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Messianism and Happiness in Walter Benjamin's *Theological-Political Fragment*

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Abstract. On the basis of a citation from the final part of Walter Benjamin's *Theological-Political Fragment* (1920-21), we shall hypothesize a similarity between Benjamin and Kant, the political thinker and philosopher of history, in his *Idea of a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent*. According to Kant, the man who participates in history and in the human race seeks happiness and the means to procure it for himself as a member of «free» humanity, thus seeking to unify external freedom and happiness in institutions of law. During the period 1920-1921 Benjamin was strongly critical of the concept of law, including also that of Kant, which he saw as contradictory to the idea of justice; in opposition, Benjamin held first an anarchist-libertarian view, then a revolutionary one. From a dialectical perspective, however, we find in common in Benjamin and Kant a redemptive pessimism that foresees, in the «twisted wood» of mankind, an ultimate providential and messianic *possibility*: «The spiritual *restitutio in integrum*, that leads to immortality, correspond to a worldly restitution that leads to an eternity of downfall, and the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality», the eternal succession of generations and their institutions, which is «the rhythm of messianic nature», is happiness. Nature eternalizes itself in this virtual spatial and temporal totality in the history of humanity moving toward the realization of the idea of law and, spatially, the achievement of global, cosmopolitan politics: «nature is messianic by reason of its eternal and total caducity».

Keywords: Walter Benjamin, Immanuel Kant, History, Messianism, Happiness.

1. A FAILED PROJECT: THE DOCTORAL THESIS ON KANT AND HISTORY

The spiritual restitutio in integrum [...] corresponds to a worldly restitution that leads to an eternity of downfall, and the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality, the rhythm of messianic nature, is happiness. For nature is messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away.

To strive for such a passing away – even the passing away of those stages of man that are nature – is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism. (Benjamin [1920-1921]: 305-306)

On the basis of this citation from the final part of Walter Benjamin's *Theological-Political Fragment* (Benjamin [1920-1921]: 305-306), we shall hypothesize a similarity between Benjamin and Kant, the political thinker and philosopher of history, in his *Idea of a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent* (Kant [1784]: 9-23).

In 1917, the year he attended the University of Berna, Benjamin prepared an outline of a thesis on «Kant and History» (Benjamin [1910-1940]: 98; Benjamin to Scholem, 22.10.1917). In December of the same year he narrowed his theme with the title «The Concept of infinite task in Kant» (Ibid.: 103-104; Benjamin to Scholem, 7.12.1917), encompassing it within the more general question, «What does it mean to say that science is an infinite task?» (Ibid.: 105-107; Benjamin to Scholem, 23.12.1917). In the same period he wrote *On the Program of the Coming Philosophy* (Benjamin [1917-1918]: 100-110).

Even before elaborating his plan to take up Kant as a doctoral thesis, Benjamin planned and then put off the reading of Kant's work (probably the *Critique of Pure Reason*), because he wanted to accompany it with the reading of Hermann Cohen (possibly *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, which he would read in 1918) during his study of early Romanticism. The philosophy of early Romanticism enters into his thesis project due to the importance of its concepts of "religion" and "history", for its relation to the mystical and Kabbalistic tradition, and for its conception of messianism¹:

In one sense, whose profundity would first have to be made clear, romanticism seeks to accomplish for religion what Kant accomplished for theoretical subjects: to reveal its form. But does religion have a form? In any case, under history early romanticism imagined something analogous to this. (Benjamin [1910-1940]: 89; Benjamin to Scholem, 06.1917)

¹ On the messianism of early romanticism, see Benjamin's doctoral thesis, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (Benjamin [1919]: 116-200), and his letter to E. Schoen of 7.04.1919 in Benjamin (1910-1940): 139-140. On early romanticism's concepts of religion and history, see the June 1917 letter to Scholem (Ibid.: 87-89).

By tracing the steps of the early Romantics, Benjamin intends to explore the concepts of religion and history (in their union and coincidence in a superior sphere of thought and life), according to their theoretical form and systematic role, by employing Kant's method of critical inquiry, that is, the analytical process of proceeding from the conditioned to the conditions, a practice which Neo-Kantianism would name the transcendental method.

