

## Article

# Time Out of Joint and Future-Oriented Memory: Engaging Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the Search for a Way to Deal Responsibly with the Ghosts of the Past

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Academic Editor: Justin Sands

Received: 24 January 2017; Accepted: 14 March 2017; Published: 17 March 2017

**Abstract:** This article explores in conversation with some of the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer the question of how the experience of the dislocation of time and the visitation of “the ghosts of the past” (also in contexts marked by historical injustices) is related to responsible ethical action. The question is also posed as to how the reconfiguration of the relationship of past, present and future functions on an implicit and explicit level in this regard. In the process, the article affirms the eschatological horizon of Bonhoeffer’s ethics and points to the importance of what is referred to as “future-oriented memory” in the search for responsible and hopeful action. The article acknowledges the dilemmas in relating thought and action (with reference to the so-called “Hamlet doctrine”) and points to the way in which “the future” marks and determines Bonhoeffer’s understanding of ethical action amidst the haunting presence of the past and the experience of the present time as a “time out of joint.”

**Keywords:** Bonhoeffer; time; future-oriented memory; the past; responsible action

## 1. Time Out of Joint?

In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* we read the oft-quoted words:

The time is out of joint—O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right.

These are Hamlet’s words to his friend Horatio in the fifth scene of the first act after the encounter with his father’s ghost and learning that his uncle Claudius, who is now married to his mother, had murdered his father.

Hamlet’s words have had a rich reception history, resulting in extended reflection and commentary, as well as further artistic expression.<sup>1</sup> The French philosopher Jacques Derrida, for instance, has written several influential texts that take their cue from Hamlet’s response to his haunting experience, notably his 1993 book *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*—a book that has as its epigraph the words “The time is out of joint.” Derrida dedicates this book to the memory of Chris Hani ([2], pp. xv–xvi), the South African anti-apartheid activist and popular Communist party leader who was assassinated in 1993. This cataclysmic event brought apartheid South Africa to the brink of a civil war during the time of the transition to democracy. Further, in 1993, Derrida delivered a keynote address at a conference in New York entitled “Time Out

<sup>1</sup> One can think in this regard, for instance, of Philip K. Dick’s dystopian novel *Time Out of Joint*. See [1].

of Joint,” which was subsequently published in the book *Deconstruction is/in America: A New Sense of the Political* [3].<sup>2</sup> In this text, Derrida alludes to the way in which Hamlet witnessed the disorder and injustice caused by the murder of his father and the murderer’s marriage to his mother, taking his father’s place in bed and on the throne. Quoting Nietzsche, Derrida compares Hamlet to the Dionysian man in the sense that, for both, knowledge of the essence of things inspires nausea and disgust rather than action. Both Nietzsche’s Dionysian man and Hamlet feel that it is ridiculous and humiliating that they should set right a world and age that are out of joint. Derrida therefore states: “Knowledge kills action; action requires the veils of illusion; that is the doctrine of Hamlet” [3].

This “doctrine of Hamlet,” which can be described as acknowledging the gap between thought and action, is also explored by Simon Critchley and Jamieson Webster in their book *The Hamlet Doctrine: Knowing Too Much, Doing Nothing*, a book that engages with interpretations of *Hamlet* by influential thinkers such as Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Hegel, Freud, Lacan, and Nietzsche. With regard to the “Hamlet doctrine,” Critchley and Webster echo Derrida’s reading that Hamlet knows the truth from the ghost’s mouth, but that this truth does not lead to action but instead to disgust or nausea at existence; action seems to require veils of illusion, and when these veils are lifted we feel a sense of resignation. As they write: “The cost of the finite self-reflexivity of which Hamlet is capable is the incapacity of action. Such one might ponder, is the curse of self-consciousness, which gives us extraordinary insight into ourselves but whose boon companions are melancholia, alienation, and a massive obstruction at the level of action” ([4], p. 11).

In this article, I want to explore, in conversation with some of the writings of the German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the question of how the experience of the dislocation of time and the visitation of “the ghosts of the past” is related to responsible ethical action, as well as how the reconfiguration of the relationship of past, present, and future functions on an implicit and explicit level in this regard. I affirm in the process the eschatological horizon of Bonhoeffer’s ethics and point to the importance of what is referred to as “future-oriented memory.”

