Against the Fullness of Time: Redemption from the Authority of the Law in Nietzsche's Sovereign Individual and Benjamin's Messianism

Psomas, Nikolaos

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Nikolaos Psomas
s2521237

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ABBREVIATIONS[1]

GM *On the Genealogy of Morals*
GS *The Gay Science*
BGE *Beyond Good and Evil*
TSZ *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*
TI *Twilight of the Idols*
KSA *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke Kritische Studienausgabe*
TCV *Towards the Critique of Violence*
TPF *Theologico-Political Fragment*
TPH *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

[1] In-text citation format for these classical works: (Author, Abbreviation of cited work: Section, page number)

"But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth his Son […] born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law."
(Galatians 4: 4-7)

I. *The Question of Redemption from the Authority of Law*

The core of Nietzsche's diagnosis concerning modern European culture is encapsulated in his notorious declaration "God is dead" (GS:108, 109). The untenability of religious faith, namely the fact that "the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable" (Nietzsche, GS:343, 199), necessarily entails the disintegration of the symbolic order: a universal structure of morality and meaning. According to Nietzsche, the rupture in history caused by modern 'deicide' is a source of opportunity as well as anxiety (GS:125, 120). Liberation from Christian morality opens a new horizon, free of self-imposed constructs of transcendent moral authority, but also invites the stark possibility of a descent to a crisis of nihilism. However, the ramifications of this event evade the modern consciousness, as secular signifiers of authority scramble to fill the moral vacuum, thus protracting the chimera of a transcendent moral order. Zarathustra, Nietzsche's mouthpiece, identifies a nascent substitute of divine authority in "On the New Idol":

> "Yes, [the state] also detects you, you vanquishers of the old God! You grew weary in battle and now your weariness still serves the new idol! […] It wants to give *you* everything, if *you* worship it […] state, where the slow suicide of everyone is called – "life." […] There, where the state ends, only there begins the human being who is not superfluous." (TSZ: "On The New Idol", 136-7)

According to Nietzsche, the recent development of the modern state constitutes the erection of a new idol, a secular source of normativity that guarantees the moral as well as material welfare of its subjects. In return, the state assumes divine status as it demands the unconditional obedience of citizens to its laws and institutions. In this way, 'archaic' religious idolatry is reinvented in secular terms by attaching meaning to a newly elevated construct that transcends immediate existence, i.e., the state. Crucially, the apotheosis of the state suspends the confrontation with nihilism, specifically its radical repudiation of imposed systems of value and meaning. Instead, the perpetuation of a transcendent authority, through the "the coldest of all cold monsters" (ibid), petrifies self-affirmation since individuals are

subsumed into this political Leviathan (Howell 2012). Therefore, only beyond the self-destructive stasis of the modern state can human flourishing be fully attained.

The question of juridico-political authority is also prominent in the thought of Walter Benjamin. In the "Theologico-Political Fragment", Benjamin posits the necessity of dispensing with the sphere of the profane:

> "The quest of free humanity for happiness runs counter to the Messianic direction […] For in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall, and only in good fortune is its downfall destined to find it [...] For nature is Messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away […] To strive after such passing […] is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism" (TPF, 155-6)

For Benjamin, the happiness of the profane consists in its own transience and eventual self-destruction through a *messianic nihilism*. The radical character of Benjamin's messianic nihilism has to be comprehended in theological terms in order to elucidate its political implications. The force that enacts nihilism's iconoclasm against the law and the state is recognised as the coming of the Messiah, signalling the finitude of the profane manifested in the overcoming of state power. This messianic force strives for the restoration (*apocatastasis*) of humanity's 'prelapsarian' condition, namely a return to the time before the 'Fall', i.e., prior to life under the Law.

A preliminary juxtaposition between Benjamin and Nietzsche on redemption from the authority of law presents an ostensibly irreducible difference. Whereas Benjamin frames redemption in terms of messianic theology, Nietzsche's enmity towards theological dogma translates to an anti-messianic stance. In a broad sense, messianism refers to a metaphysical commitment to religious providence, actualized in the arrival of an ideal figure whose function is the salvation of humankind (Wolfe 2013). On the other side of the spectrum, anti-messianism opposes the conceptualisation of redemption as absolution by an external agent who is expressed either in religious or secular language. Moreover, the authority of law denotes the power or violence (*Gewalt*)[2] in imposing a certain set of norms and rules unto

[2] While Arendt (1970) argues that "violence and power are opposites: where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent" (56), this paper treats violence and power as synonymous following Nietzsche's and Benjamin's usage.

individuals, transforming them into legal subjects (Menke 2010). Accordingly, redemption is defined here as release from the modern condition of being determined by the totality of the law, the separation of the living being from its status as a modern legal subject. In this context, the aim of the paper is to investigate the extent to which the redemptive logics of Nietzsche and Benjamin are compatible in relation to law's authority. More specifically, Benjamin's messianism will be compared to Nietzsche's figure of the sovereign individual in Essay II of "On the Genealogy of Morality*"*. Simply put, I pose the following question: *To what extent is Nietzsche's sovereign individual compatible with Benjamin's messianism in the context of redemption from the law's authority?*

In short, the argument advanced in the paper is that *Nietzsche's sovereign individual and Benjamin's messianism are identical insofar as their respective redemptive logics share the same underlying structure*. This argument seeks to move beyond the normative political divide between the two thinkers, which in turn defines the scholarly field (a point detailed in section 2), and establish a systematic, and comprehensive comparison. In particular, I argue that Benjamin's messianism as divine violence reveals its possibility in the nihilistic act of challenging the authority of law (section 3). In turn, this resembles Nietzsche's anti-messianic force that is present in the deconstruction of the sovereign individual as an Enlightenment idol (section 4). As result, the structural resemblance between the two, i.e., the possibility of redemption in exposing the groundlessness of authority, means that the structural binary between messianism and anti-messianism can be deconstructed. This frames the discussion in section 5 where I argue that Nietzsche's anti-messianism contains elements of theology and Benjamin's unorthodox messianism can be interpreted as anti-theological. Therefore, the mutual contamination of theological messianism and anti-theological anti-messianism problematizes the structural binary between them. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on the implications of this analysis for the feasibility of a post-metaphysical stance in contemporary political thought.