In *On the Program of the Coming Philosophy*, his project of revising and developing the Kantian system, religion would play a central role as the source of ideas and a site of the unity and totality of consciousness, while history (which must seek its concepts in a new transcendental logic) would stand at the base of the «becoming» of knowledge, a process tending toward the (messianic) fulfillment of «doctrine», a fully realized system of philosophy where religion and history would coincide (*Ibidem*).

In a letter dated October 22, 1917, Benjamin presents Scholem with a working project on Kant (although he has not yet begun the reading for it), which intends to explicate the relation between philosophy and history, theory of knowledge and philosophy of history, and which proposes to develop the Kantian system in new directions. He also writes, however, that the possibility of starting from this basis for his doctoral thesis depends on the results of his reading of Kant's works on history:

This winter I will begin to work on Kant and history. I do not know yet whether I will be able to find in the historical Kant the completely positive content required in this regard. Whether a doctoral dissertation will come out of this study in part depends on that. For I have not yet read the relevant works by Kant. (Ibid.: 98)

The theme of the work is made more specific in a December 7, 1917 letter to Scholem, in which Benjamin notifies his friend that he still can't send him an essay he is writing on Kant, *On the Program of a Coming Philosophy*, because it is still a draft; neither can he discuss Kant with Scholem (he still hasn't finished reading Kant's writings on

the philosophy of history), but he again promises a substantive advance in his knowledge and ability to thoroughly explain the epistemological questions he is working on in his partnership with Scholem:

it is necessary to begin by being concerned with the letter of Kantian philosophy. Kantian terminology is probably the only philosophical terminology that in its entirety did not only arise but was created. It is precisely the study of this terminology that leads to a realization of its extraordinary potency. In any case, it is possible to learn a lot by expanding and immanently defining the terminology as such. In this regard, I recently came upon a topic that might have something in it for me as a dissertation: the concept of the «infinite task in Kant» (what do you think?). (Ibid.: 103-104; transl. modif.)

Benjamin renders the theme of «the concept of infinite task in Kant» in parallel with the need (born in part from his reading of Scholem's letters about Kant) to carefully study the «terminology» and the «letter» of the Kantian system – which is to say its exact logical-linguistic substance, its definition of the field, and the possibility of applying its concepts and ideas so as to develop an immanent interpretation leading to a revision of Kant's epistemological and metaphysical thought. The problem is to interpret Kant from a new perspective, one which passes through Cohen's interpretation of the Kantian thing-in-itself and the role of ideas in the investigation of experience. Benjamin's goal is to surpass Cohen's interpretation in a direction that goes beyond exclusive reference of the transcendental method to the physical-mathematical science of nature.

Benjamin intends, in fact, to identify a new concept of knowledge and a new concept of experience which are founded on a religious vision of language and which develop in a messianic historical process aimed at resolving philosophy in a metaphysical-religious and linguistic dimension (characterized by a «magic of language»)² which

² See Scholem's observations on Kabbalah, mathematics and magic in language (Scholem [1995]: 403-404; annota-

he, together with Scholem, calls «doctrine», and which he identifies with the Pentateuch in the Torah. In the same letter, after asking Scholem's judgment of this project of his, he returns to the theme of the philosophy of history in relation to Kant (but only after having developed his own ideas on history does he think he may learn something decisive from Kant) and Torah:

under certain circumstances it is necessary to be a completely independent thinker when it comes to your own thought, above all when ultimate questions are at issue. In any case, there are certain questions, like those related to the philosophy of history, that are central for us, but about which we can learn something decisive from Kant only after we have posed them anew for ourselves. [...] No doubt, we can have a real exchange of ideas about the Torah and the history of philosophy only when we are together again. (Ibid.: 104; Benjamin to G. Scholem, 7.12.1917)