Elsewhere I have argued that Bonhoeffer has no interest in an otherworldly understanding of transcendence, as is seen in his remark in his letter from Tegel prison (dated 30 April 1944): “God is the beyond in the midst of our lives” ([5], p. 50).<sup>3</sup> With reference to a typology put forward by Wessel Stoker ([6], pp. 5–50)<sup>4</sup>, I argued that Bonhoeffer’s understanding of transcendence can be described as an immanent or this-worldly transcendence, but that one should also affirm the way in which he relates transcendence to the ethical encounter with the other, since the transcendent does not refer to infinite, unattainable tasks but to the neighbour within reach. Bonhoeffer’s post-metaphysical view of ethical transcendence challenges any attempt to disengage the encounter with the beyond from concrete encounters with others and critiques in the process any vague descriptions of the relationship between transcendence and alterity ([5], pp. 57–58). The question can be asked, furthermore, how Bonhoeffer’s understanding of temporality relates to his ethical concerns. In light of this question, this article points to the way in which “the future” (as eschatological notion) determines Bonhoeffer’s understanding of ethical action amidst the haunting presence of the past and the experience that the present time is a “time out of joint.”

In some way, one can of course say that every age and every time is a “time out of joint.” However, one can argue that there are times that are experienced as turning points in world and

<sup>2</sup> In “Time out of Joint” Derrida also writes: “When Hamlet says ‘The time is out of joint,’ he says, to be sure, many things; but he says at least and first of all this...: that time itself, the present indicative of the verb to be in the third person singular, the ‘is’ that says what time is, this sense of time is out of joint, itself and by itself out of joint. And the shock waves of such a disjoining doubtless affect the heart of the question ‘to be or not to be’... Perhaps deconstruction has never done anything but interpret this extraordinary phrase of Hamlet’s” (see [3], p. 29).

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted, furthermore, that I also argue that Bonhoeffer’s understanding of transcendence, and specifically as it relates to his views on a religionless Christianity, should be understood within a Christological framework, as well as that it should not be separated from his ethical and ecclesiological concerns (see [5], p. 45).

<sup>4</sup> Stoker discusses four types of transcendence, namely immanent transcendence, radical transcendence, radical immanence and transcendence as alterity. See [6].

intellectual history in which this statement gains greater credibility. The question, “Is the time out of joint?” is also considered in a book by the German cultural theorist Aleida Assmann, who is well known for her work in cultural memory studies. In *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen? Aufstieg und Fall des Zeitregimes der Moderne*, Assmann writes: “Like Shakespeare’s Hamlet at the beginning of the modern period we are today, four hundred years later, confronted with a change in our temporal ontology. The time is out of joint!” ([7], p. 247, my translation). It is Assmann’s argument that what she describes as the modern or modernistic time regime has been in crisis since the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> Modernism produced its own time regime with its specific way of configuring the relationship between past, present, and future. If the Western myth of historical progress is no longer experienced as a given, however, this temporal ontology becomes recognisable as a specific cultural construct with a specific history. According to Assmann, we are today witnessing a shift in the understanding of Western temporality, with a significant transformation in the way that we view the past and the future.<sup>6</sup> Not only have specific visions of the future crumbled, but the concept of the future itself has changed beyond recognition. The future is indeed not what it used to be. This shift is, moreover, only one part of the story, because whereas the future has lost its shine and become a source of concern, the past has more and more invaded our (collective) consciousness. This explains, in part, the rise of “memory” as a key cultural concept.

The thesis of this article, following Assmann, is that the experience that the time is out of joint is intertwined with the experience of a change in the way the relationship between past, present, and future is being reconfigured. Within the greater space created for (harmful and helpful) strategies of dealing (or not dealing) with the past, these shifts push to the forefront the challenges related to a responsible dealing with the past, including facing the ghosts of the past.

If it is true that our memory of the past, also as a construction or invention, will probably gain greater weight in our global cultural discourses, then it becomes of paramount importance to keep open the conversation of what a responsible engagement with the past entails. Two harmful strategies of dealing with the past, I argue, should be avoided. A first possible response is a romanticized nostalgia according to which we do not live from the past but in the past, hence blocking ourselves from identifying with the challenges and complexities arising from our contemporary situation. In such a case, the question of responsible action in the present loses its power. A second harmful strategy relates to the fact that the trauma and guilt experienced in the past, or that has become associated with the past, can result in a moral and spiritual paralysis that also robs us of the resources to engage constructively with the challenges posed by the moment. Against the backdrop of these concerns and challenges, in the second part of this article, I revisit two of Bonhoeffer’s texts, namely a lecture he delivered in Barcelona in 1928 and his celebrated essay “After Ten Years” written around Christmas time in 1942. In revisiting these texts, I use as a lens the question of how Bonhoeffer viewed time and his times, as well as the concomitant question of his understanding of the past in relationship to the present and the future.

