Philosophy of Crisis:

An Introduction

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On the Philosophy of Crisis

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The philosophy of crisis is not isolated to any particular philosophical discipline or strain of thought, rather it is a theme that underlies philosophical inquiry as a whole. This investigation hopes to incite a further investigation into the philosophy of crisis, further understanding how human interactions are organized and structured. This investigation begins with an attempt to trace the underlying crisis within philosophical thought, and then continues with an analysis of how crisis has been represented through the philosophies of the individual and politics.

There has been a presence of personal crisis throughout history coming from the moment in which the belief structure we have latched onto changes in response to a changed worldview. However, in pre-modern times there was no theorization on crisis, any crisis we may see when looking back on history is merely a projection of crisis ideology onto past events. True crisis comes with modernity with the beginning of crisis theorization by a multitude of philosophers. Crisis is addressed in many forms within the field of philosophy. It has been dealt with in terms of how humans interact with one another and with society and also as a way to examine personal crises such as the internal battle between good and evil. In order dive deeper into the philosophy of crisis, we have selected philosophers that offer various perspectives on this stimulating and wide reaching topic.

One of the more commonly known crises within the political sphere of philosophy is the crisis of Marxism. The political crisis of Marxism is entangled with its epistemological crisis, which is the result of the scientific reductionism of Marxism, which was encouraged by Engels and Karl Kautsky. Scientific Marxism is a non-philosophical, mechanistic form of Marxist theory that teaches the inevitable, automatic collapse of capitalism. If the collapse of capitalism was inevitable because of the effects of certain natural laws and not due to conscious, intentional efforts of the proletariat then there is no need to work toward the development of revolutionary consciousness. Marxism is an attempt to rescue subjectivity or humanity from the reifying, oppressive forces of capitalism.

While Marx held strong beliefs on the evils of capitalism, these forces did not end up coming into play in the future as Marx had predicted. Marx’s critique of political economy is an attempt to disclose the inner logic of capitalism and the contradictions that will lead to its collapse. The crisis of Marxism was that Marx’s predictions did not come true. Marx believed that eventually the oppression of capitalism would be overthrown and replaced by a new and better system of government.[[1]](#footnote-1) This crisis is particularly interesting to examine, as it is still relevant today in the United States. We are still living in a capitalist society but the level of its oppression is one that is up for debate.

In Scheler’s work regarding religious experience, On the Eternal Man, he addresses the religious and existential crisis which humanity faced at the end of World War I. While this is an existential crisis, it is heavily influenced by the politics of the time, as is Marx’s philosophy. According to Scheler, the war failed to reawaken a sense of dignity in culture in humanity and instead left the world full of suffering. It is in this moment of suffering that the call to religious renewal arises. In the view of Scheler, World War I was the first crisis experienced by all of humanity. The resulting “call to renewal” was also experienced by all of humanity. Scheler suggests that it is through these times of crisis that a figure may arise that can determine the course of humanity by answering the call.

Not only did Scheler recognize this crisis in Germany through his religious works but he also thought of it in a broader sense as well. According to Scheler the crisis of modernity was the result of three central factors: 1) the rise of late capitalism, 2) the mechanization of nature, and 3) liberal individualism. Scheler was somewhat unique in the way he discussed these three factors as mindsets so as to distinguish them from other philosophers’ work on the spirit of capitalism. Scheler understood capitalism as a way of configuring the world, not just as an economic system. He had a problem with the mindset of modernity because it reduced the world to utility; people and things were reduced to their level of value within society.

Interestingly, Scheler promoted war, a classic example of crisis, as a means to end the crisis of modernity, believing that it would act as a cultural renewal. In Scheler’s view, war was a natural consequence of growth. Conflict then serves as a reminder of the value of life and communal relations. It also serves as a reminder of cultural uniqueness and allows individuals to appreciate their own culture and their roles within it. In his final defense of war Scheler cites justice and the necessity of fighting against forces that have the potential to destroy a culture. In his later work, he develops his ideas on the crisis of modernity into the crisis of the human being itself. Scheler describes this crisis as the first-time period in which humans are aware of their problematic nature. Human beings no longer know who they are and are not aware that they do not know[[2]](#footnote-2)

Within Heidegger’s writings he deals with many different ideas of conflict and crisis, some of which are similar to Scheler’s. To him, the meaning of being is a key question that needs to be considered. He describes the essential conflict between the earth and the world, which can be understood as an attempt to elaborate an understanding of truth in a phenomenological way. It is the coming together of revealing and concealing that Heidegger develops as the essential crisis between world and earth. Heidegger also writes about crisis in *Being and Time.*  The crisis identified here is one of modernity. This involves a straying from the homeland, which Heidegger views as particularly problematic. He believed that the German people were destined to carry out a spiritual mission of transforming the West from a being of technology to a being of poetry. In order to resolve this crisis, Heidegger suggests that we need a god to reawaken us to the poetic. Heidegger’s qualms with the technological form of being include the ways in which it corrupts areas of nature into resources for exploitation, especially by the tourist industry. In terms of inter-human affairs technological modes of being are manifested in how we interact, social interactions turn into networking interactions. According to Heidegger, the problem of technology is that it defines the modern way that we live in the West.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is problematic because the more that individuals live their lives with a technological focus the less they are in tune with nature, leading to a crisis of being that can expand over time.

Husserl, another philosopher of crisis, primarily deals with the philosophy of crisis in his work *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, which looks outward, rather than within and at the meaning or meaninglessness of human existence.[[4]](#footnote-4) This question within Husserl’s philosophy came at a turning point within his philosophical career at which his tone was strikingly different from works such as *Ideas I* or *Cartesian Meditations*.[[5]](#footnote-5) While *The Crisis* was never finished and should be looked at as a projected book rather than a unified, finished product it nonetheless contains useful information regarding Husserl’s views on human nature. While the title of the work denotes a singular crisis, there are actually two main crises that Husserl tackles within the text. The first is the crisis of method afflicting theoretical sciences and the second is an existential crisis having to do with the meaning and value of human life. The crisis within the sciences arose, according to Husserl, from the mathematization of nature through geometry. He acknowledges that this shift was a work of genius but was problematic enough to create a crisis within the science it created. Husserl presents phenomenology as a curative science capable of resolving the methodological crisis of the sciences as well as the existential crisis of modern human life.[[6]](#footnote-6)

When speaking of a personal crisis, one of modern human life, Arendt comes to mind due to her work with morality. A good deal of Arendt’s philosophy deals with the question of good and evil and whether it is connected with our faculty of thought. This comes up in her writings on the trial of Eichmann. His evil doing was based not in evil motives but in his inability to think and the lack of any motives whatsoever. This adds an interesting element to humanity’s ability to tell good from evil. How is one to determine a given individual’s morality when their motives may not even be present? Determining the presence of motives, good, bad, or nonexistent, is an integral piece of determining culpability. This can be described as both a judicial crisis and a crisis of humanity itself as the determination of evil and culpability is present not only in justice systems but in interpersonal dealings within society. In times of crisis, the ability to be a thoughtful member of society is particularly useful because it allows one to separate from whatever conflict is occurring. By employing productive thought processes, one protects oneself from falling prey to opinions of the majority and thus maintains a sense of self.

The sense of self is a key element of the philosophy of Foucault as well. In Foucault’s work he attempts to understand the interactions between science, politics, and ethics. He does so in examining the effects of scientific knowledge on political and ethical practices and through the development of politics of the self along with the government of the self. He also seeks to create a history of different modes by which human beings are made subjects.

Private individuals have a shared difficulty in enduring what is taking place within a given society. There exists an international citizenship with rights and duties. These duties involve speaking out against every abuse of power, no matter the actor or victim. It is the responsibility of each citizen under the international citizenry to bring suffering to the forefront. Governments claim to be concerned with the social welfare of their citizens and thus arrogate themselves to portray the profit or loss of human happiness as a result of its own decisions. Those who govern are in the position of power in that they can talk about problems facing society. It is imperative that those who are involved in the government refuse the theatrical role of governing and instead talk about problems that matter. The will of the individual must take a place for itself in a reality in which governments have attempted to reserve a monopoly for themselves.

Foucault believes that the relationship between rationalization and excess political power is evident. He suggests that it may be prudent to analyze rationalization of a society in a number of different fields, not simply as a whole. In order to analyze power relations one must start with forms of resistance against different forms of power. These forms of resistance include the various methods by which individuals attempt to challenge or relocate power relations as a natural form of opposition. The main objective of struggles against power is to attack a technique or form of power. The form of power that applied itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual and makes individuals subjects. The term subject can be defined by being a subject to someone else by control or dependence or it can apply to a tie to one’s own identity by a consciousness or self-knowledge.