Benjamin positions the «letter» of Kant in relation to a concept of the philosophy of history which he will not find in Kant, but which is linked, in his and Scholem's thought, to the Judaic conception of the interpretation of the sacred text and the messianic idea of justice³. This involves all philosophy, including the theory of knowledge (but all philosophy seems included in this knowledge, as «pure knowledge»)⁴, in a process-oriented vision of the task of philosophy toward a redemptive and messianic «resolution» (*Auflösung*) in the doctrine as a metaphysical realm, founded on the

tions, 11.10.1916). There is a link between the mathematical theory of truth and the internal form of the Hebrew language: in both, pure spiritual form is central, respectively mathematical structure and linguistic structure, while empirical or signifiatory contents are not fundamental (see Tagliacozzo [2016]: 79-108).

³ See the note of October 11, 1916 in Scholem (1995): 404, where the idea of justice in Judaism is seen as a historical-messianic category that leads Judaism itself to conquer, in the Torah, the mythical and magical dimension. See also Desideri (1995).

⁴ See Benjamin (1917-1918): 108: «All philosophy is thus theory of knowledge, but just that – a theory, critical and dogmatic, of all knowledge».

theological language of revelation (see Benjamin [1916]: 62-74; see also Ponzi [2016]: 185-198), of the conceptual, ideal, mathematical, and ethical orders whose center is God, and which coincides with the Torah (which in Hebrew means doctrine, teaching).

The term “doctrine” (*Lehre*) is strictly connected, in that period, to Benjamin’s concepts of tradition and teaching⁵: doctrine presents itself as the spiritual and ethical “linguistic” content (for this reason the Torah is also called “The Law”) which is passed on and developed in teaching. For Benjamin, the order of teaching «completely coincides with the religious order of tradition», and to educate «is only (in spirit) to enrich doctrine» (Benjamin [1910-1940]: 94; Benjamin to Scholem, 6.9.1917)⁶. It develops in a historical-messianic process directed toward its fulfillment as justice

⁵ This concerns the Judaic tradition of Kabbalah as taken up and reinterpreted (in the wake of Böhme) by Christian philosophers Molitor and Baader, who, Benjamin says, certainly influenced Schelling (see Benjamin [1910-1940]: 88). The title of Franz Joseph Molitor’s most important work, in fact, refers specifically to the philosophy of history as tradition; that is, as Scripture, its interpretation (especially Kabbalistic), and transmission: *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition in dem alten Bunden und ihre Beziehung zur Kirche des Neuen Bundes mit vorzüglicher Rücksicht auf die Kabbala* (Molitor [1827-1855]). Scholem also references his reading of this text in a letter to Siegfried Lehmann dated October, 1916, in which he explains his perception of the relation between Judaism and religion, the tradition of the Torah, and the magic of the language in the Hebrew text (Scholem [1994]: 47-48; letter 17): «[the concept of God] is the concept and reality of the Torah, this is the Hebrew concept of doctrine (*Lehre*), it is the Hebrew concept of “tradition”, incredibly profound and true, and which we achieve in reality. [...] The Torah – according to the mystics – will be perfect in the days of the Messiah».

⁶ See *Ibidem* the entire passage: «In the tradition, everyone is an educator and everyone needs to be educated and everything is education. These relations are symbolized and synthesized in the development of the doctrine (*Entwicklung der Lehre*)». Doctrine, and the philosophy it contains, is conceived by Benjamin with a theological vision of language, in which language originates from the divine word that creates the world and of which the Torah is made.

(as the presence of God in the world, Shekinah)⁷. With their just actions, the just help to usher in Shekinah, the justice of God, and the coming of the Messiah. But can actions be just in the profane realm, in free humanity’s search for happiness? This question brings us again to the relationship between morality, justice, and happiness in Kant, and to the relation between Benjamin and Kant’s texts on history.