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the features of the “modern time regime,” see ([7], pp. 131–207). Assmann refers in this regard to five features, namely “the breaking up of time” (i.e., the loss of continuity between past, present and future), “the fiction of new beginnings” (the emphasis on new beginnings in the here and now, rather than on mythical origins in the past), “creative destruction” (destroying previous structures and products as part of progress), “the invention of the historical” (the new method of collecting and preserving knowledge in archives, museums and by means of historical research), and “the acceleration of change” (everything changes faster than one expects). For a discussion in this regard, see also [8] (Inaugural professorial Lecture, Stellenbosch University, 5 May 2015).

<sup>6</sup> In this regard, Assmann’s work is closely linked to that of the German historian Reinhart Koselleck, who has already pointed out in an influential work, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (see [9]), how the notion of the “future” has a history of its own, and that the past included visions of different futures.

## 2. Bonhoeffer, Time Out of Joint and the Responsible Life

On 13 November 1928, Bonhoeffer gave a lecture as young pastor to his congregation in Barcelona on “The Tragedy of the Prophetic and Its Lasting Meaning.” Towards the end of this lecture, Bonhoeffer states: “Our time is getting out of joint” ([10], p. 341). This statement should of course be placed within the larger context of the lecture as a whole. What are Bonhoeffer’s concerns and argument in the lecture?

Bonhoeffer opens his talk by noting one of the considerations that prompted him to invite the congregation to the lecture and probably also prompted them to attend the event: “(A)ll of us feel obliged to take a position ourselves, to evaluate, to enter into, and to participate in the struggle and crisis of contemporary movements... We are twentieth-century people and, like it or not, must come to terms with that fact; indeed, even more, we should have so much love for this contemporary world of ours, for our fellow human beings, that we should declare our solidarity with it in its crisis as in its hope” ([10], p. 326).

Bonhoeffer thus indicated the need for the congregants to show solidarity with the contemporary world in its crisis and hope, since they participate in history and should take up that responsibility. However, there is no doubt in the young pastor’s mind of the extent of the crisis and the way in which it has eroded people’s sense of stability. In Bonhoeffer’s words: “Events of recent decades plunged us into an unprecedented crisis... The rug has been pulled from under our feet, and we must now search for a bit of earth on which to stand. We have been utterly and completely shipwrecked and are now horrified to see just how utterly at sea many of us are” ([10], p. 326).

Bonhoeffer extends this metaphor of being shipwrecked to indicate possible responses to the crisis. Some still cling to the timbers of the sinking ship, while others abandon all hope and throw themselves on the mercy of the waves. Those who have been saved celebrate this fact and think that the danger has been averted, while a few find a foothold on solid land from where they seek to conduct rescue operations. For Bonhoeffer it is clear, moreover, that notwithstanding with whom one identifies in this scenario, “we are ourselves still in crisis, still searching, still perplexed.” ([10], p. 326).<sup>7</sup>

Given this sense of crisis and dislocation, Bonhoeffer turns to the situation in Israel in the sixth to the eighth century BCE, and more specifically to the prophets’ response to the stormy events of their time. Although Bonhoeffer is mindful of the discontinuities between the world of Israel’s prophets and his own world, he does want to attend to the continuities between these epochs and what he deems one can learn as critical lessons for the engagement with his own time. These prophets too had lived in a time of dislocation, or as Bonhoeffer puts it: “these were men who wrestled with God and with their own age, an age in which everything was out of joint” ([10], p. 328). Bonhoeffer is thus drawn to the prophets and what he describes as their tragedy and suffering. “These were men in whose gloomy gaze and sorrowful brow words of suffering were deeply etched; yet they were also men to whom the words of Tasso applied in the highest sense, namely, that

When in their anguish other men fall silent  
A god gave me the power to tell my pain.” ([10], p. 330)<sup>8</sup>

