

# From Bare Life to Eternal Life: Response to Morejón, Ricciardi, and Fenves

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**ABSTRACT:** This response discusses the possibility of an affirmative biopolitics based on a materialist and atheist idea of eternal life in light of some of the challenges raised by the critiques of Morejón, Ricciardi, and Fenves. The first challenge concerns whether an affirmative biopolitics is at all possible given that biopolitics contains as an immanent possibility a racial politics that leads to a “necropolitics” (Mbembe). The second challenge concerns the political character of Italian theory, especially in Agamben, and its relation to communism and republicanism. The third challenge concerns the applicability of recent cosmological speculations for the purpose of joining messianism and historical materialism in Benjamin’s thought.

**KEY WORDS:** thanatopolitics, species-life, form-of-life, messianic Marxism, cosmology

Let me begin by thanking Peg Birmingham for generously offering to organize the original book discussion at DePaul University in January 2015, out of which developed this written exchange. I am very grateful to Peter Fenves, Alessia Ricciardi, and Gil Morejón for their extremely stimulating and incisive texts. With such careful readers, my task is made both easier and more gratifying: easier because they present my views in ways that clarify them even to myself; more gratifying because it allows me to move straight to the decisive points and questions raised by these texts, not in the spirit of someone who believes to have any answers, but more modestly as another participant in a series of conversations that transcend this particular occasion.

*Gil Morejón:*

Morejón's essay permits me to say something about how I understand the relation between an affirmative biopolitics and republicanism. But his comments also pointedly introduce the perspective of critical race theory and critical ethnic studies into the discussion of biopolitics, a perspective which my book does not as such take up. Thirdly, Morejón critically engages my claim that an affirmative biopolitics needs to take seriously the idea of "eternal life" if it is going to escape and oppose what Foucault called "thanatopolitics" and Mbembe calls "necropolitics." Both terms refer to "death-worlds" in which "vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" (Mbembe).

Morejón is right to see in the attempt to think affirmative biopolitics together with republicanism a not so veiled critique of the antinomianism prevalent in contemporary biopolitics, since for me a basic definition of republicanism is the attempt to replace the rule of persons by the rule of law. The connection between biopolitics and republicanism is a direct one since by the term "biopolitics" I understand the study of the different ways in which law and life relate to each other. In many regimes, this relation may become thanatopolitical, but I do not think that all law is as such thanatopolitical. I think one should at least distinguish between, say, totalitarian understandings of law, neoliberal understandings of law, and republican understandings of law. Totalitarian domination, as Arendt has argued, proceeds by stripping legal personality from an individual (that is, by reinstating the belief that some life is by nature guilty, and deserves to be punished even if it has done no wrong); then by imposing a regime of forced labour that disallows any leisure to think; and lastly by setting up a perverse system of exchange that makes any solidarity with the other have a prohibitive cost, making it tantamount to suicide. Morejón, for his part, cites Mbembe's "triple loss" of "home," "rights over her or his body," and "expulsion from humanity altogether" as constitutive of the death-in-life of the slave. As far as I am concerned the points made by Arendt, Mbembe and Agamben share something in common, in that all of them analyse a separation of *bios* from *zôê* such that the life (*bios*) of one part of humanity is thought to require the selection, segregation, exploitation and extermination, in short the "total" domination of the life (*zôê*) of another part of humanity by its reduction to a kind of "living death."

There is an important literature on the differences between how the concentration camp and the slave plantation go about establishing "total" domination. But since this term was first coined by Arendt, and only subsequently employed by many others, including Mbembe, I do not really see why Morejón discards outright the possibility that Arendt's own concept of "natality," on which she bases the human right to have rights, cannot be used to counteract the "radical natal alienation" that Mbembe sees at work in slavery. More to the point, under regimes of "total domination" the final goal of law is to make human life entirely

subservient to the commands of a person. Now, this goal is entirely opposed by the republican conception of law which distinguishes law, in principle, from the command of a person. For republicanism, no person should ever be in a position to command another.

There is no doubt that neither state racism nor (neo-)colonialism are objects of sustained analysis in *The Republic of the Living*, which is a book that is more concerned with the analysis of a neoliberal conception of law. This topic is complicated and my book does not claim to give a systematic or definitive treatment of it. But, roughly, by the neoliberal conception of law I refer to those regulations (“governance”) that make possible self-conduct in so-called “spontaneous orders” like the free market and civil society. Again, this neoliberal conception is opposed by the republican understanding of law which is essentially concerned with the organization of a free and powerful people and federations of free peoples, where law is based on the free discussion of opinions, not on the free communication of preferences through the buying and selling of commodities. Part of my project in this book was to see whether this republican conception of law still had any applicability in our biopolitical age. Here I was guided by my reading of Arendt’s notion of natality as the ground of human freedom, which to me is clearly a biopolitical notion, and the problem of how it related to Arendt’s evidently republican politics. I sought to understand the connection between these two aspects of her thought, following the pioneering work of Peg Birmingham among others.