There are three levels of objectification within Foucault’s philosophy on the subject and power. The first involves the modes of inquiry that try to give themselves status of science. There are three forms of objectivity within this mode: objectivity of the productive self, objectivity of those who labor, and the presence of objectification in natural history and biology. The second mode of objectification is the objectivity of the subject in dividing practice. Within this mode, the subject either divides within the self or is divided from others, in which case the individual is objectified in the face of the other. The third mode of objectification is the way in which a human being turns him or herself into a subject. This is done in part by sexuality as individuals recognize themselves as sexual beings. There are three types of struggles that an individual experiences according to Foucault. The first is struggle against domination. Next, the struggle against forms of exploitation that separate individuals from what they have produced. The third is a struggle against that which ties the individual to himself and submits him to others, i.e. the struggle against subjugation of the self. It is through this crisis between the individual and the power expressed over him or her that characterizes Foucault’s philosophy of crisis.

While Foucault identifies crises between individuals and the state, Kierkegaard addresses them in terms of the existential problem of existence. His interest in the single individual is focused on the reflection of how philosophy views the self and existence. He writes that the singularity of existence comes to light at the moment of conflict between ethics and religious faith. Life becomes meaningful by bringing natural desires under the moral law, which represents what one ought to be. Individuality is lost but actions become more meaningful.[[7]](#footnote-7) Actions become more meaningful in that they are more understandable. However, a conflict arises when an action seemingly demanded by faith contradicts a code of ethics. Because of the presence of this conflict in faith, Kierkegaard views faith as a paradox and seeks to determine how it is able to counteract moral principles. Faith is also paradoxical in that it seeks to create a universal moral code that is not possible to achieve for every person. Kierkegaard raises the question of this paradox through questioning the actions of Abraham in the Old Testament. Abraham is asked to commit the murder of his own son, clearly outside of the moral code, and is willing to go through with it because God asked it of him. He is seen as an ethical person because of his adherence to the will of his God and yet this raises concerns on what makes someone truly ethical, the adherence to a set moral code or the adherence to faith and a God. This then raises questions on the existence of God and what His ultimate role is.

Nietzsche, also an existentialist, confronts the crisis of existence through the challenge of nihilism and the phrase “God is dead”. This phrase arose from the cultural situation at that time at which Nietzsche was writing, nineteenth-century Europe. This included Darwinism and growing cultural capital of the natural sciences. The phrase also arose from Nietzsche’s research on psychology and the history of moral concepts through which he sought to determine the consequences of the death of God and theistic support of morality. The crisis that arises through Nietzsche’s suggestion that God is dead is that of how to measure human life; without a God by which to measure our morality, anything is permissible. Similarly to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche writes about the idea of a universal standard of morality that is abnormal and impossible for all people to adhere to.

Nihilism itself presents a crisis to the individual when confronted with its philosophy. For one who is “weakly constituted” they may fall victim to despair and think that life has no meaning. For those who have a creative individual nihilism, they can take the opportunity to find meaning and exercise creativity. This type of person can find value in their life without needing otherworldly support for the values that they embody. This latter example of a nihilist is one that emerges from the moralized nineteenth century mode of thought through which Nietzsche reconfigures the moral idea of autonomy. From this emerge the conflict between moral autonomy and an autonomy that goes beyond ideas of good and evil.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Using the above descriptions of how crisis is viewed and the suggested solutions to crisis within society, it becomes easier to generate a philosophy of crisis as a whole. However, given the sheer magnitude of philosophical works in which crisis is a centerpiece of thought or contributing factor to a larger idea, we acknowledge the limitations of the current work and the need for further research in the field of crisis in order to fully understand how crisis influences society as a whole. In order to look deeper into the philosophy of crisis, we will next examine philosophies of both political and personal crises within the writings of a select few philosophers.

On the Crisis of the Individual

Isaac Auerbacher

The concept of personal crisis is pervasive within popular thought, religion, and philosophy. Occurrences in the world and within our own psyche are constantly undermining systems of belief and structures in society. These events, these exceptions are what drive us toward and form the basis for crisis. Misconceptions on the nature of crisis, and a fear of the exception cause us to dread crisis. Society has been structured in a way that tries to systematize personal crisis, to create a way past it, and this is a natural tendency, crisis is by nature difficult, and most do everything they can to avoid difficulty. Structures and institutions of society are in many ways representations of individuals and their structures of belief, and aspects of these are internalizations of societal ideals. Philosophy and religion propose ways in which we should formulate metaphysical and ethical beliefs, and these are all in a sense propositions for a method to get past, or out of crisis. One of Nietzsche’s most important contributions is the notion that philosophy, and specifically metaphysics rests on the presupposition of moral aims. Categorization of existence should be considered in light of a certain ethic, an assumption in the necessity of belief in them. An undermining of metaphysical systems is also one of ethical systems, and in the moment when an occurrence defies these, there is a turning point that provides the conditions for the new. The focus of a philosophy of crisis is this turning point, an exception that can open the way for a creation of new internal belief structures and change in societal ones. The wisdom books of the Hebrew Bible, and the works of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are key places in which crisis is represented, but also recognized as the condition for the formation of their particular systems of metaphysics and ethics. These philosophies are all written in a way that is supposed to set us toward crisis, and construct our beliefs within or by virtue of it. In these places we can find examination of the mechanism by which belief is formed, and the ideas and institutions that threaten it, driving us to crisis. Many of the contentions for what we ought to believe are only possible in light of the crisis. By considering the location of crisis in these philosophies, and examining how it is resolved, we can move towards a deeper understanding of the concept, and a way in which we as individuals might deal with our own personal crisis.

The frequent appearance of crisis in media and popular culture misconstrues and obfuscates the unique idea of a personal crisis. We are told that people in society are becoming increasingly polarized, depressed, persecuted, sublimated and these signal an end to the way we like to live our lives. These contentions however contain an important aspect of how crisis operates. A poorly structured society can impose and push the individuals that compose it towards crisis. In turn, the appearance of a multiplicity of individuals in crisis can rip apart guiding cultural institutions and cause political crisis. However, popular conceptions of crisis mistakenly identify it as either its potential cause or its effects. One place we can see this that serves as an example of this thought is the reporting of politics. Both the right and left point to what they see as serious problems facing political and social life and regard them as symptoms of the manifestation of the dangerous ideology of the other side. Separately and as a connected system, these are construed as crisis, and the result of this crisis, the collapse of the individual and society. However, within this framework, the crisis lies in either the amalgamation of the issues people are faced with, or the existence of radical and dogmatic ideology. It looks to what comes before and after to explain the event of crisis. Instead, we must see crisis as the exception, dilemmas in the fundamental structure of our beliefs bring us to a place that forms the conditions for the creation of extreme belief and ideology, and maybe the creation of something else.

*Crisis in Religion*

Walter Kaufmann’s lecture on *Kierkegaard and the Crisis of Religion* can provide insight into how to read Kierkegaard’s work as a philosophy of crisis. He starts with an examination of existentialism as a branch of philosophy. Kaufmann argues for two features that are shared by existential philosophers. These aspects are echoed in a philosophy of crisis, it may be that a more complete examination of existentialism is necessary for a complete picture of crisis. The first is a radical individualism and subjectivity. Kierkegaard criticizes a tendency of the modern philosopher to disengage with the work, approach new ideas as merely interesting. He does not want us to be spectators, making no commitment to a particular view or objection, instead we must engage with the philosophy, involve ourselves in it. Kierkegaard’s interpretation of biblical stories, and specifically Abraham in *Fear and Trembling,* is justified on this basis. “It is supposed to be difficult to understand Hegel, but to understand Abraham is a trifle. To go beyond Hegel is a miracle, but to get beyond Abraham is the easiest thing of all.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Abraham’s crisis in this book is readily apparent to us because the story allows us to engage as ourselves in a very different way from a scientific and systematizing philosophy. Kierkegaard says that philosophy is something which no longer moves us, and this may be because it is too painful. It is difficult to involve ourselves with ideas that counter our own, and maybe impossible to understand what it is like to be in a position from which we could have those ideas ourselves. We should approach philosophy with our entire being, and as an active participant, a person who might be able to separate themselves from dogmatic beliefs. The Bible, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard are written in a way that is supposed to force us to do this, push us to have a personal stake in their considerations. The second important feature of existentialists, Kaufmann contends, is a fascination with extreme experiences. It is the controversial, the exception to the rule that forces us to leave behind our indifference. Existential philosophers, and philosophers of crisis believe that it is the ultimate, the break from the normal, the rare and unusual features of our consciousness that define us, that shape us. Crisis has this nature as an extreme experience, a strange place we find ourselves when belief is undermined in such a way that it opens the possibility for complete reconsideration.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Kaufmann argues for three key ways that the crisis in religion is manifested in Kierkegaard’s philosophy. Religion serves as one of the most prominent methods through which people form their fundamental structures of belief. Observing how crisis is exhibited through subversions of a religious belief system shows how it presents in the compromising of any metaphysical or ethical arrangement. The first cause of crisis for Kierkegaard is the undermining of naive religious beliefs by science. A literal interpretation of the Bible becomes increasingly difficult in the wake of scientific discovery. Kaufmann contends that this is not a new or unique problem; Copernicus, Galileo, Darwin, all these men had to grapple with discoveries countering a religious view of the world. The response of religious institutions is important to consider here, rather than accommodating science, they tried to cut it out, deny it. However, once the evidence becomes too difficult to dismiss, when a scientific view cuts so deep into the heart of religion that it cannot be ignored, a person might be driven to crisis. Doubting is understood, at least in Christianity and Judaism as a necessary part of faith, we must question our belief and return back to it with greater self-knowledge and a newfound gusto and strength in it. However, at a point the doubt becomes so encompassing that it casts off belief, there is real uncertainty, and in this a person might, and often will denounce God and religion, and gain a new faith in science. Kierkegaard advocates for a different approach to the undercutting of religion by science. Rather than regarding religion and science as contradictory opposites with irreconcilable views, we must revise our belief. A religious person is forced to ask themselves what their beliefs mean in light of scientific discovery. If religion does not conflict with science, what are the biblical stories trying to tell us about the fundamental truths of the world? The examining of religion can push an individual into crisis, and in crisis, the individual can open a real questioning, with answers that do not lie in the religious structure which is in crisis lifted off, but maybe a different system of belief, or belief entirely outside of the organization. Science here is not the crisis itself, nor is the increasing disdain for religion in favor of science the crisis. Rather, it is the serious consideration of religion and the erosion of the tenets of religious structure that can push an individual into crisis. A newfound belief in science over religion is an effect of a person that has been in crisis and moved to a new mode of formulating their beliefs.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The second crisis in religion for Kierkegaard is a moral one. An orthodox reading of the Bible gives us a clear system for moral belief. God created the world, and humans within it, and the Bible is the direct word of God. It follows that all the moral commandments are imposed on us as obligations by God. We are given a complete structure for how to build belief and act morally. The issue with modern religion, Kierkegaard contends, is that many people select individually which commandments they choose to follow. If an individual is the one that is doing the choosing, if our obligation is not given by God as an absolute, omnipotent, and perfect creator, religion would no longer have any relevance to morality. Churches in Kierkegaard’s time were becoming increasingly liberal, allowing for a looser reading of the Bible. They allow for a person to learn the scripture, revise it themselves, and then attribute their belief in these individual moral systems to belief in God. In a sense, God is brought into the equation of morality dishonestly. Kierkegaard’s observation points at a crucial way in which many systematize and create their beliefs. An individual will internalize an existing set of beliefs or ideals, adjust it in ways that fit with their subjective experience, and then ascribe the origin of their belief externally. We do not recognize ourselves as active participants in the formation of moral systems. The undercutting of religion by individual’s selection of beliefs contradicts God as an absolute, and this uncertainty forms the conditions for crisis.

