a complete shifting of direction in one’s life: “The moment is that ambiguity in which time and eternity touch each other, and with this the concept of *temporality* is posited, whereby time constantly intersects eternity and eternity constantly pervades time.”¹ It is an instantaneous event that can initiate a change in one’s world view and turn her toward a new goal. For Kierkegaard, the prototype of the moment is the incarnation, when God became flesh, representing a significant moment in the history of humankind in which God, as timeless eternity, entered time, and in effect historical events took on a new meaning. Ignited by the penetration of eternity into one’s personal temporality, this moment engenders an upheaval in one’s existence. The subjective moment of *Oieblik* is a repetition of the incarnation located in the existential sphere. Kierkegaard asserts:

A moment as such is unique. To be sure, it is short and temporal, as the moment is; it is passing, as the moment is, past, as the moment is in the next moment, and yet it is decisive, and yet it is filled with the eternal. A moment such as this must have a special name. Let us call it: *the fullness of time*.²

Here he alludes to Galatians 4:4: “But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son.” The event described in the scriptures is relocated by Kierkegaard from the Christian and universal stage to the internal existential situation.

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¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, ed. Reider Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 89.

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 18.

In its scriptural sense, the moment holds an eschatological import, for the awaited second coming—the *parousia* that is bound to happen in the “fullness of time” (*kairos*)—is too an occurrence of the incarnation, which will in turn change the meaning of history. In Kierkegaard’s existential deployment, ‘the moment’ carries the possibility of a radical transformation in the individual, who becomes a new creature. Kierkegaard writes: “A change takes place within [the individual] like the change from non-being to being.”³ It is an act of conversion, a changing of one’s self. Now it is important to note that the model of eternity at play here is not that of an endless continuum of now moments, evanescent in essence, but as quality of temporality; it is the fullness of time, *kairos*, a convergence of past, present, and future in the present moment. This is why it is so transformative: it encompasses the union of temporality and eternity wherein the present becomes presence. Since ‘the moment’ deals with internal experience of the subject’s encounter with God, in it one’s radical individuality is underscored. With the awakening of the spirit in ‘the moment,’ the radical experience individualizes the individual, and thus the fundamental difference between oneself and the other is emphasized. Ultimately, one stands alone in front of God in this personal experience of self-transformation.

In Kierkegaard’s scheme, this existential moment is essentially bound to its Christian origins; the incarnation, the second coming, and the encounter with God are its fundamental building blocks. For the Dane, ‘the moment’ is a biblical notion interpreted existentially and philosophically in a manner in which its religious origins are retained and highlighted.

The notion of *Oieblik*, founded upon a reading of Corinthians 15:52 and connected to a reading of Galatians 4:4, was picked up by Martin Heidegger, whose debt to Kierkegaard is known. Heidegger’s intellectual trajectory began in theology, first Catholic and then Protestant, though he eventually left Christianity altogether. In *Sein und Zeit*⁴ he sought to address the question of the meaning of being through the entity to which its own being is a matter of interest—that is, *Dasein*, the being that we are. In this work, various ontological preconditions of *Dasein*’s existence are outlined, yet as many have noted, the condition of being-towards-God is absent. The framework set forth by Heidegger is confined to the realm of immanence. Nevertheless, Heidegger puts the Kierkegaardian notion of ‘the moment’ (“*Augenblick*” in his native German) to play. This is merely one example of Heidegger’s tendency to incorporate religious categories and models into his thought, strip them of their original content, and instill in them ontological content.

Dasein, Heidegger confers, could attain authenticity by grasping its existence in its totality and live accordingly. This consists of *Dasein* recognizing its ontological condition, i.e., the inevitability of its death and its ontological individuality. Ostensibly, authenticity would comprise embracing this extreme particularity and conceive of others as some form of threat or obstacle for being truly oneself. After all, the realm of inauthenticity, which Heidegger terms “*das Man*,” is dominated by the crowd, ‘others,’ the social element of one’s world. This, however, is not the case. The fundamental experience of comprehending one’s death and solitude leads *Dasein* to

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edna H. Hong & Howard V. Hong (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), 51. He writes: “In consequence of receiving the condition in the moment (*Oieblikket*) the course of his life has been given an opposite direction, so that he is now turned about. Let us call this change *Conversion* (*Omvendelse*), even though this word be one not hitherto used: but this is precisely a reason for choosing it, in order namely to avoid confusion, for it is as if expressly coined for the change we have in mind” (Ibid, 18).