Bonhoeffer’s plea is that they should heed again the words of these prophets. Why? He comments: “Our own age is getting out of joint. The vital force of our people, of Europe, seems broken. The hideous face of decadence, of immorality, of cynicism, of depravity grins at us from every corner and crevice” ([10], p. 341). In such a situation, Bonhoeffer continues, the challenge is to embrace simplicity again and to listen to the words of the ancient prophets that people should once again be serious about

<sup>7</sup> In such a situation, Bonhoeffer continues, “who can claim to have found the *right* path, the one and only appropriate path. Who dares to make blanket judgments about the burning problems of ethics, the question of the right to wage war, the problem of economic competition, concerning the new social order, the education of the new generation, or the mysteries of sexuality” ([10], p. 327).

<sup>8</sup> These are lines from Goethe’s *Torquato Tasso*.

doing God's will and bear the burden that God lays on them. The call is to walk with God, albeit that this is a hard path, "a path on which the heart's blood of the best people flows and has flowed, as the example of what the prophets have amply taught us" ([10], p. 341).

I draw attention to this Barcelona lecture by Bonhoeffer since it gives us insight into his understanding of his own age as an age of crisis, a time out of joint. We also see how Bonhoeffer connects this dislocated time with the time of the prophets in the search to find a theological response to the perceived crisis. In reading this lecture, one is left with the impression that Bonhoeffer struggles, in a searching yet not aloof way, to make sense of his time. Perhaps one can say that in his own way Bonhoeffer was grappling with what Derrida and others (following Nietzsche) have described as "the Hamlet doctrine." Given the experience of time as being out of joint and the growing knowledge of the crisis and anticipation of its intensification, one can ask the question: How can we resist being incapacitated and paralysed to such an extent that we are unable to engage responsibly with the challenges of our time? For Bonhoeffer, the example of Israel's prophets, and what he describes as their tragedy, serves as a biblical resource that should again be heeded, given the experience that time has become unhinged.

It is interesting to juxtapose Bonhoeffer's 1928 lecture with his well-known and evocative text "After Ten Years," a reflection that he wrote around Christmas 1942 for Eberhard Bethge, Hans von Dohnanyi, and Hans Oster. Whereas in the Barcelona lecture he points to the need to engage with the challenges of the time and show solidarity with the contemporary world in a way that is informed by the witness of Israel's prophets, the 1942 text looks back at a decade of their own participation and prophetic witness in a tumultuous time, indeed a time of crisis. Bonhoeffer opens his reflection with the following words: "Ten years is a long time in the life of every human being. Because time is the most precious gift at our disposal, being of all gifts the most irretrievable, the thought of time being lost disturbs us whenever we look back" ([11], p. 37).

During his imprisonment, Bonhoeffer would often reflect on the theme of time. From his letters and notes, we know that he worked on a text called "The Sense of Time," but unfortunately this text is lost.<sup>9</sup> We do, however, have some of his notes, which give us a glimpse into his thoughts with regard to the experience of time. From these notes of May 1943, we can gather that he reflected intensely on themes such as "the past," "memory," and "the passing of time" ([11], pp. 70–74). As he writes in a later letter to Eberhard Bethge (18 November 1943): "An essay on 'the sense of time' arose primarily out of the need to make my own past present to myself in a situation in which time can easily appear 'empty' and 'lost'" ([11], p. 181).<sup>10</sup>

Bonhoeffer grappled with the matter of lost time, and as he makes clear in "After Ten Years," time is lost when "when we have not lived, learned, worked, enjoyed, and suffered as human beings" ([11], p. 37). However, for him the preceding ten years were not lost or unfulfilled, empty time. In this context, he points to the gift of memory: "Yet just as the ability to forget is a gift of grace, so similarly is memory, the repetition of received teaching, part of responsible life" ([11], p. 37). Bonhoeffer also notes that this account of things learned during the preceding decade could not have been written without the accompanying "feeling of gratitude for the community of spirit and of life that in these years was

<sup>9</sup> See his letter to his parents (15 May 1943): "I am currently trying my hand at a small study on the 'sense of time'... One of my predecessors scribbled above the cell door: 'In a hundred years everything will be over,' as his attempt to cope with the experience of the empty time. But there is much to be said about this, and I would enjoy talking it over with Papa. 'My times are in your hand' (Ps. 31) is the biblical answer to this question. But the Bible also contains the question that threatens to dominate everything here: 'Lord, how long?' (Ps. 13)" ([11], pp. 79–80). In a later letter to his parents (dated 14 June 1943) Bonhoeffer notes "The study on the sense of time is practically done" ([11], p. 106).