Finally, Kaufmann argues for Kierkegaard’s criticism of organized religion as a crisis. He notes that there seems to be an inverse relationship within religious institutions of quality and quantity. We can also find this idea within the stories of the Old Testament. Many of the prophets criticize their societies for religious practice despite sacrifice and worship. Jonah becomes angry with God when it is decided that the people of Nineveh will be saved. Even though they are following the commandment, it is because of fear of punishment and not faith. There is an idea here that it is not enough just to go to church and act in a way that lines up with God’s commandments. It is a personal relationship with God and religion, the internalization of the infinite, that forms true religious belief. This problem is connected with the previous one, as religion becomes more organized and institutionalized, as more denominations become available, there is opportunity for individuals to choose which commandments to follow. Kaufmann states that it is true that it is much more like for a person to have a profound spiritual experience in smaller and more orthodox communities. Organized religion is too shallow, and Kierkegaard wants us to approach the deep. He is not necessarily opposed to organized religion as a concept, but believes the institutions of his day are fatally flawed. In a way, Kierkegaard argues for a more authoritarian church. However, here the question must be posed as to whether this kind of establishment would not allow for exceptional people such as himself to emerge from the framework. Orthodoxy goes hand in hand with exclusion, and denies the crisis as the place that forms the conditions for profound belief. As stated before, Kierkegaard is a radical individualist and an authoritarian organization of religion might work against individuals making the movements of faith.

Kierkegaard does not believe that the push of these factors towards religious crisis gives us reason to abandon it. When scientific discovery comes into conflict with science, we start to recognize the absurdity of orthodox religious practice. We should embrace the absurdity and by virtue of it accept religion. Kierkegaard wants us to “humbly accept that which is incomprehensible.”[[12]](#footnote-12) It is necessary to countenance the possibility of opposing God, we have no right to make moral selection. When God opposes our conscience, and it is even put to consideration, this is a reduction of God to the finite. Instead, we must reconcile the infinite and the finite, and grasp it with assurance and courage.

*Absurdity, Resignation, and Faith*

In *Fear and Trembling,* Kierkegaard uses the story of Abraham as a representation of what a person must do for true faith. This text can also serve us as an examination of the role of crisis as a condition for Kierkegaard’s ideal. His analysis of the absurd, despair, and infinite resignation and movement is an exegesis of personal crisis and its resolution in faith. Kierkegaard expounds on the crisis and argues that the only real way out is to be like Abraham, the knight of faith.

The absurd is a central idea in Kierkegaard’s philosophy and acts as the entity by virtue of which faith can exist. The absurd is not the same as the crisis, it is a driving force and feature of crisis, and affirmation of the absurd is what Kierkegaard proposes for a way out. “The absurd is not one of the factors which can be discriminated within the proper compass of the understanding: it is not identical with the improbable, the unexpected, the unforeseen.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Most systems of belief discriminate against the uncertain and indeterminate, and even more so for the absurd. Impossibility is still allowed for within structure, as either a negation of what is, or something that is in the process of becoming. It can be understood within the normal framework of experience. The absurd is that which does not allow calculation or estimation, we may renounce that which is not certain, but this is still belief. The absurd is the preposterous, that which is incommensurable with the reality, we cannot conceive it, and by virtue of this we should embrace it. God as an infinite and transcendent being that is also represented as something that can love and judge, human capacities is a paradox, an absurdity. By virtue of this absurdity, Kierkegaard argues we can come to true religious belief, faith.

Another central idea for Kierkegaard is despair or dread. In *Fear and Trembling*, he is diagnosing a sickness of humanity. In his lecture, Kaufmann highlights this despair as part of the crisis of religion. Despair suggests crisis by its occurrence, it can be an emotion that pushes individuals towards crisis, or the effect of an incapacity to deal with crisis. Kierkegaard defines despair as the wrong relationship with God, but this is incomplete, this can also be understood as a wrong relation to oneself. Humans have a capacity to run away from themselves, fend off what makes them uncomfortable, avoid isolation. Institutions of society and religion help individuals do this, placing the mechanism of belief formation in these structures rather than in the self. “It is only the lower natures which find in other people the law for their actions, which find the premises for their actions outside themselves.”[[14]](#footnote-14) This is an exemplification of the second crisis of religion that Kaufmann discusses in his lecture. The ability of people to choose which religious beliefs they follow and then attributing that belief to God. It is not only in religion that we find this, individuals also internalize societal ideals and trace the origins of their belief to external factors. The only way out of despair for Kierkegaard is to make an infinite resignation by virtue of the absurd, and a movement to faith. This is a resignation to crisis as the place that holds the conditions for faith.

“The infinite resignation is the last stage prior to faith, so that one who has not made this movement has not faith; for only in the infinite resignation do I become clear to myself with respect to my eternal validity, and only then can there be any question of grasping existence by virtue of faith.”[[15]](#footnote-15) Kierkegaard contrasts two figures to help us understand the infinite resignation, the knight of faith, and the tragic hero. The knight of faith is represented by Abraham, and understanding his story can help us grasp this idea. In Genesis, Abraham is tested when the ethical and the religious come into fundamental opposition. He is forced to reckon with his highest ethical force, the love of his son, when God tells him to sacrifice Isaac. To make this sacrifice, Kierkegaard argues that Abraham had to simultaneously hold the thoughts of murdering his son, and the belief that God would always provide, a paradox, and in doing this he exemplifies the ideal of faith. Abraham had to make an infinite resignation, and a following movement to faith to be a truly religious man, this is what makes him a knight of faith. On the other hand, the tragic hero has given up something that is essential to him, maybe as the result of a tragedy, maybe as an undermining of fundamental beliefs, and resigned to the loss, learns to live with the pain. He does not return in light of the paradox as Abraham does, he cannot embrace the absurd. In the framework of crisis we might say that this second knight has made an infinite resignation to crisis and could not find it in himself to overcome this crisis. Fundamental religious, ethical, and metaphysical beliefs are subverted by the occurrence of something that is so antithetical to the structure that we make a resignation into crisis. It may be that if we cannot return from the crisis, cannot embrace it, we will be left in dread, despair, fear and trembling.