On December 23, 1917, Benjamin writes to Scholem of his disappointed expectations after reading *Idea of a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent* and *On Perpetual Peace* (Benjamin lists the review of Herder along with the two readings) (see Tagliacozzo [2003]: 319-320):

As far as Kant’s history of philosophy is concerned, my exaggerated expectations have met with disappointment as a result of having read both of the main works that deal specifically with this (Ideas for a Universal History [Ideen zu einer Geschichte] and Perpetual Peace [Zum ewigen Frieden]). This is unpleasant for me, especially in view of my plans for a disser-

⁷ See Scholem (1995): 411 (annotation 27.10.1916): «Now I know that even the most arid “juridical” discussion in the Talmud is a religious issue – to put it simply: Since Judaism wants justice and the Talmud does not contain a doctrine of law, but a doctrine of justice». On justice as a preparation for the coming of the Messiah and sign of the presence of God in the world (*Shekhinah*) see a November 16, 1916 note, *Ibid.*: 419: «The essence of the Jewish idea (*Vorstellung*) of justice (*Gerechtigkeit*), as “an effort to make the world into the highest good (*höchstes Gut*)”, as Benjamin has written [see *Ibid.*: 401], is deeply revealed in the *extremely* untranslatable words of the sage which Hirsch transmits on *Gen.* 24, 1 [see Hirsch (1889): 319]: [...] *the just will prepare (for the arrival of the) Shekhinah on Earth* [...]: the just prepare the Earth [to make it into] [...] a divine place, to drag the Shekhinah down. [...] the essence of the Shekhinah is justice. And therefore the increase in justice is in fact only the increase in the revelation of justice, the true growth of divine power on Earth, of Shekhinah; thus justice is the maximum revelation of God and its maximum veneration. The *just* summon the Messiah, no one else. Shekhinah is often translated as “Splendor of God”; fine, this is the [...] (*zedaka*, *justice*), justice is in truth a reflection of God. One can love without God, but one cannot be just without God».

tation topic, but in these two works by Kant I find no essential connection at all to works on the philosophy of history with which we are most familiar. Actually, I can perceive only a purely critical attitude toward them. Kant is less concerned with history than with certain historical constellations of ethical interest. And what's more, it is precisely the ethical side of history that is represented as inadequate for special consideration, and the postulate of a scientific mode of observation and method is posited (introduction to *Ideas for a Universal History*). I would be very interested in knowing whether you have a different opinion. I find Kant's thoughts entirely inappropriate as the starting point for, or as the actual subject of, an independent treatise. (Benjamin [1910-1940]: 105; Benjamin to Scholem, 23.12.1917)

These words of Benjamin's reveal to us the degree to which he mistook Kant's intentions, that in the search for a law of history he did not seek a new natural law, but, rather, a «connecting thread» that would be theological and ideal (precisely an «idea of universal history») rather than mechanical. But he could find no similarity in Kant with the Judaic and messianic viewpoint he shared with Scholem.

2. LAW AND JUSTICE

That Benjamin, having already read some Kant (*Foundations of a Metaphysics of Morals*, the *Critique of Judgment*, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, at least in part), was already reflecting on these themes of law⁸ and justice is revealed by a note in Scholem's diary that copies from one of Benjamin's notebooks a text entitled *Notes for a work on the category of Justice*. We may repeat here, then, the question posed at the outset of this discussion: in a free humanity's search for happiness, can actions be just within the realm of the profane? The answer comes to us from the above-mentioned text of 1916:

*From the notebook loaned me by Walter Benjamin.
Notes for a work on the category of Justice.*

⁸ We translate with the term "law" the German term *Recht* with the English term "law".

To every good, as limited by the spatio-temporal order, inheres the character of possession (*Besitzcharakter*) as an expression of its passing-away (*Vergänglichkeit*). Possession, however, as a prisoner of that very finitude, is always unjust. Therefore, no order of possession (*Besitzordnung*), no matter how ordered, can lead to justice (*Gerechtigkeit*).

On the contrary, this resides in the condition of a good which cannot be a possession [...].

Justice is the effort to make the world into the highest good (*höchstes Gut*).

The reflections here pointed out lead to the hypothesis: Justice is not a virtue alongside other virtues [...], rather, it establishes a new ethical category [...]. Justice does not appear to refer to the good will of the subject; rather it establishes a new state (*Zustand*) of the world: justice designates the ethical category of the existent (*des Existenten*), while virtue designates the ethical category of that which is needed (*des Geforderten*). One may require virtue, while justice ultimately can only exist as a state of the world and a state of God. In God, all virtues have the form of justice. [...]