The main portion of Morejón’s essay focuses on the claim that “the transformation of biopolitics into thanatopolitics is not an extrinsic possibility.” I think Morejón’s states the case for this claim very forcefully and I have no major disagreement with him on this point. My starting point is Benjamin’s claim that life is construed as “guilty” and “destined to die” so that power can be exerted over it. Whether this attribution of “guilt” comes from a concept of degeneracy (as in Foucault, discussed by Morejón) or through other racializing discourses, more applicable to colonial and settler forms of total domination, as identified by Mbembe through the contrast between “concentration camp” and “plantation,” is not something that my book sets out to analyse further. However, such distinctions within regimes of total domination do not affect my basic question, namely, how should life be reconceived bio-politically in order to avoid these thanatopolitical outcomes of biopower? It is interesting to note that in his recent book dedicated to “racializing assemblages” and biopolitics, Weheliye, although critical of the Italian biopolitics of Agamben and Esposito, nonetheless also tries to advance an affirmative biopolitics based on a counter-concept to “bare life” by taking up Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “flesh” as a line of flight from the racializing assemblages.<sup>1</sup>

Morejón argues that my suggestion to think about affirmative biopolitics through the idea of “eternal life” is not enough to counteract “thanatopolitics”

and may even be complicit with it. Morejón correctly renders the basic gist of my argument, namely, that if one is to avoid dividing up life into *bios* and *zôê*, into “spirit” and “body,” “individual” and “species,” then it is crucial to think the possibility that thinking and living are co-extensive, and this means that, just like life neither ends nor begins with the individual living being, then neither does thinking.

Morejón’s first objection is that my conception of eternal life is still a particular form of *bios*, namely, the form of a philosophical life. If that is the case, I do not justify why everyone should desire to lead a philosophical life. But if eternal life is not a *bios*, then I must attribute the capacity to philosophize to all life (*zôê*), which sounds very strange indeed. The chapter in question takes up the distinction that Spinoza makes between the life (*bios*) that you think you are living (your biography, your decisions, your conscious striving for this or that goal, etc.) and a life (*zôê*) that is being lived in and through you. The latter is what Deleuze calls, in his last text, “Immanence: a life . . .” Such life is both singular and generic. Generic because it is an undifferentiated life that is equally living through every finite living being; singular because it is lived, each and every time, finitely. This singular and generic life is what I call “eternal life” and I try to argue that one cannot distinguish it from thinking, which is also singular and generic in the same way. So, I could perhaps phrase my point as follows: it is only “a life . . .” that is philosophical, not your life or my life. And in this sense, for me there is no “philosophical life” as a separate form of life, as a *bios*, just as nothing that is living can be so living without some thinking occurring through it.

The second objection is that such a conception of eternal life is isomorphic with the thanatopolitical gesture because it invokes “a transfinite species-being” but “the transfinitude of species-being is a presupposition of racist thanatopolitics not a conceptual bulwark against it.” This is the one part of Morejón’s argument that I fail to follow: as I understand it, racial discourses, indeed the very idea of “race,” presuppose the distinction between *bios* and *zôê* and tries to parse it along groups of individuals. The idea of race, in other words, is constructed on the oblivion of what I call above “a life . . .” which makes every kind of species-ism impossible. I fear in this instance that Morejón may have conflated an Aristotelian idea of species, which I do not support, with a Spinozist-Marxist idea of “species-being” that I defend and try to reconceptualise. It may be that the term “species-being” (*Gattungswesen*) may not be the most felicitous term to designate that concept of life which cannot be parsed into distinct “species” much the less “races,” but, on the other hand, we do not have many other terms to designate what Morejón calls the “transfinite” mode of life and I call “eternal life.” But the sense of species-being that Marx had in mind, and which I am also after, is nicely captured by a passage from Sylvia Wynter cited by Weheliye: “the struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-

being of our present ethnoclass (i.e. western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioural autonomy of the *human species* itself/ourselves.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, the racially constructed idea of Man (and Mankind) is a reification of the “human species”: without reference to a non-racial idea of species-being, it would not even be possible to have such a critical conception of race.

The last objection posed by Morejón is a serious one, to which I do not have an immediate response. Does the so-called “global mass extinction event” put into question my belief that “trans-species living” is eternal? Of course, if one believes in “species” then one must recognize also the possibility of their “extinction.” But since my “trans-species” concept of life is not dependent on the idea of “species,” then there is a sense in which what I call “eternal life” has no necessary and internal relation to death or extinction (unlike the lives of finite living beings). For contemporary biology, death seems to come into the horizon of life only with sexuated reproduction and the distinction between germ cells (which do not die) and somatic cells (which die). Additionally, we already know that even extinct life forms can, in principle, undergo a process of “de-extinction.” Furthermore, it is increasingly likely that life is not only found on our planet, and, for that matter, I am sympathetic to the idea of an infinite number of parallel universes (as I discuss below in relation to Fenves’s response). In sum, these considerations lead me to suspect any construal of life starting from “mass extinction events” (i.e., any construal of biological life as inherently “precarious”). Rather, I would tend to see the current discourse on extinction as part and parcel of the general eschatological (“end of times”) construction of the environmental crisis, which deserves further critical scrutiny.