*Job’s Crisis*

A significant place in the Old Testament in which the concept of crisis appears is the book of Job. The book begins with a fascinating conversation between God and *satan*, the accuser. Although *Satan* has been taken to be the antithesis of God, the embodiment of chaos and evil, he does not appear this way in Job. Certain Talmudic texts interpret this conversation and figure as a return to a question raised at the beginning of Genesis, during creation. When God creates man, there is a change in the phrasing of his commands, from “let there be” to “let us create.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The us can be interpreted as a use of the royal we, or a recognition of God as a plurality, the word *Elohim,* which is plural is often used to name God. Another way to see this however, is that God was speaking to other beings, the angels, and this is because there was a sort of debate as to whether humans should be created. At this point in creation, everything that existed was perfect, complete, there was simply nature, God, and angels. Humans introduce incompleteness in the world, they have freedom and agency to create and change. *Satan* is an angel who searches the world, to find evidence that God made a mistake, oppose God’s decision to create. Without man, there is no crisis, only the absolute, in humanity there lies a fundamental tendency for crisis. God makes a gamble with the accuser, Job is the most upright man in the world, and *satan* believes it is only because God has rewarded him that he maintains faithful.[[17]](#footnote-17) And so the story begins, tragedy befalls Job, he loses his family, his crops and calls into question his belief. The standard system of morality in the bible is that those who are good are rewarded by God, and those who sin are punished. So how can it be that Job, the most upright man in the world, who has walked the path of God to perfection, is sent to ruin. Horrible occurrences send Job into crisis, his morality goes against his religion. Job’s crisis occurs when that which does not fit infiltrates his belief system. In his subsequent dialogue with his companions, he is forced to reckon with certain fundamental questions, the crisis is what allowed for this. Job wonders why he was created, why existence is better than nonexistence. His companions represent the traditional order of belief in the Bible, they tell Job that he must have sinned for such tragedy to befall him. If it is true that he has sinned, this also forces him to reconsider belief, he thought he had been on the path of God. This kind of self-blame caused by a system of belief outside of ourselves can drive us to look for answers externally. In a similar way to Kierkegaard’s Abraham, Job’s morality goes against his religious beliefs. This puts him in pain, it is not only that he has lost his material possessions and family, it is that the fundamental moral systems of his belief have been subverted. Crisis is something that we might suffer in, it is uncomfortable to have uncertainty in light of an event that has lifted off what we previously believed. A loss of moral belief causes the loss of an aim, a goal that we can pursue in the hopes of fulfillment. The idea of a path that we must walk on is prevalent in the Bible. By following God’s commandments we remain on the path to God and the infinite, we might lose our way, but through religious practice it is possible to return. However, the occurrence for Job of tragedy that does not fit within the juridical order of the Bible makes him question how it is possible to be moral. How can we remain on the path if we do not even know where it is? If it is uncertain whether God will be just, we have no indication of the relative value of any action. This is in a certain sense a question of meaning. Given injustice and evil in the world, chaos as something that creeps into fundamental systems of belief, how is it even possible to find meaning? It is only when the terrible happens to Job that he can seriously pose and consider these kinds of questions. At the end of the book, Job encounters and contends with God. God does not give answers, a way to reconcile his religious beliefs with the tragic, instead he shows Job his inconceivability. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?”[[18]](#footnote-18) The way out of crisis for Job, the path to true belief through God, is created by standing in fear, in awe of God. To comprehend that which is incomprehensible, a paradox that reflects Kierkegaard’s thoughts on Abraham. Job responds to God and realizes that in his dialogue, his attempt to reconcile the religious with the ethical, he was considering God as an entity that could be conceived by human categorization. “Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.” Job is redeemed by a grasp of the unfathomable in the same way that Abraham comes to faith by virtue of the absurd, and an internalization of the paradox.

*Transience and Ecclesiastes*

Perhaps the most important place in which crisis is expressed in the Bible is the book of Ecclesiastes. From the first word of Ecclesiastes, we can glean much of the meaning the book is trying to convey. This is the Hebrew word *hevel*, usually translated as vanity or meaningless. The book begins with a proclamation: “Vanity of vanities, says the teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” We can start to understand the word by first looking at it’s other significant occurrence in the Bible, in Genesis. *Hevel* is a name, and names are meaningful, they convey the essence, the nature of the person. This name is Abel, brother of Cain, son of Eve the mother of all things. Cain’s name stands in opposition to Abel’s, it literally means that which is mine, possessed. When Eve birthed Cain, she exclaims “I have produced,” the word contains the same Hebrew root as Cain’s name. He is a farmer, “a tiller of the ground”, someone who creates and possesses his creation. He is connected with agriculture, the precursor to civilization, to the world of human creation. Abel is a shepherd, “a keeper of sheep,” he travels through the wilderness to find a place for his flock to settle, before again moving on, transience.[[19]](#footnote-19) Abel is not vain, nor does he live a meaningless existence, and so we find that *hevel* in Ecclesiastes cannot mean either vanity nor meaningless. Perhaps a better way to express the meaning of *hevel*, one that represents Abel’s personality is ephemerality. Abel is impermanent, unfixed, and moving, he does not establish himself and his property within the world. Robert Alter, a prominent translator of Hebrew poetry notes that the root of *hevel* is the word for breath, and so in his translation of the wisdom books, he replaces vanity with mere breath. This echoes another phrase in the book used first at the end of the beginning verse “all is mere breath [vanity] and a herding [chasing after] the wind.”[[20]](#footnote-20) The word translated as herding comes from the root that describes a shepherd tending the flock, but wind is not something that can be herded. Ecclesiastes captures the sense of fleeting and transitory life that the narrator expresses throughout the book.

This book is the narrative of a person in crisis, an examination of the factors that can lead us to crisis, and a resolution through religious belief. *Qohelet,* the teacher, and author of the book explains the different moral beliefs he has taken, the ideals that he has value, the circumstances that undercut these beliefs, and finally a movement to God. He first examines his search for wisdom, a worthy and difficult aim. But this system of belief based on wisdom is undercut by a realization of death. “What happens to the fool will happen to me also; why then have I been so very wise?”[[21]](#footnote-21) There is no use to wisdom if we all die in the end, it is fleeting, a herding of the wind. An entire structure of belief with the aim of wisdom is subverted by a recognition of death. The awareness of mortality has the ability to undermine any belief system, and push an individual into crisis. How can we find meaning in life if we all die in the end? It brings us to a realization of ephemerality, and this is a feature of crisis. The indeterminate, uncertain, and unresolved push their way into belief, compromise the structure to the extent that crisis occurs, and crisis itself is that which is undetermined, and this precariousness provides the conditions under which we can pose the great and important questions, and create answer to them. The crisis in Ecclesiastes is resolved with an imperative, to “Fear God.” This is what gives us meaning in the presence of injustice and mortality, every deed comes into judgement, and the value in our lives determined by the commandments.

The resolution of crisis in Kierkegaard, and of course in the Bible is a religious one. Faith is the only way that we can grapple with the uncertainty in the world. When our believes are sabotaged, it is faith that can bring us back, a humble acceptance of the idea that there are many things we cannot and will not understand, and it is by virtue of this that our beliefs come into existence. The individual and their choices in moral belief are unimportant, insignificant in relation to God. Faith however, does not really include the crisis, it is a resolution that regards crisis as part of the other, something that is not possible to even conceive. Faith, except in the exceptional sense that Kierkegaard regards it, does not recognize crisis as the condition under which individual and affirmative belief structures can come into existence. In crisis, we must recognize something outside of ourselves, something we can internalize in order to find meaning, rather than belief upon the condition of uncertainty. It may be that faith provides a successful way out of crisis, successful in the sense that the person is able to become fulfilled in a spiritual sense, but given the prevalence of crisis for individuals, and the idea of crisis in philosophy and religion, we should examine the idea, see it as a fundamental part of belief, an origin for new and genuine belief, and form systems that centralize and affirm this idea.

*Nietzsche’s Crisis*

Nietzsche’s works are perhaps the most prominent example of a philosophy of crisis. His entire project is to an extent an examination of crisis, and his aim in the way he writes is meant to push us to realize crisis. In the first chapter of *Beyond Good and Evil,* he criticizes philosophers, and within this critique is an analysis of the mechanism of belief formation. Nietzsche wants to undermine the structures of morality in such a way that it is also the subversion of belief, and institutions of society that are manifestations of our tendency to represent ourselves in the world. To understand why Nietzsche’s project is so significant, we must first grasp the way that he conceives morality and value. Morality is how we order the world based on responsibility and obligation. Values are most simply that which we aim at, the ideal for which we strive. However, they encompass more than this, they are also the process of achieving that aim, the steps we take on the path to completion. Values act as a lens though which we view and consider the world, and the mechanism with which we order these thoughts and incorporate them into a system of belief. Moral beliefs are structured and formed based on what is good for, or what we believe is good for ourselves, and what works within a society. We are social creatures and therefore systematize morality in relation to our interactions with other individuals, and with society as a whole.

Nietzsche states, “Gradually it has become clear to me what every great philosophy so far has been: namely, the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir.” This is a crucial and controversial point, philosophy is usually understood as something that can exist in some sense without the philosopher. Logic and reason will bring to light certain fundamental truths, and these entities stand without the guiding hand or influence of the philosopher. He continues, “also that the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy constituted the real germ of life from which the whole plant had grown.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Every philosophy has a presupposition of the moral aims of the philosopher, and the philosopher represents their aim necessarily within their work, and they do so unconsciously. Nietzsche’s point here is to show that even the most fundamental metaphysical beliefs are built on the premise of certain moral aims. A crisis in morality, a pulling out of its foundations is so important because all of our beliefs are moral ones. Philosophy, religion, and science are interpretations from ethical assumptions. We would like to be able to externalize these institutions, look around within them and find belief we can incorporate into our own, we do not realize that these are in fact representations of ourselves and our own structures of belief. Nietzsche thinks we are addicted to explanations, we have a tendency to form belief, and want to look in the world for answers. A reason for this is that it often seems like experience is all we have. If reasons and explanations cannot be found through experience, then where can we find them? Life consists of suffering and discomfort, and we do not want to suffer for no reason, this in part explains a tendency to look for explanation. Within these belief structures that systematize, suppose an aim or value outside of the self, there lie the seeds for upheaval, and destruction. Inside every belief structure is a drive towards crisis, a mechanism by which they could be undermined.

