AH ANALECTA HERMENEUTICA
INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR HERMENEUTICS / INSTITUT INTERNATIONAL D'HERMÉNEUTIQUE

ISSN 1918-7351
Volume 18 (2026)

The Issue of Time's Nonlinearity: Calvin O. Schrag and Franz Rosenzweig in Conversation

Anna Poláčková
University of South Bohemia, Faculty of Theology
ORCID: 0009-0003-3755-8841

Abstract
Drawing on Calvin O. Schrag's *The Phenomenon of Embodied Speech* and *Kierkegaard's Existential Reflections on Time*, the first part of this article examines the so-called "present with fringes"—a term used by Schrag for the temporal synthesis wherein the instantaneous moment is inextricably tied to the necessity of the past and the possibility of the future. The second part turns to Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* and *The New Thinking*, illustrating how his tripartite narrative of Creation, Revelation, and Redemption transforms objective history into a lived story mediated by language. The following study highlights their shared focus on embodied speech. While Schrag emphasizes the "instant of decision" that transforms the individual from observer to participant, Rosenzweig illustrates how the "tenses of reality" unify God, man, and world. Ultimately, both philosophers present the "now" as a transformative event where disparate temporal and relational elements are unified into a single, immediate experience.

Keywords: personalism, existentialism, time, speech, Schrag, Rosenzweig

1. Introduction

This article seeks to explore the phenomenon of experienced time through a comparative analysis of Calvin O. Schrag (1928-2024) and Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929), both of whom move away from abstract—or objective—time toward a model of existential temporality. The first section examines Schrag's concepts of "embodied speech" and "present with fringes," where the present moment serves as a synthesis of necessity (the past) and possibility (the future). For Schrag, following Kierkegaard's existential anthropology, the instant is a site of transformative decision that turns the individual from a detached spectator into a personally engaged participant. The second section addresses Rosenzweig's concept of new thinking, which utilizes a narrative, tripartite structure of Creation, Revelation, and Redemption to describe the "tenses of reality." Rosenzweig elevates speech as the organon of Revelation, turning the pre-story of the world into a lived encounter.

The comparison reveals three primary commonalities: the rejection of isolated "nows" in favor of temporal synthesis, the prioritization of the concrete *Self* over the generic genus of humanity, and the role of language as the catalyst of immediacy. Ultimately, while their frameworks differ—Schrag focusing on the *Self*'s synthesis of past and future via decision, and Rosenzweig focusing on the relational actualization of God, man, and world—both thinkers conclude that the present is a transformative event rather than a theoretical point, serving as the unique locus where the individual actively participates in the construction of meaning.

2. Schrag's "Present with Fringes"

In *The Phenomenon of Embodied Speech*, Calvin O. Schrag seeks to illustrate the temporal synthesis of speech on an everyday common greeting "How are you?".[1] He suggests that although the question grammatically uses the present tense, it is meant to refer to the past. In other words, the person who poses the question expects that the referent's current state of being is influenced by his past experience. However, a future trajectory can be observed on the seemingly simple question as well—the tie to the future indeed differs from the past's contribution to the present moment. Schrag claims that the future's relevance in the instantaneous present lies in the form of possibility. In this

[1] Calvin O. Schrag, "The Phenomenon of Embodied Speech," *World Futures: The Journal of New Paradigm Research* 7, no. 4 (1969): 13. https://doi.org/10.1080/02604027.1969.9971661.

way, every speech act holds both direct and indirect prospect of what is yet to come.[2] However, speech acts and dialogue cannot happen in a punctual "now." Lived communication requires a certain kind of "thick present" where the speaker can maintain an identity across the syntax of a sentence.