II. *Benjamin's Marxism contra Nietzsche's Aristocratic Radical Politics*

Nietzsche's intellectual influence on Benjamin's philosophical development has generated an extensive scholarly literature, mapping the intricate relationship between the two esoteric and, non-contemporaneous philosophers (McFarland 2012). Despite the plethora of philological as well as philosophical commentaries, there is a noticeable deficit of a

systematic and comprehensive comparison between Nietzsche and Benjamin on the question of redemption from the authority of law. This peculiar absence within secondary literature results primarily from the disproportionate emphasis on the incommensurability between Benjamin's Marxist critique of oppressive systems of domination, and Nietzsche's political 'elitism' that is averse to revolutionary praxis. Meanwhile, any efforts to transcend this impasse and provide a space for a positive comparison comprise of scant references or underdeveloped analyses.

More specifically, Benjamin's firm alignment with the oppressed and impoverished 'masses' is diametrically opposed to Nietzsche's aristocratic radical politics. The apparent divergence on the redeemed subject, either the working class or the 'noble' elite, heavily informs the engagement of scholars with both philosophical figures. In turn, extended discussion on Benjamin and Nietzsche in the context of authority and redemption is precipitately occluded. Ponzi's (2017) comparative study of the two thinkers neatly illustrates this point. According to Ponzi (2017, 2), Benjamin's critique of industrial capitalism as a religious cult, founded upon guilt rather than atonement, heavily borrows from the Nietzschean equivalence of economic debt (*Schulden*) with guilt (*Schuld*). However, Benjamin identifies Nietzsche as a 'priest' of capitalism, a point accentuated by the former's interpretation of Nietzsche's Overman as the ultimate champion of capitalist values (ibid, 8). As a result, Ponzi (2017) stresses the tension between Benjamin's political demand for revolution in order to redeem those exploited by the capitalist system, and Nietzsche's perpetuation of these structures of domination by privileging an elite, 'noble' class (as exemplified by the Overman). This framing inadvertently limits the possibility of further comparison by its fixation on the disagreement regarding the identity of the redeemed subject.

Another facet of the purported incommensurability is grounded on the interpretation of Nietzsche's ambivalent attitude towards the concept of law. Siemens (2010) underlines the paradoxical role of law (*Gesetz*) in Nietzsche's thought. Traditional conceptions of law represent a negation of life, a repression of one's natural instincts (ibid, 190). At the same time, Nietzsche is unable to reject law on the grounds of affirming life because life as such is law-bound (ibid, 190). Therefore, criticisms levelled against the violence of the law and its tyrannical authority by "*laisser aller* advocates", are dismissed as naïve and vacuous (ibid, 212). Although Nietzsche does anticipate the decay of state institutions and its laws, the anarchistic activism seeking to accelerate the process is deemed parasitic and a sign of

decadence (Shapiro 2016, 73). In that respect, Nietzsche's antipathy towards revolutionary transformation and his suspicion of dissolving the law has been interpreted as far removed from the political aspirations of Benjamin's thought.

Finally, a few scholars have sought to circumvent this established opposition, yet the accounts provided are insufficient. Hanssen (2000, 9) briefly alludes to Nietzsche's unmasking of violence as a foundational principle of the social contract, and directly links it to Benjamin's critique of the social contract as a discourse of legitimation for law. A more sophisticated and extensive parallel between Nietzsche and Benjamin is drawn by Martel (2011; 2019), who identifies their shared objective in disrupting the self-created phantasms and idols of transcendent meaning that capture and determine human existence in its totality. Contrasting Benjamin's divine violence to Nietzsche's Zarathustra, Martel (2011) argues that both concepts are meant to 'cure' the proclivity of human beings towards expecting ultimate deliverance by a transcendentally or teleologically grounded source of authority. By decentring abstracted constructs of authority, human subjects undergo a process of 'resurrection' as "a space in which humans can be decolonized from occult forms of theism" (Martel 2019, 158) becomes obtainable. Although Martel (2011; 2019) recognises the affinity between Nietzsche and Benjamin on the question of redemption, the dialogue established remains brief and underdeveloped. The exact redemptive logic of each thinker is underspecified and treated in isolation. Moreover, comments on their compatibility are sporadic, thus rending the argument as simply speculative affiliation.

In light of this overview, the absence of a comprehensive analysis between Nietzsche and Benjamin on law and redemption is partly due to a focus on the substantive irreducibility of their respective normative political standpoints. In consequence, scholarship on the subject either underlines their philosophical dissimilarities, hence yielding a merely *negative* comparison, or speculates on potential points of convergence with little substantiation or systematisation. In this context, investigating the structural similarity of the redemptive logics of Benjamin and Nietzsche respectively, is a valuable contribution as it moves beyond negative comparisons or speculative remarks. The significance of this philosophical inquiry resides not simply in the attempt to offer a more comprehensive account and discern a positive connection between the two thinkers on this subject, but also in the possibility of reconsidering the question of redemption from authority from a novel perspective.