<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Bonhoeffer's "sense of time," see [12]. Cf. also Bonhoeffer's enigmatic poem "The Past" (*Vergangenheit*), with its ending: "Your life most vital piece may be/the past, a gift you may regain/through gratitude and rueful pain./Grasp God's forgiveness and goodness in the past,/pray that God keep you this day and to the last" ([11], p. 421), as well as his letter of June 1944 to Eberhard Bethge in which he comments in light of this poem: "For me, this confrontation with the past, this attempt to hold on to it and to get it back, and above all the fear of losing it, is almost the daily background music of my life here" ([11], p. 416).



preserved and shown to be worthwhile" ([11], p. 38). In this regard, one can also point to the fact that Bonhoeffer's reflections on the past are often linked to the notion of gratitude. One is reminded of his reflection from July 1940, "On Gratitude among Christians," where we read: "In gratitude I attain the right relationship to my past; in gratitude what is past becomes fruitful for the present. Without gratitude my past sinks into darkness and enigma, into nothingness. In order not to lose my past, but rather to reclaim it completely, repentance must, however, accompany gratitude. In gratitude and repentance my life is gathered into a unity." ([13], pp. 490–91).

In a way that reminds one of the comment in his Barcelona lecture about the rug being pulled from underneath their feet and the experience of being shipwrecked, Bonhoeffer continues his "After Ten Years" reflection by stating: "Have there ever been people in history who in their time, like us, had so little ground underneath their feet" ([11], p. 38). This experience of losing one's footing gives rise to the question: Who stands firm? Bonhoeffer's answer to this question can be summarised in his statement: "Only the one whose ultimate standard is not his reason, his principles, conscience, freedom, or virtue; only the one who is prepared to sacrifice all of these when, in faith and in relationship to God alone, he is called to obedient and responsible action. Such a person is the responsible one, whose life is nothing but a response to God's question and call" ([11], p. 40; cf. [14], pp. 78–80).

The responsible ones are those who do not stand aloof from the challenges of their time, and who are aware of the fact that free, responsible action might go against the advancement of one's career. In reflecting on what a successful life entails, Bonhoeffer further grapples with the notion of success, also in the face of the problem posed when evil means bring success. In this situation neither theoretical critique and self-justification nor opportunism suffices for the responsible ones. Rather, in Bonhoeffer's words: "The one who allows nothing that happens to deprive him of his coresponsibility for the course of history, knowing that it is God that placed it on him, will find a fruitful relationship to the events of history, beyond fruitless criticism and equally fruitless opportunism" ([11], p. 42).<sup>11</sup> For Bonhoeffer, furthermore, this responsibility resides not merely in the identification with one's contemporary historical situation, but in the ability to consider the future. As Bonhoeffer provocatively states: "The ultimate responsible question is not how I extricate myself heroically from a situation but how a coming generation is to go on living" ([11], p. 42).

Bonhoeffer thus links responsibility to a concern for the future and future generations. He is aware that the particular situation in which they found themselves makes planning for the future difficult and that this can easily result in succumbing "to living for the moment at hand, irresponsibly, frivolously, or resignedly," or to dream "of a more beautiful future thereby forgetting the present." ([11], p. 50). Bonhoeffer rejects both these options, instead pointing to the narrow path "of taking each day as if it were the last and yet living it faithfully and responsibly as if there were yet to be a great future." ([11], p. 50). Moreover, living in this way is no easy matter. As Bonhoeffer acknowledges towards the end of "After Ten Years": "Unbearable conflicts have worn us down or even made us cynical." Hence his questions: "Are we still of any use?... Will our inner strength to resist what has been forced on us have remained strong enough, to find our way back to simplicity and honesty?" ([11], p. 52).

As in the Barcelona text, Bonhoeffer ends with a call to embrace simplicity, since what is needed is not "geniuses, cynics, people who have contempt for others, or cunning tacticians, but simple, uncomplicated, and honest human beings" ([11], p. 52).