#### *Alessia Ricciardi:*

Ricciardi’s essay shows how one could read *The Republic of the Living* simply as a reception of Agamben’s philosophy. Indeed, the book addresses some aspect of Agamben’s thought in nearly every chapter. Thus Ricciardi’s acute comments allow me to express my debts to Agamben and offer me the opportunity to show the points where I perhaps depart from him. But Ricciardi’s essay also make explicit a recurrent issue that comes up with interpretations of Agamben, namely, the form and content of the politics that follows from his philosophy.

Ricciardi’s first question goes straight to the point: Is there really something like an Italian “school” or “theory” of biopolitics? Or are the “politics” of Negri, Agamben, and Esposito so divergent that one cannot group them together, as I seem to do. It is true, as she says, that this book in part proposes that Italian “biopolitics” privileges *zôê* over *bios*, against perhaps both the French and certainly the German schools of thinking about biopolitics. Additionally, I tend to think that

the three representatives of Italian biopolitics that I discuss or engage—Agamben, Esposito, and Negri—are themselves connected by a shared “communist” horizon. I think I may disagree with Ricciardi over Esposito: I read his project as being *com-munist* in the most literal sense, namely, because it repropose the centrality of the *munus*, of the common, over against its “immunitarian” control. Esposito’s thesis is simple: every society heretofore is based on the division of what is common, on the class-based appropriation and ex-propriation of what is common; this division is structured by an immunitary logic—essentially producing the categories of liberal political thought—which leads inevitably to contradictions. Esposito thinks of these contradictions, following Derrida, as consequences of auto-immunitary processes, that is, consequences of an excess of immunity and a deficiency in community. This kind of argumentation seems to me pretty Marxist. I do not think there is any question about Negri’s affiliation to the communist horizon. And in this book I try to show that Agamben also belongs to this horizon; indeed, I try to show him as a continuation and radicalization of motifs found in the first Frankfurt School, and in the complex exchange between Benjamin and Adorno.

I agree with Ricciardi and Negri that Agamben’s thought seems to have two sides: a Heideggerian side that is centrally concerned with the possibility and impossibility of ontology, and another side—she calls it Spinozist or Deleuzian; I would say: Benjaminian or Adornian—that appears to be more directly political. The power of Agamben’s philosophy, in my mind, is undoubtedly due to his attempt to hold together and make productive the antithesis between Heidegger and Benjamin. One may even get the impression that Benjamin serves Agamben as a sort of immunitary protection against a deep fascination with Heidegger. However, it seems to me that this tension between Heidegger and Benjamin had left Agamben somewhat “blocked” until he found a new way out, apparently through Foucault, but in reality by going back to Arendt and Schmitt: that is what led to the great leap forward of *Homo sacer* and the category of “bare life.” The latter concept, after all, comes from the Benjamin-Arendt side of things, not from Heidegger’s *Daseinsanalyse*. In another chapter of *The Republic of the Living*, which Ricciardi does not discuss, I try to demonstrate that Arendt’s notion of natality, as well as her prefiguration of “bare life” in her analysis of totalitarianism, also come from Benjamin, and are in no way reducible to Heidegger, as commentators like Benhabib or Villa have argued. Be that as it may, my feeling is that ever since taking a “political” turn crystallized in the *Homo sacer* series, Agamben has been trying to reformulate his “ontology” so that it would correspond to the advances in his political thought. The concluding volume to the *Homo sacer* series, entitled *L’uso dei corpi* (*The Use of Bodies*), which is discussed by Ricciardi, attests to this on-going and interminable conflict or tension between the ontological and the political in Agamben’s thought. I shall comment on this tension as it appears in

two central ideas of his thought: the category of inoperability (*inoperosità*) and the idea of a form-of-life.

Ricciardi offers a very plausible and interesting way to connect Agamben's concept to "bare life" as the "non-natural" product of political domination that separates life from form, with his more affirmative concept of form-of-life where there can be no separation of life from form, of *zôê* from *bios*. Ricciardi points out that Agamben is very careful not to "naturalize" his conception of life while at the same time he is also very careful not to "normativize" his notion of form. By way of contrast, I seem to be doing the opposite, by thinking of natality as a feature of life as *zôê* and at the same time by making natality the ground of normativity. The distinction between normality and normativity plays an important role in *The Republic of the Living*. I relate natality to the sphere of *zôê*; *bios* to the sphere of normality; and eternal life to the sphere of normativity. The difference between normality and normativity is drawn from Canguilhem: whereas normality is rule-following behaviour, normativity is associated with what Canguilhem calls "creativity"; I link it further with the idea of contemplative life. And the general project is to think "eternal life" as ultimately a way of joining natality to normativity, by-passing or relativizing normality.