III. *Actuality as Possibility: Benjamin's Messianism in Divine Violence*

As indicated in the introduction, outlining prospective pathways of redemption from the authority of law preoccupies the political thought of both Benjamin and Nietzsche. However, in conjunction with the aforementioned insights from the literature review, the comparability of these two intellectual giants is not solely negative. The affiliation between Nietzsche and Benjamin is not restricted to their shared anxiety concerning the totality of law's authority as a modern political phenomenon. Rather their respective redemptive logics from law's authority, namely Nietzsche's sovereign individual and Benjamin's messianism, are structurally identical.

Regarding Benjamin, the concept of the messianic is present throughout his diverse philosophical reflections on literary criticism, aesthetics, philosophy of history, and political thought. As such, "there is no single doctrine of the messianic for Benjamin" (Butler 2014, 70). Instead, the messianic is a multifaceted category that assumes a variety of expressions and meanings. Accordingly, the purpose of this section is to delineate Benjamin's messianism with respect to the question of law's authority.

Before proceeding any further, it is imperative to note the difficulty and ambiguity surrounding the conceptual distinction between messianism as a *force* and the *figure* of the Messiah. Benjamin is considered part of a tradition of political theology[3] which deems the figure of the Messiah as possessing an anti-Law capacity, signifying an antinomian disposition (Taubes 2004). Put differently, the Messiah stands outside the sphere of the *nomos*, understood as the norm of the polis. However, Benjamin refuses to explicate the precise ontological status of the Messiah, resorting instead to a language of messianism as a force or process. Under these circumstances, this section addresses exclusively messianism in relation the question of the violence of law's authority, and in particular the function it acquires in Benjamin's seminal essay "*Toward the Critique of Violence*" (1921). Despite the elusiveness of the concept, I seek to argue that messianism as a force is expressed through divine violence, whose task is the annihilation of the law. More precisely, the possibility of messianic redemption is revealed in every nihilistic act of attempting to overturn the authority

[3] In this context, political theology does not refer to the theologisation of politics. Rather, political theology aims to identify the structural equivalence between theological and political analytical categories (de Wilde 2011: 367-368)

of the law. In this way, messianic redemption is actualised to the extent that its possibility becomes apparent.

To begin with, messianism is conceived as a destructive force, namely divine violence, which targets legal violence. For Benjamin, divine violence breaks with the arbitrariness of legal violence by exposing the groundlessness of the law. As Benjamin argues, the moment violence is deployed as a means to a specific end, either to posit a law or preserve the law it founds, it is confronted with the dysfunctionality of law as such:

> "All violence as a means is either law-positing or law-preserving. If it lays claim to neither of these predicates, then it forfeits all validity. From this, however, it follows that every violence as a means, even in the most favourable case, itself participates in the problematic character of law as such" (TCV:11, 48)

According to Benjamin, the exercise of violence is valid on condition that its employment preserves or posits a law. However, even if violence operates under the assumption of a means-ends relation, the problematic nature of law remains inescapable. More specifically, the violence that posits law generates the very conditions for its justification, i.e., the legal framework that distinguishes sanctioned violence from unsanctioned one. Consequently, the lack of justification renders the violence of law a matter of arbitrary power, not justice. The principal aim of law-positing violence is the preservation of its own power, thus resulting in a mutual exclusivity between power and justice. In "Force of Law", Derrida (2010) eloquently reiterates this Benjaminian insight as the "mystical foundation of authority":

> "Since the origin of authority, the founding or grounding [la foundation ou le fondement], the positing of law [loi] cannot by definition rest on anything but themselves, they are themselves a violence without ground [sans fondement]." (ibid, 242)

It is precisely against the groundlessness of law, the fact that the foundation of authority is predicated on violence that rests upon itself, that messianic destruction as divine violence is posited by Benjamin. To resolve the conundrum of the lawlessness of law's authority, divine violence acts as a messianic force whose obligation is the annihilation of law:

> "Precisely, this task introduces […] the question of a pure, immediate form of violence that might be capable of putting a halt to mythic violence. Divine violence designates in all respects an antithesis to mythic violence [...] If mythic violence is law-positing, divine violence is law-annihilating; if the former establishes boundaries, the latter boundlessly annihilates them." (TCV:17, 57)

In short, divine violence operates outside the paradigm of the means-ends rationality that characterises legal (mythic) violence. By virtue of being a pure means with no particular end in sight, divine violence signifies its operation outside the law, and subsequently its capacity for destroying the sphere of the *nomos*. The messianic destruction of divine violence abolishes the artificial boundaries imposed by the arbitrary violence of the law and de-mystifies its "mystical foundation".

Crucially, the messianicity of divine violence does not subscribe to a traditional eschatological conception of messianism, namely the awaiting of absolution from the law by a divine entity that manifests itself at the end of history. Paradoxically, for Benjamin, the messianic force of divine violence is without delay because a 'soft' messianic power is immanent in every act of challenging the law's authority, and subsequently exposing its lawlessness:

> "If, in the present, the domination of myth is already broken here and there, the new age does not lie in such an unimaginable lofty distance that a word against law would make no difference. But if, with respect to violence, its standing source [*Bestand*] as pure immediate violence is also secured beyond law, this proves that, and how, there is a possibility of revolutionary violence, which the name is reserved for the highest manifestation of pure violence through human beings." (TCV:19, 60)

In this critical extract, Benjamin differentiates between two modalities of divine violence: *pure immediate violence* and *revolutionary violence* (Guzmán 2014, 52). Immediate, pure violence periodically succeeds in momentarily disrupting the domination of myth through the destruction of law, before instituting a new law, thus continuing the cycle of mythic violence (ibid). Conversely, revolutionary violence constitutes the highest form of divine violence since it breaks the cyclical movement of mythic violence through the abolition of state power

and the total overturning of the law, hence ushering a new historical epoch where our symbiosis with the nomos undergoes a radical reconceptualization (ibid).