A characteristic of many belief systems that contains the possibility for its subversion is an exclusion of the other. “The fundamental belief of the metaphysicians is the belief in oppositions of values.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Moral systems are created with a highest value, an ultimate aim, and include a method of achieving this goal. That which is opposed or in contradiction to the ethic is sublimated and banished from the system. Dogmatic philosophic doctrines represent a will to truth, a propensity to categorize the world in one’s own image and exclude that which does not fit. It is an assumption that truth has its origins in being. This is an error that expresses itself in concepts such as pure spirit, the good, and God. Nietzsche asks us what the value is in these ideas, why is it that truth is assumed better than ignorance?[[24]](#footnote-24) Our conscious thought is guided into certain channels by instinct, the tendency to value the definite above the uncertain is a manifestation of the will to truth to preserve life as we have it. Every drive, every will, Nietzsche says, represents itself as the ultimate. The will to truth propels us to represent ourselves, to value structure, create ourselves in the world by virtue of a moral aim. We then call this the absolute, the truth. This is at the heart of why seeming objectivity on the part of philosophers is confession, autobiography. The will to truth drives belief in unconditional and binary models, it shuns otherness. It does not want us to look at the meaning and value of natural life. Life is by nature finite, unstable, and dynamic, the will to truth assumes this as an originally flawed condition, and attempts to resolve it. Despite this tendency, indeterminacy and uncertainty still exist, they present themselves and manifest constantly. The exclusion of the other allows for the unbelievable to creep in and subvert our systems of belief. There is a necessary outside, a limit to the categories of existence as far reaching as they might be, and by virtue of this, that which falls to the edge can appear suddenly and abruptly, driving us to crisis. We do not engage this outside, do not affirm the other, and this is what gives it a tremendous power to subvert.

The Death of God in Nietzsche’s philosophy is one of his most misconstrued concepts. Superficially, it is an exclamation of the undermining of God by a multitude of factors within society. Scientific thought has crept into philosophy and theology, standing opposed to fundamental religious belief. Doubt caused by the occurrence of horrible events, that which falls outside of the system of justice set up in the Bible. However, the Death of God is more than this, it is an event for society and also the individual. It is also not a necessarily happy event for Nietzsche, the Death of God will bring hardship, destruction, as any undercutting of fundamental belief structures will. It is a crisis, a turning point, it may be terrible and uncertain, but it provides the opportunity and conditions for new belief to be formed, belief with its origin in the will, and not the creator.

A major place in which this concept is found is Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science,* “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.” In these three simple sentences, we find so much of the event that Nietzsche wants us to understand. The madman is the one who says these words, and he is not joyful in doing so. We are murderers, and that of the worst kind, murderers of God. The idea of God is as an absolute creator, he is the origin of not only the world, but all morality within it. The Death of God is not something that we can return to, there is no hope for the moral structures that have been devised in light of God and Christianity.[[25]](#footnote-25) Later in the book, Nietzsche writes of the Death of God in reference to “how to understand cheerfulness.” The event is something that we have caused, yet is distant, we do not realize that God is Dead, and it is our doing. Those in Western society fail to recognize the meaning of the event, what it truly is for something to undermine all moral systems. “now that this faith has been undermined, how much must collapse because it was built on this faith, leaned on it, had grown into it - for example, our entire European morality.” The Death of God signals the destruction of the entire moral system on which not only our own beliefs, but the structures of society as a representation of those beliefs are founded. So this is not an event that will benefit a number of religious people who now have their eyes opened by the Death of God. At the end of this section however, Nietzsche remarks that true philosophers, his “free spirits” are happy, they see a dawn in the event. The event as a destruction and undermining of moral beliefs acts as an opening, gives us a way that we might overcome these, and create our own by virtue of will.[[26]](#footnote-26)

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* Nietzsche expands on the idea of the Death of God and what it would mean to overcome. In the section “On the Way of the Creator,” Nietzsche asks us “can you be your own judge and avenger of your law?” The role of the judge and avenger have traditionally been played by God, he is asking us to consider the possibility that the individual takes on that role. This is something he thinks could be destructive to a person, to recognize their own ability to create beliefs, the possibility that despite belief in God, this is what they were doing all along, and then go forward to will something new. Nietzsche says that “the worst enemy you encounter is yourself.” In a moral system that includes God, all the good and evil things that happen to a person are fitted into God’s justice, we have a clear aim as designated by the commandments in the Bible.[[27]](#footnote-27) With the Death of God, we must take responsibility for our own agency in the events that happen to us. This might be what drives a person to misery. Action presupposes an ethic, and all the things that happen to us are manifestations in that sense of this ethic. If the morality comes from us and not God, we have no reason, no person to blame except ourselves. In the event of God’s death, we have the tendency to replace the idea with another explanation, maybe nothingness, more likely institutions of science, or politics, the state will replace God as the object of dogmatic belief. However, if we can affirm the crisis, recognize the ways in which the undermining of faith is an undermining of societal structures, and affirm ourselves as beings that can will, that can make our own truth, our own morality, Nietzsche thinks we will be able to overcome.

*Overcoming Crisis*

Philosophies of crisis are ones that both examine the notion and consider it of vital importance, but also push us to engage with them, try to undermine our beliefs, and drive us towards crisis. Kierkegaard delights in his use of irony and contradiction and intends it to annoy and even outrage us. In *Fear and Trembling*, he wants us to see ourselves in Abraham’s shoes, to truly comprehend what it would be like for the ethical and religious to come into conflict. Kierkegaard desires a recognition of the absurd, an exceptional occurrence that we cannot detach ourselves from, that forces involvement. It is only by virtue of this that we can make the final movement into infinity, out of crisis. The crisis in Kierkegaard’s philosophy serves as the conditions upon which his ideal, his knight of faith can be realized. A philosophy of crisis incorporates and affirms the concept as part of the system, maybe the most necessary part, for it is here that real change occurs. In the book of Job, serious contentions with religion are addressed. Job’s dialogue with his companions, and then with God, is not one we are supposed to simply regard and consider. We are supposed to have this discussion with ourselves, ask serious questions of meaning, of existence and give answer, we must participate in the back and forth. It is only in light of these questions undermining belief that we can come into crisis, and perform the questioning, understand the incomprehensible. In the Bible, this is something we should just humbly accept, internalize the contradiction, and move into faith. The crisis here too is what allows for true engagement and reconsideration in religious belief, from which we can become faithful. In Ecclesiastes, we are told how ephemerality, mortality, and injustice can undermine our ideals, our values. In reading this book, we are meant to imagine our own pursuits, are they just mere breath? We are supposed to come to crisis, to recognize the uncertain, reckon with meaning in existence, embrace transience, and finally, to Fear God. Nietzsche’s aim is to tear down the structures of morality that are represented in personal belief, as well as institutions within society. Like Kierkegaard, he writes in a way that is meant to upset us, a realization of the Death of God is something so significant that we must involve ourselves. His aphorisms have different meanings taken in and out of the context of the book, it might be that a severely controversial idea has its roots deeper. Maybe, by becoming angry at Nietzsche we are driven to justify and understand his philosophy, look deeper, undermine our own morality, fall into crisis.

We form structures of belief based on experience, teaching, and internalizations of the ideals of our society. Taking Nietzsche’s critique seriously, these beliefs are all presupposed by an even more fundamental structure of morality. Our beliefs, and subsequent actions are manifestations of a certain value, a certain moral aim. Our actions in the present and the past form a narrative of the self we tell ourselves, and through it gain identity. We understand ourselves as a story in relation to a goal. A moral belief acts as an origin, something against which we can measure ourselves and understand our place. When something occurs that falls outside of this framework, an occurrence of impossibility, this undermines these beliefs to the extent that they are lifted off, we have true doubt. This subversion is what leads a person to crisis. Most proposals for resolving crisis are not formed with an understanding of what it is to be in crisis. We have the tendency to form belief in order to avoid crisis, to stay away from the uncomfortable and even painful. This is not necessarily an unworthy goal, but it is crisis that allows us to reconsider, to adapt our beliefs, understand the full range of human capacities, approach the uncertain. A structure of belief that accepts crisis as it’s conditions is one that is malleable, that has its origin in the self. Resolutions that ignore the crisis itself are the force behind radical, dangerous, and extreme ideology. In the face of the indeterminate, we want to run away, we crave a clear, strong, and dogmatic belief, anything to get away from the crisis, the feeling of impermanence, the loss of meaning. However, only in the time of crisis are we able to examine belief, and change it. We must recognize ourselves as the one who has power within the crisis, agency to influence our outcomes, our values, our most basic and fundamental beliefs, to change them. We must first recognize ourselves as the origin for the formation of belief. Then we can seek crisis, throw ourselves into impossible situations, go down into the deepest realms of consciousness, undermine everything that we hold on to in belief. Much is revealed of a person in crisis, and even more where they go from it. In crisis, we can understand ourselves, be an individual, step away from binding and excluding structures in society, form new beliefs as a self, create them, will them. This is not transcendence, we are not something more than what we are, nor do we have the capacity to move to a higher state, something categorically different from other individuals. The affirmation of crisis is an awareness to what extent we are a part of society, an active component in the creation of the world inside us, and around us. Crisis will probably return, any belief has the potential to be undermined, constantly we experience the other, something that we could not have possibly conceived before its occurrence. However, an embrace and affirmation of crisis, an examination of crisis as the conditions for the possibility of an individual to create belief might allow us to see the crisis coming, experience it, and return with new and different ways of conception. We are beings in crisis, and this eternal struggle is what makes us human, and what grants us freedom.