I agree with Ricciardi that, in one sense, in Agamben "bare life" does not denote natural or animal life, but instead a highly artificial product due to the separation of *bios* from *zôê*, or "spirit" ("mind") from biological life. On the other hand, Agamben uses "bare life" as a "threshold" or limit concept which points with one face towards domination and with the other towards emancipation. I think this aspect comes out most clearly in *The Open*. The space of domination is ruled over by "the human"—considered as a product of what Adorno calls identity thinking—while the space of emancipation is disclosed once the "anthropological machine" that defines the "human" by cutting it off from the continuum of plant and animal life would no longer be operative. If this is so, then for Agamben an emancipated *bios* can only be conceived as a *form-of-life*, that is, as the form-of-*zôê*, or, in the words of Agamben that Ricciardi cites, "a life that . . . makes itself that very form." For me, Arendt's natality refers exactly to this possibility, that is, to the thinking of *bios* as a form-of-*zôê*.

But, can one say that this form-of-life offers a "normative foundation"? Ricciardi usefully points to *Highest Poverty* as the text in which Agamben treats this question in greatest detail. Again, I entirely agree with Ricciardi that in Agamben *form-of-life* precedes rule-following. My question, however, concerns the relation between form-of-life and what I call normativity, which is for me linked to a materialist conception of thinking life or "eternal life." By way of contrast, as I read *Highest Poverty*, Agamben tends to conceive of normativity through a kind of negative Christology where the messianic life is identified with the life of Jesus (which is not the same as the life of Christ). I am more in sympathy with medieval

Jewish and Islamic philosophical perspectives on this issue, namely, for me the messianic or eternal life must be impersonal, and must refer to the possibility of the salvation of all biological life: no individual life is “saved” unless species-life, Marx’s *Gattungswesen*, is saved. The belief in the possibility of an “individual” salvation (and a fortiori in an individual immortal soul) is not ultimately emancipatory. True enough, when thematizing these questions Agamben also cites Averroes and Dante, but it is not clear to me how consequent he is about Averroism and whether it is compatible with his (heretical) Christology.

Agamben’s “weak” Averroism is one place in his thought where one can see the oscillation between Heidegger and Benjamin, or between ontology and politics. Agamben often cites Aristotle and Heidegger to support his claim that the proper human life is one in which humankind realizes it has no “essence” to live up to, no “perfection” to attain, but that it has merely to live its “fact” of existing, its “bare” life. This is the idea of “inoperativity,” namely, the idea that human beings have no essential task or work to fulfil. If potentiality is higher than actuality for human beings, then the most important question becomes that of how to express this power-not-to-be in everything that they are. Here, in my opinion, Agamben tends to get caught up in an ontology of possibility, of Aristotelian provenance filtered through Heidegger, that undermines his other central belief, namely, that a truly “human” life, the real in-operative life, is just a political life. On this point I agree with him in principle, but it seems to me that he still owes a way to connect bare life, contemplative life, and political life. Other specialists of Agamben’s thought have recently dedicated book length studies to unravel the political implications of his category of potentiality, and I can do no better than refer the interested reader to these works.<sup>3</sup>

Does *The Use of Bodies* manage to bridge ontology with politics? One of the main parts of this book consists in a lengthy deconstruction of Aristotle’s discussion of slavery in the first book of the *Politics*. Here, Agamben’s negative ontology of inoperability finds its limit figure in the idea of the slave whose body is a function of the use that the master and his household make of it. Agamben’s thesis seems to be that, if humankind is recognized to have no inherent work or purpose, then it is impossible to occupy the space of masters, or mastery of any kind is entirely illegitimate, and we are all like slaves without masters, that is, our bodies are there to be made use of by others in a way that is non-dominating. To illustrate his intuition, Agamben proceeds to discuss Foucault’s well-known interpretations of S&M sexual practices, in which, on this reading, the “slave” in reality remains the paradoxical “master” of how his or her body is to be used by others.

This provocative reading of slavery and of the “use of bodies” is typical of Agamben’s way of proceeding: he chooses an extreme form of dominated life (“bare life” or “slavery”) in order to simultaneously expose the logic of mastery and domination and to indicate the line of flight or “threshold” that leads beyond



domination. I disagree somewhat with Ricciardi that Agamben simply has no concept of emancipation. In an early text he does write: “A political life, that is, a life directed toward the idea of happiness and cohesive with a form-of-life, is thinkable only starting from the emancipation from such a division [between “biological life” and “human life”], with the irrevocable exodus from any sovereignty.”<sup>4</sup> Perhaps one can speak of a limit-concept of emancipation in his thinking. In any case, it is an idea of emancipation that comes as a result of what could be called a nihilist methodology.