Benjamin's demarcation between pure immediate violence and revolutionary violence underpins his messianism. The inchoateness of immediate violence, i.e., its momentary existence outside the law by virtue of attempting to replace the legal order, denotes not a sense of futility but rather reinforces the *possibility* of revolutionary violence. Interrupting the functioning of legal and state apparatuses reveals the underlying revolutionary violence that is yet to arrive, the radical destructive messianicity that will dispense with law's mystical authority permanently. Consequently, every instance that directly challenges the sanctity of law's authority, through pure immediate violence, is endowed with a 'weak' messianic force. More precisely, the nihilistic act of exposing the law's lawlessness, i.e., the circumscription of violence for the sake of its own preservation, constitutes "the strait gate, through which the Messiah might enter." (Benjamin, TPH: B, 209). Briefly put, the redemptive nature of messianism is present in the pure immediate violence, which offers a glimpse into the possibility of complete absolution from law's authority through revolutionary violence.

Following from this point, messianic destruction as divine (revolutionary) violence can only be actualized in its very possibility. The highest manifestation of divine violence is a pure potentiality which refuses to be entrapped in identifiable historical cases. As Benjamin claims:

> "For only mythic violence, not divine violence, can be recognized as such with certainty […] for the de-expiating force [*Kraft*] of violence is not disclosed to human beings. Once again, all eternal forms that myth bastardised with law stand free and open to pure divine violence" (TCV:19, 60)

The actualization of divine violence, as revolutionary violence, is elusive and unidentifiable by human cognition. The epistemic inaccessibility of divine violence from an anthropocentric perspective obviates its bastardisation by myth through law. If one asserts the claim that the messianicity of divine violence has materialized in a particular historical event, then revolutionary violence becomes enclosed in the instrumental 'means-ends' rationality of legal (mythical) violence. Thus, the redemptive essence of messianism is necessarily *negative*,

since locating divine violence within a specific spatiotemporal configuration risks its usurpation by the cycle of mythic violence[4].

At this juncture, it is worth to briefly consider Agamben's (1999; 2005) interpretation of Benjamin, as his commentary effectively illustrates and further reinforces this point. Agamben (2005a) reads Benjamin's messianism as an antidote to Schmitt's state of exception (*Ausnahmezustand*). According to Schmitt, the one who is sovereign *decides* on the suspension of the law in cases of emergency, thus precluding the employment of force outside the nomos, given that the state of exception doctrine is codified in law (ibid, 60). Benjamin argues that the self-suspension of the law in the state of exception has been transformed into a permanent political condition of modernity (Agamben 1999). The state of exception is the norm, an enforceable law which signifies nothing: it is devoid of any legal content (ibid, 170). Consequently, the apprehension of the law in-itself becomes impossible, hence rendering it ineradicable. The state of exception corresponds to a 'paralyzed' messianism that leads to the substantive nullification of the law but maintains its formal validity in perpetuity (ibid, 170).

By contrast, Benjamin's messianism is equivalent to a *perfect nihilism* that does not merely confront the coercive and commanding nature of law, but rather a law with no significance (ibid, 171). Messianism's redemption is found in the complete overturning of the 'hollowness' of the law, thus restoring the apprehensibility of the world (Agamben 2005b, 42). The key insight from Agamben's reading is that Benjamin's messianism does not depend upon providing an alternative viewpoint of an ideal state of affairs. The revolutionary divine violence consists in the possibility of the complete abolition of law's authority, including that of the law-without-significance. Above all, the perfect nihilism in the messianic force of divine violence is actualised in so far as its possibility is secured through unveiling the fundamental contingency and arbitrariness that haunts state power.

At the most fundamental level, redemption from the authority of law is conceptualised as an unorthodox form of messianism, expressed in divine violence. This messianic law-

[4] To further clarify: "As soon as the revolutionary begins to think of its own law-destroying violence as an instrument of salvation, redeeming history through the direct intervention of the divine violence it supposedly represents, he is bound to cause the worst, that is, a senseless sacrifice of 'mere life' to myth." (de Wilde 2006: 198)

annihilating violence breaks with legal violence by uncovering its arbitrariness and groundlessness. In turn, each instance of pure, immediate divine violence that challenges the monopoly of violence by law constitutes a 'weak messianic force' because it reveals the possibility of dissolving both the state and the law through divine revolutionary violence. However, revolutionary violence remains undisclosed, thus being negative. Consequently, the messianicity of divine violence is a pure potentiality reflecting an uncompromising, perfect nihilism that dispenses with law completely. Finally, the actualisation of divine violence as possibility, revealed through the nihilistic act of challenging the law, refutes any version of messianism that is predicated upon a redemptive figure or force that is determined at the end of history.

IV. *The Anti-Messiah in Nietzsche's Sovereign Individual*

The enigmatic figure of the sovereign individual is the subject of scholarly controversy due to its singular appearance in the "On The Genealogy of Morals*"* (1887) as well as the ambiguous language used to describe it (Meredith 2021, 217). Disagreement amongst scholars concerns primarily the normative status of the sovereign individual (ibid, 218). While the majority identify the sovereign individual as part of Nietzsche's 'pantheon' of ethical ideals, a few voices in the debate contest this claim (Rukgaber 2012, 214-215). Instead, they perceive the sovereign individual as a target of the Nietzschean critique of morality (ibid). This section advances an interpretation of the sovereign individual and situates it within the ongoing debate. Against the predominant position, I will demonstrate that the sovereign individual cannot be posited as Nietzsche's positive ethical ideal. Siding with a minority of scholars, specifically Acampora (2004) and Hatab (2008), I will further argue that the sovereign individual represents an Enlightenment ideal, the culmination of secular moral philosophies that Nietzsche vehemently rejects. However, the interpretation advanced in this section will move beyond this "deflationary reading" (Leiter 2011, 103) by showing that Nietzsche's deconstruction of the sovereign individual is underpinned by an anti-messianic force.