Justice is the ethical face of the struggle; justice is the power of virtue and the virtue of power. The responsibility we have toward the world reveals itself as such in the demand for justice. [...] [It is] the demand for justice, for the just state of the world. The single empirical act relates to moral law somehow as an (ineluctable) fulfillment of the formal schema. Law, on the other hand, relates to justice as the schema does to its fulfillment. Other languages have pointed out the immense gap that opens up between law and justice in their essence. *Ius fas themis dike mishpat zedek*. (Scholem [1995]: 401-402; my transl.)

Justice is one of the elements of Messianism, and in Judaism is both *mishpat* (law applied rigorously) and *zedek* (mercy, charity). According to Scholem, the concept of justice as *zedek* or *zedakà* also comes to Benjamin from his reading of Achad Ha-ham. Benjamin divides the two terms and considers Messianic justice exclusively as *zedek*, relegating law to the realm of the mythical and contingent, of violence and destiny, but as such and because of this, it is the place where free humanity must be able to strive for happiness. The arrow of Messianic intensity and justice which we

find in the *Theological-Political Fragment*, directs in a certain way the arrow of law, despite the fact that these two arrows point in opposite directions. Posed as a question, we ask, does free humanity's search for happiness within the institutions of law favor the coming of the messianic Kingdom? In the meantime, in 1918 Benjamin will read the *Critique of Practical Reason*, while in his 1921-1922 essay *Goethe's Elective Affinities* we find a citation of Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* (see Benjamin [1892-1940]: VII/1, 441; Benjamin [1922]: 300).

3. THE THEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL FRAGMENT: MESSIANIC NATURE AND HAPPINESS

The first question posed to us in the *Theological-Political Fragment* is who is the Messiah?⁹ What is the relation between the profane order and the messianic order? And, we might add, in what sense can nature be messianic? What does Benjamin mean by «profane order»? In what sense does he mean, «the profane order of the profane can favor the coming of the Messianic Kingdom» and «To strive for this [the eternal and total caducity of nature] [...] is the task of world politics» (Benjamin [1920-1921]: 305-306; transl. mod.)?

I would like to show how the profane order characterized by an internal and total caducity («the rhythm of messianic nature») (Ibid.: 306) here interprets and reflects the Kantian conception of the humankind, eternally contingent in the succession of its generations, as subject of history and politics, on the path toward the realization of the idea of law, in institutions, as the perfect republic. In Benjamin, the generations follow the rhythm of messianic nature, happiness (conceived also as fortune); that contingent dimension bound to the needs of man, which politics and history must also take into account.

In Kant, happiness, a (secondary) element of the Highest Good, is acquired by a humanity that

has made itself worthy by pursuing the realization of moral law and the idea of law in institutions (see Scuccimarra [1977])¹⁰. Kant identifies law as the setting of external liberty, which must permit all to seek their own happiness:

No one can constrain me to be happy in their way (in a way which another considers to be for the benefit of other men); rather, each must be able to see his happiness according to the path they prefer, as long as they do not intrude on the freedom of others to follow an analogous goal, a freedom which may be in concord with the liberty of each person (or with the rights of the other) according to a possible universal law. (Kant [1793]: 290; my transl.).

The union between moral law and happiness allows for justice. In the first *Critique*, Kant writes, «Happiness, therefore – in exact proportion to the morality of rational beings, which renders them worthy of happiness – constitutes on its own the highest good in a world in which we must take our place on the basis of reason – practically applied» (Kant [1787]: 683, B 842-A 814; my transl.).

Thus it is equally necessary to admit on the basis of the reasoning – applied theoretically – that each person has a right to aspire to happiness in the same degree to which he has made himself worthy of it through his conduct, and thus the system of morality is indissolubly joined – only, however, in the idea of pure reason – with that of happiness. (Ibid.: 680, B 837-A 809; my transl.)