In order to conclude this response, and return to Ricciardi’s question of how Marxist Agamben really is, I wish to address the theory of commodity fetishism in Agamben because I think that the above limit-concept of emancipation derives from this theory of fetishism. I agree with Ricciardi that one of Agamben’s great innovations concerns the problematization of “use” in the context of the generalization of exchange-value. I will not get into whether Agamben, in so doing, is following Adorno, as I suggest, or whether he may not be closer to Negri’s belief that one can return to a separation of use from exchange. For Ricciardi the discussion of use in *The Use of Bodies* points to the latter solution. I am not sure about this, since, as I said above, his analysis of slavery seems to me much closer to the kind of “profanatory” (and sexual) articulation of fetishism that I discuss in the context of his other works.

One of Agamben’s most fruitful intuitions is having taken seriously Benjamin’s idea that in advanced capitalist societies there is a third source of value apart from use and exchange values, namely, exhibitionism, or exhibition value. One sees such value at work in the everyday phenomenon of posting “selfies” on social media to receive “likes.” Here is where I should have discussed Debord’s theses on the society of the spectacle—whose great importance for Agamben Ricciardi highlights—and she is right to point out that in my reading of Agamben I owe such a treatment of exhibition value, another term for which is “glory.” That remains a task to be undertaken. However, and this brings me back full circle, I think that exhibition value cannot be understood outside of a theory of repetition which is ultimately a theory of the eternal return. That is the path I take in this book, but I do not think it is a path that Agamben would follow, perhaps because he would find it difficult to reconcile the eternal return with his idea of messianic life.

Ricciardi argues that, ultimately, Agamben might be most political when he translates the idea of inoperativity in terms of the idea of “de-constituent power” and opposes it to Negri’s recovery of constituent power. Here she touches on an extremely important theme for contemporary political thought, but one which moves the discussion away from biopolitics and decisively back into the terrain of republicanism, which gave birth to the very idea of constituent power. My previous work on republicanism discusses at some length the late twentieth-century debate on constituent power as well as some of its early modern sources, and I

have argued that the republican idea of “power of the people” is improperly captured by the theory of constituent power unless it makes space for an anarchic construal of this power.<sup>5</sup> But I argued this because I followed both Arendt and one of my teachers, the late Reiner Schürmann, in thinking that republican freedom is essentially “no-rule,” and has thus a fundamental an-archic component. In *The Use of Bodies* Agamben critically engages this kind of anarchic political thought, but he does so through Paulinian and antinomian schemes, whereas I give this idea of freedom as no-rule a republican reading. But a fuller discussion of the issues at stake here would require moving well beyond the particular book under discussion and is thus best left for another occasion.

*Peter Fenves:*

Fenves engages with and deepens what are at times fleeting allusions in the last chapter of the book that seeks to understand the connection between cosmological and political speculations in Blanqui, Nietzsche, and Benjamin around the problem of the eternal return of the same. Fenves agrees that it is possible to give a cosmological reading of certain texts of Benjamin usually deemed to be “mystical” and “messianic,” in particular the crucial “Theologico-Political Fragment” with its evocation of two contrary forces acting in and on history (the profane and the messianic) that I hypothesised could have been inspired by Einstein’s introduction in the theory of general relativity of a repulsive force that matches the attractive force of gravity, thus keeping the universe “static,” and which received the name of the cosmological constant. As Fenves recounts, Einstein later rejected the constant when it was discovered that the universe was expanding, but more recent observations seem to indicate that the expansion of the universe is accelerating, which has brought back the idea of a repulsive force, and thus the question of the cosmological constant. In any case, Fenves’s own clarification of the possible Benjamin-Einstein connection opens up an entirely new avenue of research into Benjamin’s work, which I hope will be taken up by other Benjamin scholars.

As Fenves says, in this book I try to offer a counter-part to the concept of “bare life,” namely, what I call a materialist and atheist idea of “eternal life.” In so doing I take up gestures in this direction found in Benjamin and Agamben, and try to develop them by connecting eternal life to the cosmological interpretation of the eternal return. Before I address Fenves’s contribution to how best to understand the role played by Einstein’s contribution to cosmology in Benjamin’s texts, I think it may be useful to state briefly the considerations that led me to a cosmology of the eternal return in the first place.

In the chapter in question I argue that “eternal life” should become a crucial element for post-Marxist thought or “messianic” Marxism. Current post-Marxist thought, such as it is found in Agamben or Žižek or Badiou (making room for their

considerable differences), is centred on a Pauline idea of the messianic conception of history and of the messianic life, which is often equated with Benjamin's own messianic Marxism. In my opinion, this contemporary "messianic" post-Marxism lacks a scientific or materialist correlate, that is, a correlate that addresses the basic structures of the material universe as we have come to know them in the twentieth century. I try to offer a reading of Benjamin's Marxism in which this materialist correlate is present. The mathematics of set theory, as in Badiou, is for me insufficient, to the extent that cosmological models, like all physical models, are not reducible to mathematics (and vice versa).