The aforementioned understanding of what Schrag calls "present with fringes"[3] can be traced also in his article *Kierkegaard's Existential Reflections on Time*. Here, he treats Kierkegaard's notion of contemporaneity—specifically one's immediate experience of time—in the same fashion. Kierkegaard, Schrag argues, approaches time as a phenomenon belonging to the existing subject. As such, he contrasts it with the notion of abstract, objectivized and measured time which is thought to be experienced only when posited in space.[4] In Kierkegaard's existential anthropology, time does not consist of continuous succession of "nows," or moments, aided by space. Contrarily, time approached existentially—or time immediately experienced by the *Self*—unifies the past, the present, and the future. In this way, the individual experiences immediate synthesis of the past and the future in the present.[5] In other words, both the past and the future are relevant for the individual's existence in immediacy; same as with the common question "How are you?". Schrag expands the claim by addressing Kierkegaard's polemics with Hegel with regard to his unhappy consciousness. The Dane holds that while Hegel was right that one is unhappy when he is removed from the present by dwelling either in the past or the future, he failed to approach the matter existentially. By resting on a purely abstract level, Hegel became only a spectator of the phenomenon.[6]

Moreover, the Kierkegaardian concept of contemporaneity with Christ serves to further illustrate the previously discussed temporal synthesis. The absolute paradox of God-man, i.e., the eternal God entering time in flesh, represents the very unity of temporality and eternity in the instant. Nonetheless, the two opposite poles are not mediated but remain qualitatively separate.[7] The same can be said of the *Self* which consists of two dialectically opposite extremes—possibility rooted in the future, and necessity belonging to the past. Ultimately, the concrete instant—moment, or the

---

[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Calvin O. Schrag, "Kierkegaard's Existential Reflections on Time," *The Personalist: An International Review of Philosophy, Religion, and Literature* 42, no. 2 (1961): 149. https://dn720709.ca.archive.org/0/items/sim_pacific-philosophical-quarterly_1961_42_contents/sim_pacific-philosophical-quarterly_1961_42_contents.pdf
[5] Ibid., 150f.
[6] Ibid., 151.
[7] Ibid., 155f.

"now"—presents one with an opportunity to decide. Schrag emphasizes that by the act of choosing, the individual becomes contemporary with the God-man and the once historical moment repeats itself as a possibility. To put it differently, contemporaneity turns the individual from a mere second-hand observer, or student of the historical Christian event, to a personally engaged disciple of Christ. The God-man's presence is thus available to every individual in any moment via decision. To conclude, the instant provides the opportunity for God to reveal himself to the individual, and enables the individual *Self*'s past and future to be unified by means of decision.[8]

In *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity*, Schrag transitions his earlier concept of the "present with fringes" into the literal topography of human speech.[9] He argues that dialogue relies on an inherent fullness of the present: when we communicate, the presence of our discourse is never an isolated point in time, but a dynamic field where the retrospective weight of what has been said actively conditions our prospective anticipation of what will be uttered next.

Moreover, to fully appreciate the temporal depth of Schrag's "present with fringes," one must look to his later elaboration[10] on the existential tension of the "already but not yet" theological concept. In *God as Otherwise Than Being: Toward a Semantics of the Gift,* Schrag utilizes this phrase to conceptualize a "preenacted eschatology,"[11] arguing that meaningful existential realization is never an over-realized, static fixture of the past (the "already"), nor a wholly deferred, transcendent reality of the future (the "not yet"). Rather, time operates as a dynamic suspension where the future is continuously "coming-to-presence" within the immediate fullness of lived history.[12]

3. Rosenzweig's World-Poem as a Narrative of Lived Temporality

Like Schrag, Rosenzweig approaches the phenomenon of experienced time existentially. Being a compelling narrator himself, the Judeo-Christian personalist often

---

[8] Ibid., 159f.
[9] Calvin O. Schrag, *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity* (Indiana University Press, 1989), 24-28.
[10] Although this paragraph mainly considers Schrag's *God as Otherwise Than Being: Toward a Semantics of the Gift*, he also deals with the "already but not yet" in his *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity* (146–147).
[11] Calvin O. Schrag, *God as Otherwise Than Being: Toward a Semantics of the Gift* (Northwestern University Press, 2002), 134.
[12] Ibid., 135.

portrays the world's meaning by means of storytelling.[13] In *The New Thinking*, Rosenzweig reviews his magnum opus *The Star of Redemption* and emphasizes that the book should not be primarily read but rather *listened to* like a compelling story. The book itself consists of three parts through which the author—or storyteller—wishes to narrate the world-story. In fact, Rosenzweig elevates the narrative aspect of the *Star* and calls its content a "great world-poem retold in three tenses;" Part I being the "book of the past," Part II yielding to the "immediate exchange of speech" between human beings and God, and Part III representing the "book of the future."[14] Another parallel, provided by Galli in her Introduction to *The New Thinking*, captures the story's tripartite nature as "once upon a time," "the story proper," and "(blissfully) ever after."[15]