⁴ *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 2008).

resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*), a decisive attitude towards life based on a new understanding of temporality *and* society. In authenticity, the past is understood not as time that passed, but as heritage (*Erbe*) pregnant with possibilities pertaining to *Dasein* as a member of a distinct community. The opening to the past in an authentic way acts as a catalyst for a community “to become authentically bound together.”⁵ In turn, the shared Heritage generates a new relation towards the future in which *Dasein* realizes its finitude as fate (*Schicksal*). And since resolute *Dasein* is always *mit-Sein*, always with-others, its fate is intergraded with and subordinated to the historical destiny (*Geshick*) of its community, its *Volk*. In Heidegger’s words: “But if fateful *Dasein*, as being in the world, exists essentially in being-with-others, its historizing is a co-historizing and is determinative for it as *destiny*.”⁶

But how does *Dasein*, ontologically distinct, link itself to a community? How does fate become destiny? The interface is the *Augenblick*, translated to English as the “moment of vision.” This is the ecstatic moment of authentic temporality in which the three tenses of time coalesce into one, experiencing temporality for the first time not as a sequence of now moments, but as derivative of one’s own time towards death. This temporal and internal event is the stand-in for the unavailable experience of eternity within the framework of a finite being. It is an elevation of ordinary present time to a transcended present which draws on the past but is determined by the futural impetus of *Dasein*. This enables *Dasein* to decide resolutely—i.e., authentically—for it provides a point of view in which one’s bequeathed possibilities are taken into focused consideration with respect to futural goals.

Augenblick is a dramatic moment in *Dasein*’s life. Resolute decision is founded in *Augenblick*, and so is the authentic community. As Heidegger intimates, “The moment of vision ... is also the ground for destiny, by which we understand historizing in being-with-others.”⁷ Thus, through *Augenblick*, *Dasein* could determine its ‘own most’ possibilities and proscribe how, in accordance to its facticity and singularity, it should live its life. Simultaneously, it creates the foundations for ties with the community that shares heritage, destiny, and a struggle in the present.⁸

The roots of this secular version of ‘the moment’ are to be found, as we have seen, in Kierkegaard’s reading of Corinthians, yet its communal setting, absent from the Dane’s formulation, is to be traced back to Heidegger’s earlier series of lectures from 1920-1921 on the phenomenology of religious life. Here Heidegger examines the first letter to the Thessalonians, where Paul addresses the Thessalonians’ communal predicament of living in light of the awaited *parousia*.⁹ The communal background of *Dasein*’s authenticity is rooted in the existential situation of the Thessalonians as a community coming to be “in faith.” The anticipation towards the future that prevails in *Being and Time* is, too, grounded in this earlier reading of the Thessalonian anticipation

⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 384.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 386.

⁸ See the discussion of Heidegger’s *Augenblick* in Koral Ward, *Augenblick: The Concept of the ‘Decisive Moment’ in 19th and 20th century Western Philosophy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009).

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

for the second coming. The existential ‘moment’ in Heidegger’s secular scheme in *Sein und Zeit* is rooted in Kierkegaard and Heidegger’s reading of the Pauline text.

The two philosophers hitherto discussed are both, while differently, strongly associated with Christianity, personally and contextually. Their reading of scripture influenced the philosophy they produced, and vice-versa. Tellingly, these existential readings of the New Testament were adopted by one of the important Jewish thinkers and Rabbis of the 20th century, Rav Joseph Dov Soloveitchik. In *Halakhic Man*, Soloveitchik delineates an ideal personality type whose outlook is essentially established on *halakha*, the Jewish traditional law. Much has been written on this work, yet little attention has been granted to the fact that Soloveitchik employs the philosophical notion of the ‘the moment,’ rooted in a philosophical interpretation of Corinthians 15:52 and Galatians 4:4, in his discussion on repentance. For him, repentance is an exemplar of self-creation; more than mere atonement, it is a process wherein one’s being changes. One becomes a different person than before; past sins are obliterated as if they never had occurred. To be sure, this radical opinion begs an alternate conception of causality and time altogether, and indeed scholarship on Soloveitchik has tied his approach towards time to Henri Bergson.¹⁰ However, the debt to Kierkegaard’s reading of Corinthians and the notion of ‘the moment’ seems to be just as essential.¹¹