In first place, the sovereign individual assumes a determinate form through a laborious effort of cultural conditioning, spanning over multiple historical eras. A towering figure occupying the moral 'high ground', its distinctive virtuousness and autonomy is the product of a long historical process:

> "That is precisely what constitutes the long history of the origins of *responsibility*. That particular task of breeding an animal with the prerogative to promise […] involved what I have called 'the morality of custom', the actual labour of man on himself during the longest epoch of the human race […] with the morality of custom and the social straitjacket, man was made truly predictable […] At the end of this immense process where the tree bears fruit […] we then find the *sovereign individual* as the ripest fruit […] freed from the morality of custom, an autonomous, supra-ethical individual […] whose prerogative is to promise." (Nietzsche, GMII:2, 36 – 37)

The necessary precondition for the *right to promise*, i.e., extending one's will into the future and assuming responsibility for one's actions, is a morality of mores. Social norms, predicated upon a conventional morality of tradition, condition the 'human animal', transforming it into a predictable, calculable, and regulated individual (Nietzsche, GMII:1, 36). Transcendence of the ethical sphere or 'morality of custom' (*Sittlichkeit*), the metamorphosis of the 'human animal' into an "autonomous, supra-ethical individual" from the cocoon of conventional morality encapsulates the late condition of modernity. Moreover, the capacity for personal responsibility and accountability, i.e., the provision of rational justification for one's action, is not grounded in the principles of *a priori* reasoning. Instead, the acquirement of sovereign individuality is "the product of cultural activity" (Deleuze 1983, 136).

On the surface, Nietzsche's use of language paints a favourable image of the sovereign individual. Representatively, Ansell-Pearson (1991) conceives this icon as a positive ethical ideal, the epitome of Nietzsche's ethical, self-affirming agent who is the legislator of its own values[5]:

> "Nietzsche describes the attainment of sovereign individuality not as 'moral' but rather as 'supral-moral' […] Genuine autonomy means that one is unique and incomparable […] Nietzsche insists that, 'a virtue has to be *our* invention, *our* most personal defence and necessity […] Self-legislation for Nietzsche means that one bears the sole burden for one's self, that one creates one's own laws in terms of a will

[5] See also Owen (2002), White (1997), Havas (2000), and Ridley (2000)

> to self-responsibility. To universalize these laws […] is described by Nietzsche as an extreme act of selfishness" (ibid, 279-280)

For Ansell-Pearson (1991, 278), the autonomy of the sovereign individual is not a precondition for moral conduct, as in Kantian moral philosophy, but rather it constitutes the trait distinguishing and differentiating the agent from the 'herd instinct'[6]. The autonomy intrinsic to sovereign individuality does not exclusively pertain to the legislation of laws and values that address the unique ethical needs of each individual. In a more radical sense, the sovereign individual is bound by a responsibility to its own self. Thus, *self-responsibility* is the principle according to which the sovereign individual creates its own values. Contrary to the Kantian conception of autonomy, namely the self-imposition of laws that are is accordance with universal and objective moral standards, Nietzsche's sovereign individual does not hold the pretence that its laws and values ought to be universalizable.

Although Ansell-Pearson (1991) correctly underlines Nietzsche's conspicuous disapproval of Kantian morality, the deliberate cultivation of self-responsibility in the sovereign individual problematizes its consideration as a positive ethical ideal. In Section 13 of Essay I of *Genealogy*, Nietzsche is critical of the metaphysical presuppositions grounding moral notions of responsibility and free-will:

> "It is just as absurd to ask strength *not* to express itself as strength, *not* to be a desire to overthrow, crush, become master […] Popular morality [*Volks-Moral*] separates strength from the manifestations of strength, as though there were an indifferent substratum behind the strong person which had the *freedom* to manifest strength or not. But there is no such substratum; there is no 'being' behind the deed." (GMI:13, 26)

The invention of the modern subject, a discrete entity possessing free will, facilitates the metaphysical groundwork upon which commonly held ideas of moral conduct rest. For Nietzsche, the 'neutral' subject, as the locus of action, misconstrues reality because it postulates a false sense of freedom and control over one's moral constitution. Demanding restraint of one's natural inclinations and instincts presupposes an ontology of being that

[6] Delegating one's own ethical agency to the morality of the community (Nietzsche, GS:116, 114)

separates the action from the agent. The erroneousness of the *metaphysics of action* stems from its propensity to suppress the plurality of forces that compose any living body or organism. For Nietzsche, human beings are characterised by an ontological multiplicity, a nexus of forces and drives that are in constant competition for domination (GMII: 12, 51). Therefore, the unitary and cohesive unit of 'agent' or 'self' that extends its singular will into the world and performs a certain action is a modern invention. Sovereign individuality represents this mode of structuring experience at its zenith. In line with Nietzsche's naturalism, the sovereign individual obfuscates the natural condition of human beings by repressing ontological multiplicity to preserve a unitary sense of self upon which *self-responsibility* and free-will are predicated. Acampora (2004, 154) elucidates this point, claiming that sovereign individuality is selective because certain forces are reinforced, for instance the force of remembering to foster moral accountability, over others. In short, "a pretence to sovereignty is achieved with the substitution of monarchic aspirations" (ibid).

