



Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory

ISSN 1530-5228

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**TYPE: Article**

**Title:** Bare Life and Divine Violence: Benjamin, Levinas, and Ethics of Interruption

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**Source:** Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory (JCRT)

**Published by:** Whitestone Publications

**Stable URL:** <https://jcrt.org/archives/25.2/alikhani/>

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**WHITESTONE PUBLICATIONS**

Publisher of the Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory (JCRT)

JCRT | [jcrt.org](https://jcrt.org) | ISSN 1530-5228

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BARE LIFE AND DIVINE VIOLENCE: BENJAMIN, LEVINAS, AND ETHICS OF  
INTERRUPTION

*Author Biography*

Diako Alikhani received his PhD from the University of Denver. His work is grounded in continental philosophy, phenomenology, ethics, and political theology, with a particular focus on Emmanuel Levinas. His research examines hospitality, migration, otherness, and the formation of the self through responsibility to the stranger and the Other. He is especially interested in how political, religious, and philosophical traditions illuminate questions of subjectivity, responsibility, otherness, and politics. His recent work explores the relation between law, violence, and the formation of subjects under conditions of political crisis.

*Abstract*

This article rereads Walter Benjamin's *Toward the Critique of Violence* through the category of "bare life," placing Benjamin in conversation with Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of responsibility for the Other. It argues that bare life is the site at which mythic and divine violence confront one another: mythic-legal violence founds law, produces guilt, and reduces persons to lives administered under threat, while divine violence interrupts this reduction without founding a new legal order that operates through violence. The issue, therefore, is not only the structure of law or political violence, but the production of subjectivity itself: whether the human person is reduced to bare survival or opened toward a fuller life beyond guilt, administration, and mere preservation. This article first reconstructs Benjamin's distinction between law-making, law-preserving, mythic, and divine violence. It then examines the major interpretive divide between nonviolent readings, represented by Simon Critchley and Judith Butler, and more ruptural readings, represented by Slavoj Žižek and Alison Ross. Against both a pacifying domestication of divine violence and a romantic authorization of counterviolence, the article proposes Levinas's face, the commandment "thou shall not kill," and the third as an ethical optic for political judgement. Levinas does not remove the ambiguity of Benjamin's divine violence, nor does he provide a formula for action; he keeps interruption answerable to the concrete Other whose life is at stake. The conclusion turns to the Iranian situation to show how Benjamin's suspicion of law and Levinas's ethics of responsibility together sharpen the question of how to resist tyranny without turning the oppressed into instruments of another power.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin; Bare life; Divine Violence; Mythic Violence; Emmanuel Levinas; Interruption; Ethics; Politics

*Introduction*

Questions about violence become unavoidable, especially in light of the recent American and Israeli war with Iran, wherever law presents itself as protection while functioning as domination. In such situations, the ordinary distinction between lawful force and unlawful

violence begins to tremble. Can force ever interrupt tyranny without reproducing the very logic it opposes? Can liberation pass through violence without becoming another form of domination? And what happens when a legal or political order, for example the Iranian regime and its practices for the past 47 years, claims to preserve life while reducing persons to survival, obedience, and exposure to punishment? These questions stand at the center of Walter Benjamin's "Toward the Critique of Violence,"<sup>1</sup> a text that remains difficult precisely because it refuses to let law define in advance what counts as violence, justice, or legitimate resistance.

Benjamin dismantles the inherent relationship between law and violence. He does not present law as a solution to violence but shows the reality that law is founded on violence and is preserved through violence. Law may protect, but it may also threaten; it may punish, but it may also produce guilt; it may claim to preserve life, but by doing so, it reduces life to what Benjamin calls *bloßes Leben*<sup>2</sup> (bare life). This article takes "bare life" as the central category through which Benjamin's account of divine violence should be interpreted. Although the phrase "bare life" appears relatively late in Benjamin's essay, I read it as a retrospective key that illuminates the logic already at work throughout the essay: law's reduction of living persons to guilty, exposed, and administrable life. By bare life, I do not mean mere biological existence or bodily vulnerability as such. I mean life captured by law's power: life preserved, threatened, judged, punished, or sacrificed while being deprived of freedom, alterity, ethical agency, and political significance.