Halakhic man exists according to a specific discernment regarding temporality: not between physical time and duration, as offered by Bergson, but, following Kierkegaard, between physical time and time as eternity. The first is the Aristotelian physical approach that measures quantity: time is understood as the evanescent moment of now, always already passing by, giving way to the newly present moment. According to the second version of time—“Judaism’s version,” in Soloveitchik’s judgment—“there can be no eternity without time.”¹² Here eternity is not a quantitative but a qualitative measure. For repentance to change the past and thus enable the sinner to re-create herself, it must be from within a model of time in which, Soloveitchik writes, “such a past enters into the domain of the present and links up with the future...[and] such a future, drawing upon its own hidden roots, infuses the past with strength and might, vigor and vitality. Both—past and future—are alive. Both act and create in the heart of the present and shape the very image of reality.”¹³ An authentic moment of repentance transpires when “past, present and future merge and blend together, and this new three-fold time structure arises before us adorned with a splendid unity.”¹⁴ Here too the future is the central tense of time, for goals and destinations bear the power to depict the past in completely new colors, granting it a new identity. “The future imprints its stamp on the past,” Soloveitchik writes, “and determines its image...[T]he future transforms the thrust of the past.”¹⁵

¹⁰ Eliezer Goldman, “Teshuva ve-Zman be-Hagut ha-Rav Soloveitchik,” in *Emuna Be-zmanim Mishtanim*, ed. A. Sagi (Jerusalem: Herzog, 1996) 175-189; Yitzchak Blau, “Creative Repentance: On Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s Concept of Teshuva,” in *Exploring the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, ed. Marc D. Angel (New Jersey: Ktav Publishing House, 1997), 263-274.

¹¹ See: Daniel Herskowitz, “The Moment and the Future: Kierkegaard’s Øieblikket and Soloveitchik’s View of Repentance,” *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 40, no. 1 (April 2016): 87-99.

¹² Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, trans. Lawrence Kaplan (Philadelphia: JPS, 1983), 118.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

All this takes place in the present moment, the locus of the eternal moment, which bears eschatological depth to it too. As Soloveitchik writes, “Not only the infinite past but also the infinite future, that future in which there gleams the reflection of the image of eternity, also the splendor of the eschatological vision arise out of the present moment.”

True, halakhic man is a distinct person, unmistakably different from all others, and his religious experiences—and even the more so his sins—are a matter between himself and God. Yet he is also always a member of a community, and he could not be understood outside of it.¹⁶ As Soloveitchik maintains, “The Jewish people’s all-embracing collective consciousness of time ... is an integral part of the ‘I’ awareness of halakhic man.” Halakhic man’s ‘moment’ is personal and simultaneously includes participating in a wider communal context.¹⁷ By this Soloveitchik diverges from Kierkegaard’s Christian and individualistic version and concurs with Heidegger’s secularized, communal version of ‘the moment.’¹⁸

The Christian ‘moment’ expressed by Kierkegaard, essentially tied to the incarnation and the second coming, is now rendered as the official Jewish approach toward time by Rav Soloveitchik, as the model of temporality that enables repentance and full membership in the trans-historical Jewish community. Of course, it is divorced from the fundamental ties to the incarnation, yet nonetheless this adaptation is particularly striking since, in an essay concerning inter-faith dialogue, Rav Soloveitchik famously forbade any inter-faith exchange about theology, claiming there is nothing that could be learned from Christianity.¹⁹

Notwithstanding the obvious and profound differences between these three thinkers, the examination of the different usages of ‘the moment’ as it is employed in a Christian, secular(ized), and Jewish framework demonstrates the potential productivity of a philosophical reading of the Bible for different traditions and purposes.

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¹⁶ Daniel Herskowitz, “Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s Endorsement and Critique of Volkish Thought,” *The Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 14, no. 3 (2015): 373-390.

¹⁷ Cf. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Community,” *Tradition* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1978): 15. See also “God or People—Which Comes First?” *Reflections of the Rav*, ed. Abraham Besdin (Jerusalem: Wizo, 1979), 107-116. On Soloveitchik’s account of the Jewish people see Gerald Blidstein, “On the Jewish People in the Writings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik,” *Tradition* 24, no. 2 (1989): 21-43.

¹⁸ Both Heidegger and Soloveitchik are clearly influenced by Kierkegaard, yet here is a case where Soloveitchik and Heidegger are in agreement regarding the exact issue in which they diverge from their shared source of influence. On Soloveitchik and Kierkegaard, see Michael Oppenheim, “Kierkegaard and Soloveitchik,” *Judaism* 37, no. 1 (1988): 29-40; David D. Possen, “J.B. Soloveitchik: Between Neo-Kantianism and Kierkegaardian Existentialism,” in *Kierkegaard’s Influence on Theology, Tome III: Catholic and Jewish Theology*, ed. Jon Stewart (UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 189-209.

¹⁹ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Confrontation,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought* 6, no. 2 (1964): 5-25.