On the Modern Political Philosophy of Crisis

Brandon Arnold

*On the Modern Political Philosophy of Crisis*

The concept of crisis has pervaded philosophical engagement with politics throughout human political development. The events and exceptions that structure human experience have grounded the presence of crisis within the frameworks of society. For there to be a society, there must be some formulating and structuring of the field of possible experience for humans. This formulation has accompanying institutions that develop their own relationships, and influence the creation of structuring of experience in their own ways. This continual structuring of society, this continual institutionalization is based within crisis. These methods are produced through crisis itself; the moment of crisis is the point where relationships can be turned, giving some greater control over the possibilities of existence than others.

Crisis underscores the entirety of political structures and institutions; from the methodology used to produce such structures, to the application of those structures, there is the constant presence of crisis. This constant presence has not escaped the present, and appears to be more immanent as time progresses. The political structuring of the modern day is readily concerned with preserving the nation, leadership, and order. The obsession that politics has with these themes is a direct result of the development of these themes as ends of politics, ends realized from the crisis point.

*Genealogy of the Political Crisis*

The modern state has developed through a relationship to the individual, a relationship where the individual provides the government the with the ability to control. The individual has come to appreciate the unique standing that liberalism has appeared to take, but was deceived by the apparent preservation of freedom through private property. Through a contractual relationship that guarantees a preservation of commitments and responsibilities, the individual felt that a certain understanding had been reached. An understanding between the state and the individual were the individual would be supported in its quest to maintain existence, and the state gets to exist as a subject.

The development of this relationship underlies the development of the political theory of crisis. Human experience hasn’t been categorized by adherence to one system, but rather a development of different systems over time. The effects of crisis can be understood through this development of different systems: at the moment of crisis, humans are able to ask what it means to act politically. The answer to this question results in the structures that life is willing to coexist with, but these structures are necessarily distinguished from the previous structures.

The relationship between the individual and the state has developed through two distinct crises in political identity. At the center of this relationship is a specific modality of power: pastoral power[[28]](#footnote-28). This power was first realized through an immediate relationship between power and the individual, and evolves into a relationship between power and the state that maintains the influence of the individual.

Western philosophy has subsumed a role of evaluating the encompassing influence, or lack of, from rationality on politics. This task is a result of a dominant paradigm rising through a multiplicity of possible political power. Since Kant, keeping reason within the limits of experience, and particularly keeping watch over the power of political rationality, has been a primary task of philosophical thought. So the relationship between rationality and excesses of political power appears to be evident in political philosophy, at least in its modern development post-Enlightenment.

This expansion of the relationship between rationalization and power begs the operative question: what do we do? How are we, as humans, ought to act in the face of this new awareness? The begging of this question is the underlying theory of crisis; what follows is an inherently unique production of human political organization. In moving towards a critique of political reason, Michel Foucault offers a few suggestions for evaluating this relationship. First, there must be an engagement with rationalizations of specific fields of fundamental experience rather than a generally holistic approach. Tied to this suggestion is the second: rationalizations can be dangerous, and so we must discover the specific forms of rationalization being used prior to engaging in the criticism. Third, Foucault calls for evaluating more remote processes than those the Enlightenment period engaged with[[29]](#footnote-29).

The development of pastoral power came in response to a similar such moment of crisis. By appealing to the concerns of individuals, the pastorship was able to capitalize upon an individualized power. This pastoral power has its roots not in the Greco-Roman perspective that dominates western philosophy, but rather was present in Egypt, Assyria, and Judea. Hebrews in particular validated this power, using it as a way to juxtapose themselves from bad kings. [[30]](#footnote-30) But this theme is intensified: the power is isolated within a particular individual, the shepherd. The shepherd is a manifestation of God-on-Earth; the primacy of this idea is wrapped within the shepherd wielding power over the flock, not over the land. The shepherd leads the flock, ensuring a salvation for the flock. The shepherd maintains an immanent relationship with the flock through a duty that corresponds with the identity of the shepherd. In its acceptance through Hebrew identity, the pastoral power was systematically developed through the church. The church stands as a singular opportunity where the shepherd immediately interacts with the flock, maintaining the dependent relationship between the shepherd and the flock.

While the shepherd-flock metaphor hasn’t enjoyed the same prominence in Western philosophy that it has elsewhere, the metaphor is the central contemplation in Plato’s *Statesman*. The *Statesman* evaluates the possibility of the shepherd playing the role of the leader of the city; Plato concludes that the politician is precluded from being the shepherd as the politician is concerned with the many, while the shepherd is concerned with the individual. Although the shepherd maintains and leads the flock to salvation, the flock is not the immediate concern of the shepherd. Rather, the concern for the shepherd is to maintain knowledge of each individual in the flock, and be able to support each individual in the performative journey. The politician, however, is tasked with weaving the plurality of perspectives into a coherent whole; the politician lacks a general capacity to engage with the individual to the degree required to be the shepherd.

The society of today has produced the most complex systems of knowledge and developed the most sophisticated structures of power, but to what end, for the pursuit of what goal? There seems to be two primary considerations; the first follows from the development of a politics of the individual known as pastoral power. The second is a result of the development of the modern state. this development has coincided with technological innovation, providing the modern state with the capability include the primacy of the individual with the plural perspective of the politician. Plato recognizes dichotomized relationships that construct political experience in a way that prevent an effective synthesis of these goals within an individual. The modern state has transcended the meaning of an individual, establishing itself as a *thing* that carries an active *existence*. The *state* has become a manifestation of political experience that explicitly overcomes the shepherd-politician dichotomy.

Appreciating the construction of the state as a manifestation of political actions aides in understanding the specific political rationality produced by the state. The rationality of the state is a unique juxtaposition between the reason of the state, or how the state is understood as a rational government that increases the strength of the state according to the ends of the state, and the theory of politics, or the nature of the states’ rational activity, which includes the goals it sets and the forms of institutions used to achieve those goals. The reason of state is an art, a technique of conforming to certain rules pertaining to rational knowledge. Reason of state is the art of governance where the state acts in accordance with the state’s strength. Supplement by the reason of power, which supplies the state with a little extra strength.

In a sense, this juxtaposition allows a historical analysis of the art of government.[[31]](#footnote-31) This art has assisted in establishing liberalism as the dominant political ideology, lending to the creation of an environment focused on security. The state is aware of the rationality that it has produced, and it has allowed the created environment to foster the conditions for the birth of biopolitics, the result of a unique connection between liberalism and the juridical order. The aim of the art of governance is to reinforce the power the state can wield over its subjects; given the state, enemies can be suppressed for an indeterminate amount of time, and it’s a reciprocal relationship. The state is a remarkable form of human ordering.

The reason of state and theory of politics that rationalize the modern liberal state contains a corollary component: the juridical order. Juridical considerations have preeminence within the modern political state for its effect in the preservation of power relations. For the state to maintain a constant relationship to the individual, its citizens, and provide the pastoral redemption they desire, the state must comprise some element of regulating life. The juridical order is legal phenomenon that unambiguously conveys to the individual which actions are, and are not, considered acceptable within the system.

The effects of this juridical consideration have been realized through a few important political actions. Napoleon introduced to the French Constitution Article 14, which “granted the sovereign to power to ‘make the regulations and ordinances necessary for the execution of the laws and the security of the State’,”[[32]](#footnote-32) an idea that gave legal credence to an ability to suspend the constitutional commitments of the state. A permanent state of exception in a majority of states coincided with World War One, leading to a concentration of legislative ability within the executive, transforming the executive into a legislative organ itself.[[33]](#footnote-33) The expansion of the executive’s powers continued pushing the politico-constitutional base of western politics to develop a new form; a new form materially manifested within the effects of Article 48 of the Weimar Republic. Similar in language to Article 14 of the French Constitution, Article 48 dissolved Germany’s parliamentary republic, and created a state of exception that existed for the next decade.