A compelling parallel with Schrag's conceptualization of temporal synthesis and spatiotemporal immediacy is established through two primary channels: the integration of *three* distinct tenses within a *single* narrative and the uniquely organic, phenomenological quality of the present. In his philosophical work, Rosenzweig insists on the adoption of the so-called new theory of knowledge or new thinking. The new method—a revision of the old theory of knowledge centered on objective, static truths—proposes that the final truth is an inherently dynamic concept. These dynamics suggest that truth reveals itself as a truth *for a subject,* rather than as an independent entity knowing only itself. Accordingly, the kinetics allow truth to transform into *my* truth or *our* truth. Regarding Rosenzweig's narrative of the world, he contends that the anthropology of the new thinking undergoes a radical shift: whereas traditional idealism viewed the human being through the static lens of the third person, the new thinking refuses to reduce the concrete individual—defined by his own name—to a mere genus of humanity. Thus, all genuine human interactions are mediated by the famous triad of Creation, Revelation, and Redemption—they occur within a directed temporality defined by a distinct origin and teleological end. Besides the triad, there are also three "irreducible elements of reality"[16] which Part I of the *Star* deals with—God, man, and world. Departing from the pure old thinking in which God, man, and world are part of a timeless pre-story[17], these elements are

---

[13] In *The New Thinking*, Rosenzweig acknowledges Schelling's *The Ages of the World* for its anticipation of a "storytelling philosophy," a project Rosenzweig explicitly seeks to realize. Franz Rosenzweig, *Franz Rosenzweig's "The New Thinking"*, ed. and trans. by Alan Udoff and Barbara E. Galli (University Press, 1999), 81. This narrative theology is further informed by his Jewish background, which is firmly grounded in the spiritual and communal tradition of storytelling.

[14] Rosenzweig, *The New Thinking,* 85f.

[15] Barbara E. Galli, "'The New Thinking': An Introduction", in *The New Thinking*, 17.

[16] Rosenzweig, *The New Thinking,* 32; 75f.

[17] This pre-story of the old thinking should not be interpreted pejoratively; rather, it represents a foundational, "pre-time" ontological stage necessary for the emergence of the *new*. While the old

situated *within time*, where they achieve actualization and enter into mutual relation. It is precisely this actualization of God, man, and world in time that the *Star*'s Part II engages with. Effectively, if the elements were not separate and irreducible, they could not affect each other.[18]

The pivotal insight of Part II lies in Rosenzweig's assertion that by virtue of speech, reasoning—or the pre-story—becomes *audible*. The so-called "language of grammar" thus becomes the very organon of revelation which conditions human interaction and continuously generates the "presentness of experience"[19] or "tense of reality"[20]. Nonetheless, the difference between the old and new thinking does not necessarily lie in sound versus silence but rather in the "need of another" and in the "taking of time seriously."[21] At the same time, however, the *another* must be understood concretely—for Rosenzweig, speaking to everyone is like speaking to no one or the general public—a specific individual with ears but also a *mouth*.[22] Thus, immediacy, or presentness, allows for a so-called "bridge-building"[23] during which the separate elements of reality open up. God—who on his own is concealed and incomprehensible—suddenly makes himself known in Revelation. Man—who shuts himself in when on his own—comes out of his shell through Creation. The world is perplexing on its own but by means of Redemption it starts to make sense. Importantly, Rosenzweig holds that the tenses of reality cannot be interchanged—every single moment, or event, contains its present, past, and future, without which it would be hardly discernible.[24] Therefore, these tenses of reality enable us to discern the elements by comparing them and seeing what they do to each other.[25]

Returning to Rosenzweig's world-tale, he emphasizes that Revelation facilitates the "miracle of return and renewal."[26] While God created the world, it is through his self-revelation that the world is truly constituted for the first time. In this framework, Creation remains perpetually present; even when viewed as a past event, it emerges

---

thinking seeks timeless essences in isolation, its inclusion here serves as a deliberate, self-conscious threshold—describing their inner workings.