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<sup>11</sup> The question can also be ask in the light of this quotation how Bonhoeffer links his understanding of ethical responsibility for the course of history to God's transcendence and/or immanence? We should in this regard keep in mind that Bonhoeffer grappled in prison, in a letter dated 30 April 1944, with the question: "How do we talk about God—without religion, that is, without the temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics, the inner life, and so on?" ([11], p. 364). And in the same letter he writes: "God's 'beyond' is not what is beyond our cognition! Epistemological transcendence has nothing to do with God's transcendence. God is the beyond in the midst of our lives" ([11], p. 367). Bonhoeffer's view of transcendence is therefore not a radical immanence, since "God is the beyond," but it is also not a radical transcendence since "God is the beyond... in the midst of our lives." It is against this background that I elsewhere describes Bonhoeffer's view in a qualified manner as "immanent transcendence" is (cf. [5], p. 50).

### 3. Dealing with the Ghosts of the Past, Future-Orientated Memory and the Responsible Life

Bonhoeffer's soul-searching question "Are we still of any use?" provided the theme for the Seventh International Bonhoeffer Congress held in Cape Town, South Africa in 1996, twenty years ago (see [15], pp. 1–5). In that same year, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) started its official work in an attempt to come to grips with the trauma and injustices of South Africa's apartheid past. At the first hearing of the TRC in East London on 15 April 1996 Archbishop Desmond Tutu made the following comment: "We are charged to unearth the truth about our dark past; to lay the ghosts of the past so that they will not return to haunt us" ([16], p. 87). This statement is also quoted in the 2008 book by the South African academic, business leader, and activist Mamphela Ramphele, aptly named *Laying Ghosts to Rest: Dilemmas of the Transformation in South Africa* ([17], p. 46). Ramphele notes that, despite the shortcomings of the TRC, one should also celebrate its successes: however, the mandate to lay the ghosts of the past to rest remains unfulfilled, since there are still many ghosts that continue to haunt South Africa's young democracy. Ramphele refers in her book especially to the continuing presence of what she calls the stubborn ghosts of racism, ethnic chauvinism, sexism, and authoritarianism ([17], pp. 73–121). Indeed, the challenge remains to face these ghosts in such a way that these engagements do not paralyse or incapacitate us. Clearly the ghosts of the past are still very much alive and present within contemporary South African public discourse, as seen in several mass protest actions against symbols, statues, and institutional practices associated with the country's colonial and apartheid past.

How does one face the ghosts of the past in a time that is experienced as being out of joint, especially in contexts marked by historical injustice? How does one remember the past in a way that this knowledge does not incapacitate one, but rather serves as a resource for responsible action? It falls beyond the scope of this article to address these complex and multifaceted questions, but let me conclude by making two brief remarks pertinent to these questions in the light of Bonhoeffer's writings.

A first remark relates to the need to engage fully and responsibly with one's contemporary situation, to find in Bonhoeffer's word "a fruitful relationship to the events of history, beyond fruitless criticism and equally fruitless opportunism" ([11], p. 42). Bonhoeffer was acutely aware of the crisis of his time. As he puts it in his *Ethics*: "Today we have villains and saints again, in full public view. The gray on gray of a sultry, rainy day has turned into the black cloud and bright lighting flash of a thunderstorm. The contours are sharply drawn. Reality is laid bare. Shakespeare's characters are among us" ([14], p. 76). In Bonhoeffer's writings one finds ample examples of his ability to reflect in a self-conscious way on the crisis of his time (cf. also [14], pp. 103–33). Yet the example of his life also indicates his willingness to share in the fate of his context and time. In many ways, Bonhoeffer's witness testifies to the fact that he embodied the words from the stanza on "Action" in his poem "Stations on the Way to Freedom":

Not in escaping in thought, in action alone is found freedom.  
Dare to quit anxious faltering and enter the storm of events,  
carried alone by our faith and by God's good commandments,  
then true freedom will come and embrace your spirit, rejoicing. ([11], p. 513)

In facing the ghosts of the past, the presence of "the Hamlet doctrine," of thought and action seemingly pulling against each other with the former threatening to annihilate the latter, is real, and Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the need for responsible action indicates his way of grappling with this dilemma. Dealing with the past, one can say, requires responsible engagement with, and not the flight from, our contemporary challenges. Part of the promise of Bonhoeffer's life and work lies in the fact that he embodied what it means to be a "contemporary," in the sense that Giorgio Agamben describes contemporariness as "a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it, and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it" ([18], p. 41).