One of the main differences between the conception of eternal life that I defend compared with the "Pauline" conception of "eternal life" is that for the latter, eternal life is always "futural," located in the "next world," understood as something that advenes "after" the "end" of history. This conception of eternal life fosters the belief in an empty, homogenous flow or irreversible "arrow" of time, as well as the belief in the ideal of progress. However, since these beliefs come under critical scrutiny both in Nietzsche and in Benjamin, I thought it best to find another, non-Christian conception of eternal life. On the conception of eternal life that I suggest, "eternal life" only refers to "this world," and its infinite and eternal repetitions. Thus, time is not oriented by past and future: the past is as eternal as the future, and everything that happens has happened an infinite amount of times and will continue to so happen. It follows that there is no "end" to history and there is no "future world"; linear time is an illusion, linked to our limited referential frame.

It continues to strike me as remarkable that some of these characteristics of "eternal life" as I understand it (and which are also found in some "pagan" philosophy, perhaps also in some variants of "eastern" philosophy, and, I would argue, in certain more philosophical interpretations of Judaism and Islam) reappear in some formulations of contemporary cosmology (I employ for shorthand the work of Brian Greene, easily accessible at [www.briangreene.org](http://www.briangreene.org)). Thus, I suggest that the materialist correlate to messianic Marxism is best approximated by the cosmology of parallel universes, which is compatible both with Einstein's theory of general relativity and with quantum mechanics.

However, the fundamental reason why I take seriously this cosmology is because it was taken seriously by Blanqui, the most famous revolutionary of the nineteenth century, with his cosmological hypothesis of the eternal return, then by Nietzsche, and Benjamin picks up on this hypothesis at the end of his life. In all three thinkers the cosmology of the eternal return seems to be linked to the idea that politics ought not to be guided by "other-worldly" ideals, which lead to a self-sacrificial conception of life, but rather by an ideal of this-worldly happiness which is somehow attainable despite this world not being the "intelligent design" of some God but rather being characterized by uncertainty, disorder, chance,

probability. So, in the first place, my venturing into cosmology is motivated by this question of what constitutes a life of happiness. In the second place, my interest in the cosmology of the eternal return was motivated by Benjamin's belief that somehow one needed to come to terms with the hypothesis of the eternal return if one wanted to grasp what was at stake in commodity fetishism, and thus ultimately to carry forward the Marxist critique of political economy.

Fenves brilliantly pursues the cosmological reading of the "Theologico-Political Fragment" by expanding on Benjamin's use of Eddington's "popularization" of Einstein's theory of general relativity. Fenves is right to point out that I am not a Benjamin specialist nor is the book intended to be a contribution to the philology of Benjamin's texts. However, there is one point of philology which Fenves leaves undecided, as does most extant Benjamin scholarship as far as I know, namely, the question as to the date of composition of the "Theologico-Political Fragment." Scholem, famously, dated this piece to Benjamin's "messianic" youth; Adorno, instead, gave it a very late date of composition, when Benjamin was already "Marxist." It seems to me that if Fenves is right about the extent of Benjamin's involvement with Eddington and Einstein, then this may bolster Adorno's hypothesis of a late composition of the "Fragment," since a later date would also mean that Benjamin could have kept up with the on-going debate on Einstein's cosmological constant in the 1920s and 1930s, and its implication for a "finite but unbounded" universe, which debate may have left traces in several expressions used in the "Fragment" as well as in the late *Theses on the Philosophy of History*.

As Fenves says, general relativity is intended to address the problem of "boundary conditions," for instance the question of where in space is the universe located, or what happened before the beginning of the universe. These questions can no longer be sensibly put once it is realized that "time can behave like another direction of space. . . . Space-time has no boundary."<sup>6</sup> Fenves suggests that ultimately the so-called "no-boundary condition" fits better with a non-static view of the universe, and thus one to which the predicate "eternal" cannot be applied. However, "finite" also means that velocity in any frame of reference is limited by the constant of the speed of light, and "unbounded" also means that there is no limit to the number of parallel universes. So, as far as I can tell, a "finite but unbounded" universe allows one to think that space-time can contract to the density needed for a Big Bang while remaining unbounded, that is, without our having to ask ourselves what there was "before" a Big Bang and what there will be "after" a universe "dies" (or attains equilibrium). But if this is the case, then the hypothesis of an eternal return of everything remains plausible, and plausible in the terms explained by Greene: "Finite energy within a cosmic horizon entails a finite number of particles. . . . Finite energy within a cosmic horizon also entails that each of these particles . . . has a finite number of distinct possible locations and speeds. Collectively, a finite number of particles, each of which can have finitely

many distinct positions and velocities, means that within any cosmic horizon only a finite number of different particle arrangements are available. . . . By the same reasoning, the limited number of particle arrangements ensures that with enough patches in the cosmic quilt—enough independent cosmic horizons—the particle arrangements, when compared from patch to patch, must somewhere repeat. . . . This means that if the universe is infinite in extent, you are not alone in whatever reaction you are now having to this view of reality. There are many perfect copies of you out there in the cosmos, feeling exactly the same way. And there's no way to say which is *really* you. All versions are physically and hence mentally identical. . . . And so every possible action, every choice you've made and every option you've discarded will be played out in one patch or another."<sup>7</sup>