In paragraph 87 of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant writes:

¹⁰ See also Fabio Minazzi (2003): 68: «In this comprehensive framework one can better understand, then, how for Kant the very right of happiness for each individual citizen pertains exclusively to that individual, but pertains precisely in his specific quality as member of a civil society and in his quality as a man, that is his quality of “being capable in general of law”. For Kant happiness and freedom thus represent two sides of the same coin, to the point that from his perspective it is never possible to consider only one component of the problem, neglecting its direct and constitutive connection with the other aspect» (my transl.).

⁹ On the presence of Spinoza and his *Theological-Political Treatise* in the essay's title (given successively by Adorno) and on Benjamin's reflections during 1920-1921, see Palma (2019): 221-238.

The moral law as the formal rational condition of the use of our freedom obliges us by itself alone, without depending on any purpose as material condition; but it nevertheless determines for us, and indeed a priori, a final purpose towards which it obliges us to strive, and this purpose is the highest good in the world possible through freedom.

The subjective condition under which man (and, according to all our concepts, every rational finite being) can set a final purpose for himself under the above law is happiness. Consequently, the highest physical good possible in the world, to be furthered as a final purpose as far as in us lies, is happiness, under the objective condition of the harmony of man with the law of morality as worthiness to be happy.

But it is impossible for us in accordance with all our rational faculties to represent these two requirements of the final purpose proposed to us by the moral law, as connected by merely natural causes, and yet as conformable to the Idea of that final purpose.

[...] Consequently we must assume a moral World-Cause (an Author of the world) in order to set before ourselves a final purpose consistent with the moral law; and in so far as the latter is necessary, so far (i.e. the same degree and on the same ground) the former also must be necessarily assumed; i.e. we must admit that there is a God. (Kant [1790]: 380-381)

The unity of moral law and happiness, which is beyond of power of the moral, natural man because he cannot entirely dominate nature, is guaranteed in Kant by the postulate of the existence of God as the moral cause and author of the world. Thus transcendence, represented in Benjamin as the Messiah, presents itself as the sole power able to create the relation between the profane and the messianic, between happiness and morality, in the guise of justice: «Only the Messiah in person complete each historical occurrence in the sense that he alone redeems, creates its relation to the messianic itself. For this reason, nothing that is historical can relate itself, from its own ground, to the Messianic». But since the profane is erected on the idea of happiness, and since the relation between the profane order and the messianic order is «one of the essential teachings of the philosophy of history», «free humanity's

search for happiness» favors «the advent of the messianic Kingdom». «For in happiness all that is earthly seeks its downfall, and only in happiness is it determined to find its downfall» (Benjamin [1920-1921]: 305-306; transl. mod.). Contingency, death, and happiness are inseparable. Seeking happiness does not bring about, but favors, the advent of the Kingdom indirectly, as the «profane order of the Profane», the profane elevated to a power. Thus the necessity emerges in the profane order to elaborate a law which, however «mythical» and unredeemed, may, within «world politics, whose method must be called nihilism» (Ibid.: 306), favor the advent of the Kingdom, in the history of a humanity which presents itself as eternal in the succession of its generations, notwithstanding the fact that the individual is contingent and mortal. Precisely by defining itself in terms of the contingency and fragility of the human, in seeking to recuperate that which is always lost in the process of passing away (*Vergehen*)¹¹, in its sobriety, can the political be messianic and redemptive.

On the other hand, the moral man, the single, internal man, has within himself a messianic intensity which «passes through unhappiness, in the sense of suffering» (Ibid.: 305; transl. mod.) in a spiritual *restitutio in integrum* which introduces him to the immortality of the soul. This is the tragic man of Benjamin and the moral man of Kant, given direction by internal freedom (purity of intention). Set against the collectivity of humankind, the individual in Benjamin presents himself as a moral subject, alone and unhappy, characterized by an immortal soul in which messianic intensity is expressed in a present, fulfilled eternity, the virtual realization of the Kantian moral law united with beatitude in *post mortem* eternity.