[18] Rosenzweig, *The New Thinking,* 32f.

[19] While this specific term originates in the *Star*, Rosenzweig employs the concept of the present in the same manner throughout *The New Thinking*. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. by William W. Hallo (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), 110.

[20] Rosenzweig, *The New Thinking,* 85.

[21] Ibid., 87.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., 85.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., 90.

from the primordial Revelation to Adam that stands at the inception of human history.[27]

4. Converging Moments: A Comparison Between Schrag and Rosenzweig

Both Schrag and Rosenzweig move away from abstract, or objective, time to a model of existential temporality where the present moment serves as the locus of meaning and synthesis.

The first similarity can be seen in the concept of *temporal synthesis*. Both thinkers reject the idea of time as a series of isolated "nows." Schrag argues for a temporal synthesis where the present moment is fringed by the past (necessity) and the future (possibility). A simple greeting like "How are you?" contains this entire triad. Rosenzweig proposes a world-poem in three tenses. He insists that every "tense of reality" is discernible only because it contains its own past, present, and future. Revelation (the present) thus acts as the bridge that makes the past (Creation) and future (Redemption) audible and real.

The second commonality lies in the *rejection of abstraction* over the concrete *Self*. Both philosophers prioritize the existing subject over the spectator. Schrag uses Kierkegaard to critique Hegel's unhappy consciousness, arguing that abstract time is merely space-posited. Thus, meaning is found only in the immediacy of the *Self*. Rosenzweig critiques old thinking for treating humans as a generic genus. His new thinking insists on the concrete individual with a specific name, ears, and a mouth, for whom truth must become *my truth*.

Third, both authors view language as the *organon of immediacy*, meaning that the present moment is activated through the event of speech. Schrag illustrates the synthesis of time through embodied speech, where the act of even a casual greeting creates a shared, immediate present. Rosenzweig describes grammar as the organon of Revelation. Speech is what allows the pre-story to become audible, turning the hidden God and the shuttered man into relational beings in the now.

---

[27] Regarding the element of Creation—the world, or the "It"—Rosenzweig engaged in a lengthy and largely friendly correspondence with Buber. Rosenzweig argued that instead of the I-It relation, one should consider the He-It and We-It relations, representing God as Creator and the world as created. This dialogue is analyzed in detail by Friedman. Maurice Friedman, *Dialogue, Speech, Nature, and Creation: Franz Rosenzweig's Critique of Buber's 'I and Thou' Modern Judaism* 13, no. 2 (1993). http://www.jstor.org/stable/1396088.

Last, for both Schrag and Rosenzweig, the present is not just a point on a line; it is a *transformative event*. Schrag, in line with Kierkegaard, holds that the instant allows the individual to become contemporary with the eternal, i.e., the God-man, through decision, moving from a mere second-hand observer to an engaged participant. Rosenzweig's concept of Revelation facilitates a miracle of return and renewal. In the moment of Revelation, the world is constituted for the first time, making the past, i.e., Creation, perpetually present and accessible.

5. Conclusion

This study sought to demonstrate that while their starting points differ, both Schrag and Rosenzweig rescue the present moment from the vacuum of objective, or linear time. For Schrag, the casual greeting "How are you?" serves as the primary evidence for a "present with fringes," where the individual's speech act synthesizes the necessity of the past with the possibilities of the future through a Kierkegaardian act of decision. In this framework, the "now" is the site where a detached spectator is transformed into a personally engaged participant.

Rosenzweig, conversely, constructs a "world-poem" where the present is defined by Revelation. Here, speech acts as the *organon* that makes the pre-story of the world audible, bridging the gap between a past Creation and a future Redemption. By replacing the generic genus of humanity with a concrete individual that has name, ears, and a mouth, Rosenzweig establishes the present as a relational event rather than a static point.

Ultimately, both thinkers converge on a shared horizon: time is not a series of isolated "nows," but an existential synthesis. Whether through Schrag's present with fringes or Rosenzweig's tenses of reality, the human encounter in language becomes the unique locus where meaning is actively actualized and the *Self* truly emerges.