A second remark in dealing with the ghosts of the past relates to the need to remember the past with the future in mind. Bonhoeffer often emphasised the need to deal with the past in a spirit of

gratitude *and* repentance. We should indeed acknowledge and face the ghosts from the past, and this includes acknowledging our guilt and complicity. Bonhoeffer, furthermore, clearly grappled with the question how to relate the past, present, and future. A letter to his mother, Paula Bonhoeffer, dated 28 December 1940, is instructive in this regard. Bonhoeffer writes about how things turned out differently than expected, saying: “It almost seems to me as if we must come to terms with it over the long haul, to live more deeply out of the past and the present—and that means out of gratitude—than from any vision of the future. On the other hand, one notices how strongly human life desires to live from the future, more than from anything else” ([13], pp. 113–14). Towards the end of the letter, Bonhoeffer writes, “even if the veil of things to come has not yet lifted, we shall nevertheless be thankful for what we have in one another up to this hour and look together with great trust into the future. For we have not only one another, but we have and know the one who has given us the time and also holds our future in hand” ([13], p. 114). One can indeed conclude that Bonhoeffer continued to struggle with relating the past, present, and future in a responsible and constructive way, and to ground this search theologically. He emphasised the need for decision in the moment, yet he did not hold to any form of “presentism” that aims at living ahistorically (cf. [19]).<sup>12</sup> As we have seen in “After Ten Years,” for him, responsible action implied a concern to address the question of how future generations are to go on living. In light of this, one can rightly describe Bonhoeffer’s ethical stance as a future-orientated ethics of responsibility.

In the South African context, the late Russel Botman, who wrote his doctorate on Dietrich Bonhoeffer [20] and later became the Rector and Vice-Chancellor of Stellenbosch University, often drew upon this aspect of Bonhoeffer’s legacy ([15], p. 372). In the first Russel Botman Memorial Lecture, entitled “‘Making History for the Coming Generation’—On the Theological Logic of Russel Botman’s Commitment to Transformation,” Dirkie Smit speaks of “hopeful agency” as one of the features of what he calls Botman’s theological logic and indicates how Botman re-articulated Bonhoeffer’s future-orientated ethics of responsibility in the light of the challenges posed by his own context. According to Smit, Botman understood a hopeful agency as grounded in a transformative hope that is a this-worldly hope over against all forms of other-worldliness, an empowering hope over against all forms of despair, and a modest and self-critical hope over against all forms of false hope. Smit comments in this regard: “The fact that it was a this-worldly hope meant for him that it should not lead to idle waiting and become a form of escapism, but rather that it should inspire concrete actions, practical engagement in the fullness of life, hopeful agency in the utterly serious realities of the penultimate... The fact that it was an empowering hope was for him of great importance... he refused to be held captive by the past—with its legacies, divisions, hurt and bitterness... The fact that it was a modest and self-critical hope meant for him that these transformation processes—all these attempts to make history for the coming generation—remains provisional and penultimate” ([21], pp. 10–12).

#### 4. Conclusions

In facing the ghosts of the past, there is a real temptation that the past’s haunting presence can lead us to opt for shortsighted strategies marked by escapism or opportunism. The experience that the time is out of joint can incapacitate us and, as the “Hamlet doctrine” demonstrates, the way in which thought and action pull against each other add to the complexities of embodying hopeful agency. In reflecting on Bonhoeffer’s legacy we should be mindful of his struggle in this regard, as is seen in his observation in his “Thoughts on the Baptism of Dietrich Wilhelm Rüdiger Bethge”: “We have lived too much in our thoughts; we believe that by considering all the options of an action in advance we could ensure it, so that it would proceed on its own accord. We learned too late that it is not the thought but the readiness to take responsibility that is the mainspring of action. Your generation will relate

<sup>12</sup> Hartog describes “presentism” as “the sense that only the present exists, a present characterized at once by the tyranny of the instant and by the treadmill of the unending now” ([19], p. xv).



thought and action in a new way” ([11], p. 387). In dealing with the ghosts of the past, the perennial challenge to find new ways of relating thought and action in a responsible way indeed persists. It is our hope that the words and witness of people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Russel Botman—with their emphasis on the need for a future-orientated ethics of responsibility—will continue to guide, perplex and inspire us. For we should indeed not only ask what we want from the past and the future, but also ask what the future, and the past, want from us (cf. [7], pp. 323–24).

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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