According to Kant, the man who participates in history and in the humankind seeks happiness and the means to procure it for himself as a

¹¹ One cannot help thinking of Benjamin's reading of Hölderlin, the subject of a study by Benjamin in 1914-1915, in particular Hölderlin's text *Das Werden in Vergehen* (Hölderlin [1794]: 641-646). See Pelilli (2019): 153-168.

member of «free» humanity, thus seeking to unify external freedom and happiness in institutions of law. During the period 1920-1921 Benjamin was strongly critical of the concept of law, including also that of Kant, which he saw as contradictory to the idea of justice; in opposition, Benjamin held first an anarchist-libertarian view, then a revolutionary one. From a dialectical perspective, however, we find in common in Benjamin and Kant a redemptive pessimism that foresees, in the «twisted wood» of mankind, an ultimate providential and messianic *possibility*: «The spiritual *restitutio in integrum*, that leads to immortality, correspond to a worldly restitution that leads to an eternity of downfall, and the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality», the eternal succession of generations and their institutions, which is «the rhythm of messianic nature», is happiness. Nature eternalizes itself in this virtual spatial and temporal totality in the history of humanity moving toward the realization of the idea of law and, spatially, the achievement of global, cosmopolitan politics: «nature is messianic by reason of its eternal and total caducity» (Ibid.: 306).

In Kant, in *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*, the goal of nature and history, is a «universal *cosmopolitan condition*, as the womb in which all the original dispositions of the human species will be developed» (Kant [1784]: 20-21). The idea of law will be realized in the coming together at the limit (from an eternal perspective) of the idea with all its historical realizations in the realm of law itself. Humankind is «immortal» but composed of «rational beings who all die» (Ibid.: 13).

If free humanity achieves happiness in the profane order, justice also is realized, the highest good, the redeemed state of the world; together with peace, justice is one of the dimensions of the messianic era. And vice-versa, without a full realization of the profanity of the profane, the messianic cannot come about. Without the historical succession of the generations of humankind in its search for happiness, in all its contingency and

perishability, moving toward the realization of cosmopolitan institutions that guarantee external freedom and happiness, there can be no justice, and thus no messianic state (*Zustand*):

Free humanity's search for happiness tends to diverge from that messianic trajectory [...]. The rhythm of messianic nature is happiness. For nature is messianic by reason of his eternal and total caducity. To strive for such a caducity, even for those states of mankind that are nature, is the task of worldly politics, whose method must be called nihilism. (Benjamin [1920-21]: 306; transl. mod.)

The method of world or worldly politics, *Welt-politik*, must present itself as the degree zero of the political, at the point where the political and the moral meet; not as the means of achieving an ultimate goal, but rather as a teleology free of any ultimate goal. In Benjamin the ethical, political and «historical task» pertaining to the conscious subject and collective agent (in the *Theses* of 1940 the generations, the oppressed masses; see Benjamin [1940]: 389-400) is founded on the autonomy of Kantian reason and on a conception of time that is not empty and mechanical, but that is full, intensive, and redemptive. This latter is the time of the Bible and prophecy, where historical contingency and the eternity of the idea coincide and mirror one another, as in the idea of happiness and sunset referred to in Benjamin's *Theological-Political Fragment*. The infinity of the *new* cognitive, ethical, and political task is intensive and comes to fruition in *actuality*, in which the concept of historical consciousness redeems the past and provides instruction for praxis. The relation between past and present is given in the dialectical image, in the concept of history, in a messianic interruption of the course of history. This owes to the Jewish doctrine of the Kabbalah, to Kant and to Marx (see Khatib [2014]). This owes also a great deal to Hermann Cohen's neo-kantian and Judaic-messianic conception of ethics and his concept of temporality and eternity, his concepts of sanctity, humanity, justice and peace bound to history, and to his ethical anti-ontologism and anti-eschatologism – even granted Benjamin's inversion of Cohen's idea of ethics

bound to the future in the actuality of remembrance and the political interruption of the course of history (see Desideri [2005], [2015], [2016]; see also Tagliacozzo [2020]).

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