One of the crucial points that Fenves raises in the context of his discussion of Nietzsche's eternal return concerns the role of the laws of thermodynamics, and in particular the role of the principle of entropy, not only in Eddington, Einstein and Benjamin, but in the more general question of the "unified field theory," that is, in the synthesis of general relativity and quantum mechanics pursued by contemporary cosmology. Entropy is the "axiom" that in any given physical system, the system will tend to increase in disorder due to wasted energy. As a cosmologist recently illustrated the principle to me, think about the seemingly inescapable fact that if one shakes a box containing on one side a set of red balls and on the other side a set of white balls, they will tend to mix randomly and will not return back to their original state of perfect separation. Put bluntly, if entropy is "the last word" in physics, then it may be argued that the pluriverse as such, and not just our universe, is destined to die, which would obviously pose a problem for an account of eternal life.

Is the principle of entropy referenced in the central idea of Benjamin's "Theologico-political Fragment," namely, the idea that happiness coincides with the "eternity of going-down" or "total and eternal going-away-ness" that according to Benjamin characterizes redeemed nature (messianic nature)? In his oral comments, Fenves raised the suggestion that with these expressions Benjamin may have been referring to Eddington's "arrow of time," to the purported "eternity" of irreversible and linear time, and ultimately to the axiom of entropy. In my reading of the "Fragment," I did not envisage this possibility. Rather, for me the "going-down" refers to the desire of everything individual to destroy itself *as unique or self-same*, in which "going-down" everything finds its happiness. The destruction of the illusion of uniqueness is brought about by the eternal return of the same. However, in my interpretation, this destruction of uniqueness does not mean the reduction of everything individual into nothingness. As I understand it, there is no space (literally) for "nothing" anymore, neither in quantum mechanics nor in general relativity nor in their unification.

One possibility is to understand this destruction of the individual in terms of what Einstein himself referred to as the key shift brought about by general relativity, namely, the shift from speaking of matter (which after all has always been considered a condition for individualization) to speaking of field (i.e., the transformability of all matter into energy, according to  $E=mc^2$ ).<sup>8</sup> As I understand it, entropy does not contradict the law of conservation of energy, but refers to the impossibility of keeping energy working in one physical system alone, that is, the impossibility of fixing for ever the forms taken by energy. So the “going down” does not mean the absolute annihilation of something, but its transformation into something else. What makes this transformation “eternal” is precisely what Benjamin calls the messianic dimension, and which I suggest ought to be understood in accordance with the cosmological hypothesis of the eternal return of everything in the infinity of parallel universes. On my interpretation of the “Theological-political Fragment,” Benjamin’s point is that happiness is neither found in *this* life that you think you are “living,” nor is it found in a “future life”: rather, it is found only in the *eternal repetition* of this life, and of its infinitesimal variations, also repeated eternally. The eternal *repetition* of the “downfall” is what *redeems* nature. Thus, the non- or counter-entropic idea of a *restitutio in integrum* (or return to the initial conditions) expressed in Benjamin’s “Fragment” would correspond in my account to the cosmological rhythm of bursts of repulsive gravity and the “condensation” of universes ruled over by gravity, an eternal alternation of creation and de-creation of universes. On this picture, entropy is an essential, but not the sole or overriding factor in this clumping and declumping of energy into material universes.

Is the hypothesis of eternal return compatible with quantum mechanics, and thus with the probabilistic turn in physics? I am far from having the competence necessary to properly discuss this question. However, the hypothesis of the eternal return could help to make sense of some of the most awkward, indeed unbelievable, consequences of the dual wave-particle nature of matter, and of the uncertainty principle, basic to quantum mechanics. The usual illustration given of the enormous distance between the classical and the quantum view of the world is the famous “two-slit” thought experiment in which particles are shot through two slits and appear at the end of their trajectory to be clumped together in a pattern that would result from the interference of waves. This experiment was given a famous interpretation by Feynman, which Davies paraphrases as follows: “somehow the electron explores all possible routes, and in the absence of an observation about which path is taken we must suppose that *all of these alternative paths somehow contribute to the reality*. So when an electron arrives at a point in space . . . *many different histories must be integrated together to create this event.*”<sup>9</sup> This integral is called the Feynman sum. One possible account for this amazing fact is that one and the same electron has indeed taken all these paths

in parallel universes to the one we observe, not just once but an infinite number of times, without us being able to determine which of these parallel universes it “actually” travelled.