Germany embraced an arrogance of centrality at the end of the Enlightenment. Given Germany’s central geographic location, the German approach to philosophical and spiritual had also developed a certain central importance, at least among German intellectuals of the time[[34]](#footnote-34). National Socialism appeared to be an authentic integration of conflicting philosophies into single worldview; Martin Heidegger[[35]](#footnote-35) became the philosopher to act on political sentiments. Heidegger’s concern with crisis, race, leadership, and order mirror almost perfectly the concerns of National Socialism: the structuring of action and the present, place and group, rank, and legitimation.[[36]](#footnote-36)

In an active embodiment of his philosophy, Heidegger took it upon himself to address the need for spiritual leadership. In spite of requiring a commitment to National Socialism, Heidegger assumed the rectorship at the University of Freiburg to position himself, as a philosopher, into a role of decision making within political society. Regrettably, the inclusion of the philosophical perspective was not enough to overcome a general ambivalence to National Socialism, tolerating the compounding of duties within Hitler as the executive. Hitler’s more privileged position as the sovereign permitted National Socialism to take advantage of the juridico-political exception to its extent, necessitating a turning in the evaluation of what it political action is.

In addition to the considerations of pastoral power and a juridical component of exception as crises, the response to which has developed the modern state, is Alain Badiou’s *event*.[[37]](#footnote-37) The theory of the event seems to embrace crisis on a metaphysical level, as the event is the active violating of structures so that new subjects can be realized. Creating new subjects is the immediate connection to crisis, as the creation of new subjects necessarily demands a reorientation of political engagement. The deploying political power requires maintaining an active relationship with the subject in order to efficaciously create a structure on the field of possible experience of the subject, and by inherently identifying new subjects through the event, political action must be reexamined to include the new subjectivity. Political revolutions are certain types of events,[[38]](#footnote-38) but regardless of the conclusion of the revolution, the possibility for events to occur underlies the immanent existence of crisis. The event may only cause a slight deviation in the production of reality, but even the slightest deviation confirms the effects that crises have on society.

*Sovereigns and Exceptions*

Even as the state preserves a relationship with political subjects through pastoral power, the juridical component of exception situates crisis as a political fact. If crisis, as an event that necessitates a response that restructures the field of political actions, is understood as a fact, then the state of exception, if it is an embodiment of crisis, would also have to be taken as a political fact. This fact would indicate a necessity for decision making powers to resolve the crisis, turning political action to a new direction.

The importance of the decision in solving the exception signifies a proximity to Carl Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty. Schmitt’s *Political Theology* opens with “sovereign is he who decides on the exception”,[[39]](#footnote-39) indicating at the beginning of the book an interdependence between sovereignty and the exception. While important to note, to truly appreciate the impact of the sovereign’s decision making powers, the interdependence between the sovereign and the exception has to be appreciated. In its occurrence, the state of exception demands a decision to reground the structures of political engagement and turn towards a new political action. This would seem to indicate that the state of exception is not a consequence of sovereignty, nor is the sovereign’s existence dependent on the state of exception, but rather both are necessary considerations as motivations in the evolution of political action.

The state of exception represents a grounding of crisis in a juridico-political concept with material and metaphysical manifestations. The state of exception is an inherent point of reevaluation for political philosophy, as the conditions which structure political engagement are entirely suspended in the state of exception, allowing these structures to be, theoretically, holistically criticized. This criticism allows political engagement to be restructured on any level.

But the state of exception stands in direct relation to a state or war or a state of siege, indicating that, to a large degree, the exception is characterized by violence and instability.

The state of exception is a zone of imbalance between the juridical and the political, a zone that, “insofar as it is a suspension of the juridical order itself, it defines law’s threshold or limit concept.”[[40]](#footnote-40) The state of exception is an inherently juridical consideration, as it requires the existence of the law and its structures in order to suspend them. Interestingly, a juridical order lacks any grounding if there is no corresponding political system, as the legal stipulations that structure of life through power relationships lack any significance if those relationships are meaningless. In the exception, politics is preserved, it is just the juridical that is completely suspended.

The suspension creates a no man’s land where we are allowed to engage with the question of what it means to act politically, providing the specific grounds for a turning point to a new politics. During the suspension, the sovereign is completely responsible for regrounding the juridical, although there are a couple different ways that the sovereign can do this. By preserving the political framework, the sovereign maintains the ability to decide, specifically on the application of particular juridical elements and on the state of the exception itself.

Hitler didn’t have to wait for the state of exception to present itself, by invoking Article 48, Hitler was able to create an active state of exception that provided him, as the executive and sovereign, the complete control of governing practices. The legal civil war that followed Hitler’s ascendency led to the elimination of political enemies in communists, and the elimination of social enemies in the Jews. This elimination of enemies is the result of the sovereign deciding to apply certain juridical elements to certain populations while in a state of exception, demonstrating the sovereign’s ability to apply the juridical in the face of a suspension. Hitler also demonstrates that the sovereign’s decision on the state of exception does not have to be a decision that resolves the exception, rather, the sovereign has complete ability to embrace the exception and continue the state. The enactment of Article 48 was technically never reversed, so the political climate of Germany under National Socialism can be understood as an unceasing state of exception, only ending with the collapse of National Socialism itself.

The sovereign preservation of the state of exception during National Socialism underlies the greater effect that the sovereign has had on the development of the state: the state embraces as its central task the creation of the state of exception. There is an assumption at play here: that the modern state can be thought of as sovereign. It seems that this assumption can be taken for granted, but this is actually a profound assumption. The state has been able to garner its modern significance by internalizing a pastoral performance of power, and maintains this significance by embracing sovereignty through the executive. This special synthesis establishes the state, in the state of exception, as the guarantor of political action, and as the sovereign responsible for shaping the grounds of possible action in accordance with the ends of the state.

The state has subsumed an ability to create structures and institutions, especially in the face of crisis, which also presumes that those structures and institutions are effective at shaping the field of possible human experience. The state has an ability to perform all political actions, thus indicating that the state has internalized a new framework that appreciates a concern with the individual and the whole. But to understand the role of law, the state, and the sovereign during the state of exception, it must be acknowledged that there is still a juridical influence during a state of exception; the exception is an exclusion of the line that contains the line itself.

The state of exception make its first appearance in Carl Schmitt’s *Dictatorship*, the beginning of a two-part project to isolate both the exception and the sovereign. Dictatorship, according to Schmitt, a dictatorship is inherently a state of exception insofar as it related to defining a “concrete exception, …. a problem that up to now has not been held in due consideration by the general theory of law”.[[41]](#footnote-41) Thus understanding the inherent connection between the state of exception and dictatorship, there are two modes of dictatorship that Schmitt distinguishes: commissarial dictatorship and sovereign dictatorship. The former aims at defending or restoring the standing constitution, and the latter, as a figure of the exception, maintains an ability to turn the political discussion and reshape the constitution.

The latter definition of dictatorship is at interest here, and Schmitt identifies two specific modalities of power that the sovereign dictator capitalizes on. First is constituted power: power that is specifically awarded to the sovereign by the constitution. The second form of power is constituent power, which the sovereign takes for themselves as “a power that, though it is not constituted in virtue of a constitution, is nevertheless connected to every existing constitution in such a way that it appears as the founding power,… and for this reason it cannot be negated even if the existing constitution might negate it.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Although it doesn’t contain any intrinsic juridical grounding, constituent power is inscribed “within every politically decisive action and is therefore capable of ensuring the relation between the state of exception and the juridical order even in the case of sovereign dictatorship.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

Schmitt recognized the unique threat to the juridico-political order by dictatorships under Leninist theory and the Weimar Republic and sought to preserve the consistency of the juridico-political order. Schmitt does this in *Political Theology* by analyzing the norm and the decision, two fundamental elements of the law. In the exception, the norm is suspended, revealing the distinctive element of the decision;[[44]](#footnote-44) In the norm, the decision is reduced to a minute relevance and the law functions in an undeviating manner, whereas in the state of exception, the decision is elevated to primacy relevance, and the norm is reduced to a minimum.

The link between crisis, the state of exception, and sovereignty can now be understood. The exception poses a unique crisis to politics, as the entire juridical order which situates the political is suspended, requiring a reorientation to politics in the exception. The sovereign maintains a paradoxical location inside and outside the juridical order, outside when juridical order is in suspension, but always inside the political through the decision-making ability of the sovereign; the use of that decision indicates another crisis, as the decision that the sovereign makes regrounds the juridical, necessitating another reorientation in politics.

*Crisis and the State*

The modern state is a direct development from moments of crisis in human political development. The first came through an ontological desire; a quest to explore the origins of human existence and determine how humans are supposed to act. These questions were answered in one form through the development of the pastoral power through religious institutions. This pastoral power operated with a direct focus on the individual, ensuring both their existence and salvation. The structures created by pastoral power to achieve those ends isolated a specific form of control over life, a form of control capitalized upon by liberalism and cemented within the state. This biopolitics is maintains the state’s relationships to the individual, preserving the immanent relationship of the state and the individual needed to enact power over the other. By recognizing the distinctive juridico-political component of the state of exception and its relationship to sovereignty, the immanent nature of crisis maintains its position within the modern state.