In view of Nietzsche's suspicion towards the modern conception of the self, the nomination of the sovereign individual as an ethical ideal turns out to be dubious. Instead, it seems more plausible that the narrative concerning the origin of the sovereign individual is intended to subvert the prevailing Enlightenment discourse of emancipation from the arbitrary authority of custom and intellectual immaturity, "the incapacity to use one's understanding without the guidance of another" (Kant 2009, 6). The sovereign individual's self-mastery, autonomy, and free will signifies the pinnacle of human moral progression in accordance with Enlightenment ideals. Through exposing the historical contingency and arbitrary force involved in the erection of the sovereign individual as an idol of Enlightenment values, Nietzsche undermines the premature panegyric proclamations of liberation from external and arbitrary authority.

The transformation of the 'human animal' into the modern legal 'rational' subject is an exemplary case that effectively demonstrates the aforesaid point. Nietzsche posits that the cognitive process of memory, a key prerequisite for responsibility and promise-making, was developed through an externally imposed violence which imprinted certain patterns of desired behaviour, such as the fulfilment of one's obligations to the community as well as adherence to its laws (GMII:3, 38). More specifically, the transgression of artificial boundaries, installed by law was met with severe punishment, primarily in the form of

physical violence to ensure the memorisation of certain rules of conduct within the community (ibid). Therefore, the duties and responsibilities of the legal subject towards the law and the state were only translated into the language of 'reason' after a prolonged period of tyrannical violence by an external authority (ibid).

Despite the lack of empirical substantiation, Nietzsche's quasi-anthropological account is meant to dispel the phantasm of the social contract, the foundational myth of political liberalism. The imaginary vision of a pre-political 'state of nature' where rational, autonomous, and free individuals converge to found a body politic and voluntarily delegate their agency to a 'higher' authority, reflects the dominance of Enlightenment rationalism. Instead, Nietzsche emphasises the systematic violence required to shape an amorphous mass of 'human animals' into a cohesive polity containing law-abiding citizens with a moral conscience and respect for legal and state authority (GMII:17, 58). As a consequence, the sovereign individual is not the precondition for political life under a transcendent authority but instead the very product of the arbitrary violence of law's authority and the state. In view of this, Hatab (2008) correctly identifies the sovereign individual as the ontological presupposition of social contract theory and political liberalism, thus being inimical to Nietzsche's social philosophy.

Assuming that the sovereign individual is an Enlightenment ideal that Nietzsche dissects in order to expose its historical contingency, the question is raised as to the motivation behind this act. What is the purpose of erecting the idol of the sovereign individual at the beginning of the second treatise and proceed to dismantling it? More precisely, what is the value of demonstrating that the attainment of sovereign individuality is not the transcendence of external authority but rather the outcome? The answer can be discerned from the penultimate section of Essay II where Nietzsche ponders on the coming of the 'Future Man':

> "He will have to come to us, the *redeeming* man […] he can return with the *redemption* of this reality: redeem it from the curse which its ideal has placed on it up till now. This man of the future will redeem us […] this Antichrist and anti-nihilist, this conqueror of God and of nothingness – *he must come one day"* (GMII:24, 66).

In this extract, Nietzsche's redemptive "future man" is the "Antichrist", the "anti-nihilist" whose task involves the purification of reality from false ideals. The characterization of the "redeeming man" as the "Antichrist" is paradoxical. Given that "Antichrist" literally translates to "Anti-Messiah", the one against messianic redemption, Nietzsche foregrounds the following aporia: how can the redeeming figure be anti-messianic? The resolution to this paradox lies in the fact that the anti-Messiah 'cleanses' humankind from their self-constructed idols whose function is the promise of salvation. The idol of the sovereign individual fits this description appropriately. Claiming to be emancipated from the dictatorial authority of customs and the spirit of the laws, the sovereign individual emphasizes its own autonomy, self-mastery, and freedom, thus pretending to be its own source of normative authority. Although the concept of sovereign individuality is a recent 'achievement', this idol nonetheless assumes an eternal and fixed status. More specifically, the consolidation of the sovereign individual as an idol involves its interjection into the past to offer explanations of the present modern condition, as exemplified in the myth of the social contract. The methodological error of conflating the purpose of a concept with its origin (Nietzsche, GMII: 12, 51) sustains the idolatry of the sovereign individual as its current form dictates its historical development, thus repressing the arbitrary force and contingency underpinning it. Put differently, the sovereign individual posits itself as the natural *telos* of humanity, inculcating humanity with the expectation of deliverance from arbitrary authority while its very function is a secular authority whose origin is arbitrary.

Therefore, unmasking the historical contingency of the sovereign individual shatters its self-proclaimed redemptive capacity at the end of history. There is no logical progression towards a determinate goal in historical time, only the agonistic interaction between a multitude of interpretive forces that shape the human understanding of events and concepts at a particular temporal juncture (Nietzsche, GMII:12, 51). The sovereign individual is simply the crystallization of the dominant hermeneutic paradigm of Enlightenment reason that informs the self-conception of the modern subject. In this precise sense, the task of the "Anti-Messiah" is the deconstruction of the sovereign individual as an idol that sustains the false expectation of salvation from an external authority while perpetuating the conditions it seeks to abolish.