Applied to the problem of human happiness from a Benjaminian perspective the uncertainty principle could mean several things, some of which were already implicit in Blanqui’s text on the eternal return. First, there is no reason to regret anything in life, since this or that which you did or did not do, has always already happened in a parallel universe, and some avatar of yourself is currently and forever living it. Thus, somewhere in the infinite multiverse, you are eternally living a happy life (or perhaps, it would be better to say, that the messianic or happy life is one value of the Feynman sum of all your parallel lives). Furthermore, because your life is eternally repeated, in all of its infinitesimal different variations, it is impossible to determine with certainty at the same time whether what you do at any given time belongs to “your present” life or to another parallel one. This is one possible explanation of the meaning of Benjamin’s thesis that every past event has a “secret meeting” with another, unpredictable event, in which it will find its meaning.

I conclude my response by taking up Fenves’s proviso with respect to the use of scientific popularizations, such as both he and I have been doing all along, namely, “proceed with caution.” I take it that he means that my use of scientific popularizations to bolster the “materialistic” conception of messianism, as opposed to the conception of messianism that simply adopts theologemes, may itself have something theological about it, insofar as “the theory of everything” does not manage to uncover what is ultimately “hidden” in and as nature. And, furthermore, for just this reason these cosmological theories can support more than just one political and philosophical theory. This seems to me to be a valid point, although I would perhaps phrase it differently. I would prefer to say that the conception of this-worldly, profane and political happiness that I try to delineate in *The Republic of the Living* may well require a kind of religion. The Romans thought that such a religion had three necessary articulations: a “natural,” a “civil,” and a “poetic” dimension. It seems to me that the proponents of “a theory of everything” who also engage in the work of popularizing such a theory are perhaps best described as contributing to this sense of religion, one in which a non-theistic conception of eternal life plays a prominent role.

Fenves suggests that it was a piece of good luck that I hit on Greene’s book and its defence of the eternal return hypothesis. He then refers to a recent masterpiece of the genre of scientific popularizations, namely, Hawking’s *Brief History of Time* as offering a different view of the universe, one in which the question of eternity and of eternal repetition would perhaps not figure so prominently. This may be so, but Fenves’s last question makes me wonder if we should perhaps not be more bold and hypothesize that the relation between scientific cosmology and (politi-

cal) philosophy is not a one-way street going from the former to the latter. So far Fenves and I have been speculating on whether Einstein or Heisenberg could have had some influence on certain formulations of Benjamin's, but if we read into the latest popularization of Hawking, one may be surprised to find a passage such as this: "The usual assumption in cosmology is that the universe has a single definite history. . . . But since we must take into account the Feynman sum over histories, the probability amplitude that the universe is now in a particular state is arrived at by adding up the contributions from all the histories that satisfy the no-boundary condition and end in the state in question. In cosmology, in other words, one shouldn't follow the history of the universe from the bottom up. . . . Instead, one should trace the histories from the top down, backwards from the present time. Some histories will be more probable than others . . . but there will be different histories for different possible states of the universe at the present time. . . . The histories that contribute to the Feynman sum don't have an independent existence, but depend on what is being measured. We create history by our observation, rather than history creating us."<sup>10</sup> I am not entirely sure I understand this passage, but I would be tempted to say that, in this instance, Hawking may be relying on a view of history that was also made possible by the critique of nineteenth-century historicism and found its highest expressions in Nietzsche's genealogy, in Benjamin's *apokatastasis*, and in Foucault's archaeology.

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## NOTES

1. Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 50–51. The opposition of "flesh" and "person" is operative in all of Esposito's work, from a very early stage.
2. Cited in *ibid.*, 137; emphasis mine
3. See Sergei Prozorov, *Agamben and Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014); Jessica Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption: The Political Thought of Giorgio Agamben* (New York: SUNY Press, 2014); and Matthew Abbott, *The Figure of This World: Agamben and the Question of Political Ontology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).
4. Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 8.
5. I refer the interested reader to "Machiavelli after Marx: The Self-Overcoming of Marxism in the Late Althusser," *Theory and Event* 7(4) (2004); and, more recently, "The



- Quarrel between Populism and Republicanism: Machiavelli and the Antinomies of Plebeian Politics” *Contemporary Political Theory* 11(3) (2012): 242–63.
6. Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design: New Answers to the Ultimate Questions of Life* (London: Bantam Press, 2010), 134–35.
  7. Brian Greene, *The Hidden Reality: Parallel Universes and the Deep Laws of the Cosmos* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 34.
  8. Albert Einstein and Leopold Infeld, *The Evolution of Physics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1938), 240–45.
  9. Paul Davies, “Introduction,” in Richard P. Feynman, *Six Easy Pieces* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), xvii. See also Hawking: “According to the quantum model, however, the particle is said to have no definite position during the time it is between the starting point and the endpoint. Feynman realized one does not have to interpret that to mean that particles take *no* path as they travel from source and screen. It could mean instead that particles take *every* possible path connecting those points . . . and [that] they take them simultaneously” (Hawking and Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, 75).
  10. Hawking and Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, 139–40.