*On the Modern Political Crisis*

At the origin of the state, maintaining the already established juxtaposition between pastoral power and sovereignty is the political paradigm of liberalism. “Liberal”, especially in its contemporary application, has many significant likenesses, but the fundamental concern with private property being the key to social organization is at concern here. Liberalism’s material corollary is a form of capitalism that, through its fundamental relationship inside of the state, has transcended borders and become a global element. With the global acceptance of the concern of private property comes another necessary admission: the cost of that private property. The cost is inevitable inequality, as some actors are able to secure and maintain property in a zero-sum way with the other. However, this price has been accepted as the price of capitalism, allowing global capitalism to secure a contemporary historical victory: global capitalism has established itself as the only viable end for humanity. Over the past 30 years, the failure of socialist states and of the collectivist vision of economic and societal laws of countries has devastated any structural opposition to liberalism.

The elections of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister of England and Ronald Reagan as President of the United States in the 1980s provided the juridical and political support to propel liberalism to a profound importance. Communism and capitalism were in constant conflict through much of the 20th century, as communism and other collective identities sought to eliminate inequality within societal organizations, leaving liberalism and neoliberalism as the only possible ends of humanity.

Human beings have always had at least two possible destinies, and the definitive crisis of our time has been the limiting of humanity to one possible destiny or solution. Liberalism has embraced the role of being the singular destiny for humans, defining human subjects as either a beggar, a consumer, an owner, or nothing at all. The direction of the state has internalized these views of its subjects, and used them to promote an end of humanity in accordance with the advancement of private property. This has created an environment where all political decisions are dependent upon globalized capitalism and its inequalities. The resulting phenomena is the concentration of capital, a concentration of capital that has created the conditions where “264 persons have as their property the equivalent of 3 billion other people.”[[45]](#footnote-45) This development is the result of a special synthesis of liberalism with the state, which is itself a special synthesis of pastoral power and sovereignty.

While the position of the state is has evolved into a dominant and assumed entity, there are still small rebellions to globalized capitalism, like the Zapatistas in Mexico. Unfortunately these philosophical oppositions are few and far between, with the world existing in abstract divisions. Everybody is fighting in the same battle to support globalized capitalism. Dissenters only appear so, but on a philosophical level they are suspect. The election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States revives many of the fascist themes of the 1930s, specifically in action and rhetoric to Benito Mussolini. Fascism was able to appropriate itself in a democratic fascism, but that should not cause any confusion, for “if the constitution of a state is democratic, then every exceptional negation of democratic principles, every exercise of state power independent of the approval of the majority, can be called dictatorship.”[[46]](#footnote-46) This maturity of fascism has been successful in the past, but it creates a fatalistic dichotomy between the fascist state and the other that prevents pragmatic political engagement, and results in an active and violent assault on the other in the name of securing the state. Most importantly, fascism precludes another strategic avenue of action, maintain the present as the only viable solution.

The themes that correlate with the development of fascist power point to the immediate crises that confront the present day. Any one of these: the lack of possible pragmatic political action, violence against the other, and the lack of another strategic avenue, are sufficient to create a moment of crisis; a moment where political action can be turned to embrace a new reality of political action. But the deeper crisis is the lack of viable alternative to the biopolitical control of liberalism. The collective opposition at the heart of communist states couldn’t stand the challenge to liberalism, giving the state free reign to structure life and political engagement.

The impact of the connection between the state and liberalism is developed by examining sovereignty’s impact on bare life. This impact is discussed at length in Giorgio Agamben’s book *Homo Sacer*, but there are a few relevant implications for understanding how the crises in politics affect the present day. Ancient Greek had two words that mean life: *bios* and *zoe*. Human life, for the most part, is represented through the use of *bios*, denoting a political component inherent to the life. However, *zoe* doesn’t maintain the political component of life; this bare life stands special status as life that can be killed, but cannot be sacrificed. This bare form of life is what Agamben calls *homo sacer*. *Homo sacer* life stands in special relation to the sovereign, as the sovereign is responsible for the structuring of the *bios*, but is also the sole party with the ability to kill *homo sacer*. However, it’s more than just a simple relationship, as the sovereign is permitted to kill without it being homicide, and without celebrating the death as a sacrifice; bare life stands as the immanent other of the sovereign. *Homo sacer*, with its disconnect from political life, is precluded from being the shepherd or the sovereign, but always exist as the outsider to political action. With the special consideration of the state of exception, *zoe* is always present, as there is inevitably life that is excluded within the decision.

Modern politics is an attempt to transform the bare life to a concern of life, or trying to find the *bios* of the *zoe*, but the modern state is incapable of preserving the *zoe*. At heart of pastoral power is the exclusion of *zoe* in society, the economy, and the state. Bare life remains in politics through the exception, through its specific exclusion from the system. Similar to the force of the juridical that is maintained within the sovereign during the state of exception, *homo sacer* maintains an influence on the sovereign through its exclusion, permitting a violence against that the other which stands outside the order itself.

The biopolitical significance of the exception revealed itself in the military order issued by United States President George Bush in 2001. The Patriot Act already allowed the detention of any alien suspected of activity that would endanger the national security of the United States, but it also required the charging of a crime or release within seven days; “what is new about President Bush’s order is that it radically erases any legal status of the individual, thus producing a legally unnamable and unclassifiable being.”[[47]](#footnote-47) This is a new structuring of life that is neither a prisoner, nor a person accused of a crime, but a pure detainee, subject to an indefinite detention through a lack of temporal constraint and a lack of legal identity. The only other possible example is the situation of Jews under the Nazi regime: a people that had been removed of all legal identity, left only with their Jewish identity to continue to exist as life.

It seems apparent, then, that the state has embraced a totalitarian theme of politicization, operating off of the logical synthesis of biology and economy, to continuously restructure the grounds of possible experience for life; the development of a rationalized control of life.[[48]](#footnote-48) The dominant paradigm developed as a result of rationalization of life is *the camp*. The camp contains crime which escapes juridico-political consideration, as the subjects of the camp themselves lack a juridico-political consideration: they are *homo sacer*. The current day manifestation of the camp, a manifestation expanded by President Bush’s order, is Guantanamo Bay. Guantanamo Bay holds all of the detainees that the United States has determined posed a threat to its security. It could be said that there has been a material development of the camp, as the Nazi concentration camps that the Jews were subject to are nothing like Guantanamo Bay, but that material evolution has done nothing to change the philosophy that the life within the camp is life not worth living. The camp has been developed in conjunction with the end of the state: to isolate a biopolitics that can structure all of life.

*How to Act Politically?*

The question of our time, in response to the crisis, then seems to be: is there another way to act politically? The success of liberalism in the modern state has locked humanity into a singular, biopolitical perspective that is solely concerned with the structuring life. The end of the state as it has currently manifested itself through the development of pastoral power and sovereignty, two unique modes of power that relate themselves to life in different ways. Pastoral power has developed through a direct relationship with the individual, and provided the state with a means of power which create a relationship with the individual. This relationship with the individual is exasperated by the sovereign, but is still preserved through an exclusion, specifically that of bare life during the exception.

What we need is a pluralistic juxtaposition in the face of crisis. We need to reevaluate the relationship of life with its organization through both the pastoral and sovereign elements of the political. By recognizing the state of exception as a juridico-political fact, is can also be known as metaphysical crisis; the point where reevaluation of meaning of political action takes place. Opportunely, both within an event and the state of exception, the immanence of the possibility of change exists, preserving the opportunities for revolution. The revolution needed in politics is a consideration of how to fight the dominance of pastoral liberalism. By recognizing a plurality and maintaining a constant juxtaposition of those pluralities, we can reach a transcendence of the simply dialectic dichotomy, and constantly preserve the multitude of perspectives into a cohesive representative politics. Without preserving the multiplicity, the crisis of today will persist.

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3. Wheeler, 2017 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hua VI, p.4/6 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bachyrycz, 171 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Bachyrycz, 173 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Crowell, 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Crowell, 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kierkegaard 13 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kaufmann [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Kierkegaard 20 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Ibid. 19* [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Ibid. 20* [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Genesis 1:26 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Job 1:6-12 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Job 38:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Genesis 4:1-4 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Alter 345 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ecclesiastes 2:15 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Nietzsche 203 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Ibid.* 200 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Ibid.* 199 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Nietzsche 96 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Nietzsche 175 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Foucault, 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Foucault 2003, 182 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Foucault 2003, 184 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Foucault, 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Agamben 2005, 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Agamben 2005, 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Sluga, 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. This section quite clearly juxtaposes Heidegger with National Socialism, but this is an unfortunate result and don’t want to contribute the narrative of simply linking Heidegger to National Socialism. This juxtaposition doesn’t cast light on Heidegger’s actual philosophical relationship to National Socialism, the juxtaposition merely casts light on dominant dovetailing of crisis at the time. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Sluga 23-28 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Robinson, *The Event* [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Robinson, *Politics* [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Schmitt 2008, 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Agamben 2005, 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Schmitt 2017, xvii [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Schmitt 2017, 137 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Agamben 2005, 34 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Schmitt 2008, 12-13 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Badiou 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Schmitt 2017, 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Agamben 2005, 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Agamben 2003, 145 [↑](#footnote-ref-48)