More accurately, the Anti-Messiah is an anti-messianic force that is present throughout the second treatise since its focal point is the dissolution of the sovereign individual as an idol. In

this way, the anti-messianic force is diffused throughout the nihilistic act of demolishing the secular 'temple' of sovereign individuality. However, the nihilistic assault on sacrosanct moral truths or figures of authority, promogulated by defective mythologies of meaning, should not descent to a sense of meaninglessness or, as Nietzsche describes, "a will to nothingness, an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental presupposition of life" (GMIII:28, 120). Rather, Nietzsche champions an *active nihilism*, a process that culminates in the destruction of false idols and eternal truths and in turn prompts their overcoming (KSA 12: 9 [35]). In this exact way, the "Anti-Messiah" is also anti-nihilistic in so far as the deconstruction of the sovereign individual is not performed for the sake of negation as such, but rather to open an indeterminate horizon redeemed from overarching structures of authority seeking to impose a rigid order of meaning.

To summarise, the sovereign individual does not constitute Nietzsche's positive ethical ideal but rather an Enlightenment idol, whose historical contingency is exposed throughout the second essay, thus functioning as an anti-messianic force. Upon closer inspection, the presence of an anti-messianic force in the deconstruction of the sovereign individual structurally resembles the messianic destruction of Benjamin's divine violence. In both accounts, the epicentre of redemption is the nihilistic act of exposing the contingency, arbitrariness, and groundlessness which haunts the authority of the law and its instituted idols. The nihilism espoused by Benjamin and Nietzsche is not simply a necessary precondition for redemption but instead contains redemption within it. In other words, Nietzsche's anti-messianism and Benjamin's messianism converge on their negative status by refusing to recognize the actualization of redemption in specific figures of authority or politico-historical events. Assuming that the structure of the redemptive logics of Nietzsche and Benjamin is identical, how can the binary between theological messianism and anti-theological anti-messianism be interpreted? The following section will provide an answer to this question by bringing the anti-theology in Nietzsche's anti-messianism into dialogue with the theological dimension of Benjamin's messianism in the context of the structural resemblance of their redemptive logics.

V. *Deconstructing the binary between Messianism and Anti-Messianism*

In "Nietzsche and the Machine" (Derrida and Beardsworth 1994), Derrida comments on the messianic undertone present in Nietzsche's philosophical oeuvre:

> "*Also Sprach Zarathustra* is a counter-messianic book; but of course, any counter-messianic text is at the same time messianic. Even when Nietzsche laughs at the prophetic and messianic preaching, he nevertheless assumes the same tone to laugh at it. He presents himself as the counter-messiah; the Anti-Christ is messianic, *Ecce Homo* is a messianic text" (ibid, 33)

The Derridean observation of a counter-messianic text, simultaneously conveying a messianic message, extends to Nietzsche's *Genealogy.* The image of the Anti-Messiah as a redemptive force brings to the forefront the tension between messianism and anti-messianism that permeates the engagement with the idol of the sovereign individual throughout the Second Essay. In consequence, the structural fault lines demarcating between these two categories as distinct redemptive logics become unclear. Messianic theology contaminates the anti-theological 'essence' of anti-messianism and vice versa, thus revealing the complexity and ambiguity that is inadvertently repressed through their systematic categorisation and conceptual circumscription of these two terms. More concretely, the structural binary between messianism and anti-messianism dissolves as Nietzsche's anti-messianism unavoidably resorts to theological conceptual language similar to Benjamin, while Benjamin's messianism denotes a Nietzschean counter-theological conception of redemption.

As alluded to above, the anti-messianic element, present in the deconstruction of the sovereign individual, is structurally equivalent to Benjamin's divine violence. Both locate redemption in the recognition of secular (legal) authority as contingent and foundationless. Drawing the implications of this insight further, the shadow of theology lingers in Nietzsche's anti-messianism, specifically through the theological language equivalent to Benjamin's divine violence. In particular, it could be argued that the Anti-Messiah as such is a pure potentiality, the same way revolutionary violence, as the highest manifestation of divine violence, is actualised in its possibility. The anti-messianic force is immanent in the act of dismantling the sovereign individual's self-proclaimed emancipation from authority.

Exploding the contingency of the idol itself and its susceptibility to arbitrary force reveals the *possibility* of overcoming its authority, the same way that pure immediate violence challenges the authority of law and reveals the possibility of revolutionary violence as well as the complete deactivation of the authority of law. In turn, neither divine violence nor the Anti-Messiah can be materialised in specific authority figures or historical events. Any attempt will perpetuate the erection of new idols of worship or entrap revolutionary violence back into the cycle of mythical violence. Necessarily, absolute redemption in Nietzsche and Benjamin becomes epistemologically inaccessible in so far as it does not assume a concrete form of expression.

Consequently, the Anti-Messiah of Nietzsche and the messianism of Benjamin are *pure potentialities*. As immediate violence offers a glimpse into the possibility of revolutionary violence and the deactivation of the law, the act of dismantling false idols and authority figures, offers a glimpse into the possibility of the Anti-Messiah as a force that shall permanently eradicate idols of transcendent authority. In this way, the apparent anti-theological anti-messianic stance of Nietzsche is penetrated by the theologico-metaphysical presence of absolute redemption as a pure potentiality. In metaphorical terms, the Anti-Messiah remains permanently suspended in the future. The "redeeming man", to use Derrida's (2011) term, is always *to-come* (*à venir*), unable to be actualized in material reality.

Conversely, Benjamin's conception of messianism as divine violence arguably harbours a Nietzschean anti-theological disposition. The task of the anti-Messiah, namely the elimination of sacredly held idols as sources of normative authority, reflects the duty of divine violence of annihilating legal violence. In other words, the active nihilism performed by the anti-messianic force, or the dismantling of elevated phantasms in order to overcome them, is identical with Benjamin's perfect nihilism that dispenses with the mythos of law's authority in its totality, and restores the possibility of apprehending the world anew. In this way, Benjamin's messianism emulates the *negative* quality of Nietzsche's anti-messianism.

Ultimately, the realization of redemption in the negative catharsis of perfect/active nihilism is not consummated in the figure of a determinate Other, appearing at the end (*telos*) of world history. Nietzsche's anti-messianism breaks with the logical progression of teleological history by 'de-throning' the sovereign individual who sits at the end of this process,

promising a secular form of salvation. In the same way, Benjamin's divine violence does not amount to any direct divine intervention by a Messiah who is expected to offer definitive deliverance once the profane realm approximates its moribundity. Redemption is not predicated upon absolution through the arrival of a transcendent messianic figure in the *fullness of time* (*plēroma tou chronou*), i.e., after a long sequence of historical events predestined to concluded through salvation by a determinate Other. Instead, the possibility of messianic redemption announces itself through the immanent struggle against the totality of law's authority, similarly to the possibility of anti-messianic redemption in the dissolution of the false idols of secular morality. Therefore, the messianic destruction in Benjamin's divine violence is intertwined with Nietzsche's anti-theological anti-messianism since the act of redemption is strictly negative and denounces any conceptual entanglement with an external, ideal, and determinate Other.

To summarise, by virtue of the identical structure regarding the redemptive logics of Nietzsche and Benjamin, the mutual contamination between anti-messianism and messianism results in the problematisation of this purported binary. Nietzsche is unable to relinquish theological concepts since the Anti-Messiah constitutes a pure potentiality which cannot be actualised as a concrete figure of moral authority. Meanwhile, Benjamin's ostensible theological commitments are fragile because his messianism is conscientiously negative and it renounces any association with a determinate, teleological Other.

Despite the plausibility of the argument, two significant limitations need to be acknowledged. Firstly, for Benjamin, a critical aspect of challenging the authority of law is *revolutionary praxis* in the form of the general proletarian strike in which the immediacy of pure divine violence is momentarily manifested (TCV:13, 52). By contrast, Nietzsche's reflections on the French Revolution, as an articulation of hatred and resentment (GMI:16, 33), accentuates his conspicuous contempt for mass uprisings against the state apparatus. Moreover, in his evaluation of modern European morality as 'herd morality', Nietzsche claims that aspirations for a communal utopia are grounded in a misplaced faith in the community as a redeemer, or the 'herd' as salvation (BGE:202, 91). Therefore, the argument constructed in the paper risks understating the integral role of revolutionary action in Benjamin's "messianico-Marxism" (Derrida 2010, 298).

Secondly, translating Nietzsche's anti-messianism into theological language deflates his hostility towards traditional metaphysical thought. Attributing metaphysical notions of pure potentiality to Nietzsche's redemptive logic introduces a degree of speculative thought that is antithetical to his philosophical stance. Indeed, for Nietzsche, a speculative metaphysics is a variant of theological thought that needs to be overcome (Badiou 2001, 1). As a result, the interpretation of the Anti-Messiah as a pure potentiality risks reproducing the metaphysical dualism between a transcendent and immanent world that Nietzsche actively opposes (TI: "Reason in Philosophy" I, 16).

VI. *Beyond Post-Metaphysical Thinking?*

As established in the discussion above, the mutual contamination between messianism and anti-messianism, theology and anti-theology, attests to the unsustainability of the structural binary. However, what can be inferred from the finding that these metaphysical problematisations are integral to issues concerning the authority of law, or the nature of political authority for that matter? In this concluding section, I raise a number of questions and problematisations concerning the "post-metaphysical thinking" (Habermas 1992) in contemporary political thought.

Agamben (2005a) suggests an analogous relation between the question of the authority of law in political thought and metaphysical concerns pertaining to the nature of reality:

> "The struggle for anomie [extra-legal sphere] seems to be as decisive for Western politics as the *gigantomachia peri tēs ousias*, "the battle of giants concerning being", that defines Western metaphysics" (ibid, 59)

However, the two philosophical 'battles' are not simply equivalent in significance, but rather there is a substantive intertwinement between the political question of law's authority and metaphysical convictions. Both Nietzsche and Benjamin appreciate this intricate connection. Secular authority, be it the law, the state etc., conceives itself as transcendent and eternal, shrouding itself in mythical or divine status. Consequently, their redemptive efforts to break with the eschatology of the profane, i.e., the promise of salvation via the authority of the law

or the state, necessarily entails engaging with the underlying metaphysical doctrine that provides the foundation for these self-proclaimed sources of normativity.

More importantly, the conceptual language unto which these metaphysical foundations have been erected is inescapable. Nietzsche's famous claim that "we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar" (TI: "Reason in Philosophy" 5, 19) underlines the linguistic and conceptual constraints in the effort to overcome ideas such as God, state, law etc. Thus, a definitive relinquishing of the theologico-metaphysical notions underpinning the fundamental categories of modern political and legal thought, is impossible. The poignancy of Arendt's (2006, 19) comment on Nietzsche's effort to break with the authority of traditional metaphysical and political thought, but ultimately being unable to move past this conceptual framework, eloquently captures this predicament.

In this context, the question raised is whether Habermas' (1992) "post-metaphysical thinking" (*nachmetaphysisches Denken*), especially in relation to political thought, is feasible, or even desirable. To what extent can, or should, philosophical critique towards the concepts of law, state or authority abstain from inquiring into the relevant metaphysical problems? Although no definite answer can be provided here, both Nietzsche and Benjamin point to the impossibility of maintaining an agnostic stance towards the metaphysical doctrines that permeate and inform conceptions of state institutions and the law. The authority of tradition in metaphysical as well as political thought is inescapable in absolute terms. However, perhaps each attempt to subvert tradition and its categories by using its own conceptual language against it through the deconstruction of its structural binaries, offers a glimpse into the possibility of overcoming its authority.

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