To call bare life the site of confrontation is not to treat it as a neutral location. Bare life is produced. It is the subject as mythic law makes it: exposed, guilty, administrable, preserved only as life under threat. Mythic violence is therefore not only a socio-political structure but a mode of subject-formation. It creates the subject who can be judged, punished, sacrificed, pardoned, or kept alive in the name of the order that administers her. Divine violence matters because it interrupts precisely this production. Its aim is not to replace one violent legal order with another, but to release life from the mythic bond between guilt, law, and mere preservation. The confrontation between mythic and divine violence therefore takes place at the level of the living subject: whether life remains captured as disposable life under law or is opened beyond guilt, administration, and survival.

Levinas is crucial because his ethics gives language for a subject beyond bare life. The face of the Other interrupts my power before I can reduce the Other to a concept, a function, or an object within my world. The commandment "thou shall not kill" does not function as a formula that settles every political decision in advance. It is an ethical optic through which politics must be judged. The face interrupts both the sovereignty of the state and the sovereignty of the revolutionary subject. Thus Levinas does not make Benjamin safe; he makes Benjamin's dangerous ambiguity answerable to the concrete Other whose life is at stake.

Rather than asking where Benjamin permits violence or forbids it, the paper asks what kind of life and what kind of subject are produced by mythical law and what kind of interruption could release life from that reduction. The alternative is not simply violence or nonviolence, law or lawlessness. The deeper alternative is between bare survival and fuller life: Between the subject captured by guilt, administration, and fear, and the subject opened by responsibility, alterity, and the possibility of life beyond mere preservation.

1. Walter Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence: A Critical Edition*, ed. Peter Fenves and Julia Ng (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021).

2. *Bloß* in German has more of a naked or bare meaning and thus, in disagreement with the English translation and in line with Agamben's concept, I prefer using bare life instead of "mere life." Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

The argument of this paper proceeds in five steps. First, it explicates divine violence and the mythic violence in Benjamin and the distinction between lawmaking and law-preserving violence, emphasizing the production of bare life through law, threat, and guilt. Second, it examines several major interpretations of divine violence, especially the nonviolent readings of Simon Critchley and Judith Butler, the more rupture-oriented reading of Slavoj Žižek, and Alison Ross's insistence that divine violence must be read against mythic violence. Third, it argues that bare life is the central category for understanding why mythic violence operates through guilt, blood, sacrifice, and legal administration of the living. Fourth, it brings Levinas into the argument as an ethical supplement and correction: the face of the Other, the Third, justice, and ethics as an optic for politics provide a guideline that keeps divine violence from becoming a human claim to divine authorization. Finally, it contextualizes the argument through the Iranian situation, where the state's claims to preserve order implement the reduction of subjects to bare life and raise the urgent question of responsibility toward those held under explicit mythic violence.

### *Divine violence and mythic violence*

Right at the outset, Benjamin defines the task of his project as an inquiry into the relation of violence to law and justice, noting: "The task of a critique of violence may be described as the presentation of its relation to law and justice. For however effective a cause may be, it becomes violence in the impressive sense of the word only when it intervenes in moral [*sittliche*] relations."<sup>3</sup> Violence matters, Benjamin insists, not only because it injures bodies or destroys property, but because it intervenes in the sphere of ethical, social, and political relations and thereby shapes the lives that law claims to govern. It is therefore inadequate to ask only whether a particular act of violence serves a just or unjust end. That question already assumes the means-end framework Benjamin wants to unsettle. If law itself authorizes some means while prohibiting others, then law cannot be the neutral judge of violence. A critique of violence must examine the legal order that claims the power over violence and the kind of subject that order produces.

This is why Benjamin distinguishes "law-making violence" and "law-preserving violence."<sup>4</sup> The former is a violence that creates or transforms a new legal order: revolution, conquest, or war can become founding acts when their victory is translated into borders, constitutions, and institutions; the latter is violence that maintains the existing order or the order that has been founded: police, courts, prisons, and administrative procedures, and the continuing threat of punishment keep the law in force. These two forms of violence are not accidental distortions. They reveal law's historical structure and the subject-position produced within it. Law is born from force and continues to live by force, even when that force becomes bureaucratic, procedural, and ordinary.

The power of law is therefore not exhausted by spectacular acts of punishment. Law also rules through threat. The threat of law hangs over life like fate, not because punishment is always immediate, but because the subject is never fully outside the law's reach. The death penalty is Benjamin's clearest example because it displays law's claim to power over life and death. Yet the same structure is present whenever law claims the right to decide what forms of life may be protected, exposed, disciplined, or sacrificed. Law presents itself as order, but its order is sustained by the possibility of coercion.

3. Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence*, 39.

4. Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence*, 39.

From the discussion of the law-positing violence and the law-preserving violence, Benjamin then juxtaposes mythic violence and divine violence. Mythic violence is the violence that founds law by establishing power, guilt, and boundaries. Referring to the myth of Niobe and the killing of her children by Leto's children, Apollo and Artemis, Benjamin shows how the gods do not simply punish a wrongdoing. They display the boundary between gods and human power by defeating the subject who has crossed it. This kind of violence does not erase guilt; it produces and preserves it and is thereby inherently connected to legal violence. Law-founding violence does not create justice; it creates a structure of power and calls it law. "The positing of law is the positing of power, and, in this respect, an act [Akt] of an immediate manifestation of violence. Justice is the principle of all divine end-positing, power the principle of all mythic law-positing."<sup>5</sup> Mythic violence is thus a production of subjectivity: it makes the human person appear before law as guilty, exposed, and available to power.

Divine violence is introduced as the interruption of this mythic production: "Just as God is opposed to myth in all spheres, so divine violence runs counter to mythic violence."<sup>6</sup> If mythic violence works through blood, sacrifice, boundary, and threat, divine violence breaks the cycle of law-making and law-preserving violence without founding a new legal order that repeats the same logic. Benjamin contrasts the punishment of the sons of Korah in the Bible with the myth of Niobe. Niobe's story displays the production of guilt and the foundation of power; Korah's destruction appears without warning and without founding a new legal order. The punishment of Korah falls on a privileged group, not on the weak or marginal. It has a messianic nature, for it strikes "unannounced."<sup>7</sup> It comes from elsewhere and without warning. Divine violence, in this sense, does not become law. It interrupts the logic through which law secures itself.

The language here is difficult because Benjamin refuses to make divine violence available as a human possession. It cannot be calculated within the law or sanctioned by a victor. Benjamin's language of bloodlessness is important for this reason. Blood represents bare life as the object of law's power. Mythic violence is bloody because it binds life to guilt and sacrifice; divine violence is bloodless because it breaks the logic through which life becomes bare life before the law. Law exercises power over human beings as bare living for the sake of maintaining its force. Divine violence, by contrast, acts on life as a whole, but for the sake of the living rather than for the preservation of power. As Benjamin writes, "mythic violence is blood- violence over mere life for the sake of violence itself; divine violence is pure violence over all of life for the sake of the living. The former demands sacrifice; the latter assumes it."<sup>8</sup>

Law, therefore, does not simply protect life from violence. It is inherently intertwined with violence. Law can itself be the form through which violence captures life and produces a subject reduced to survival. Bare life, then, is not merely biological existence. It is biological existence as administered, exposed, threatened, judged, and made guilty by law. Benjamin's critique is therefore aimed not only at unlawful violence but at the legal order that presents domination as protection. The problem of divine violence arises because the subject produced by law cannot be released by another law-founding act without risking the repetition of mythic violence.

### *Interpreting Divine Violence: Nonviolence, Rupture, and Responsibility*

5. Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence*, 56.

6. Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence*, 57.

7. Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence*, 57.

8. Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence*, 57-8.

Because Benjamin refuses to stabilize divine violence as a rule, later readers have disagreed sharply about what it means. Does divine violence name a nonviolent interruption of legal coercion, a force that suspends law without reproducing sovereign violence? Or does it leave room for a destructive revolutionary rupture that may appear violently from outside the existing order?

Simon Critchley emphasizes an anarchic politics of resistance with a nonviolent foundation. Divine violence is not permission for a purified revolutionary blow but is a “nonviolent violence,” a force (*Gewalt* in German can be translated as force as well as violence) through which sovereign law is disrupted without imitating sovereign violence. Drawing on Levinas, Critchley regards the commandment not to kill as an ethical orientation rather than a merely legal prohibition. The commandment and thus the priority of responsibility for the Other function as a plumbline, a guide for action: it does not mechanically predetermine every action, but it keeps political judgment under the demand of responsibility. For Critchley, the commandment of “thou shall not kill” can also be translated as “you will not kill” or “don’t kill,” and that is manifested in the face of the Other.<sup>9</sup> For Levinas, the “Other is the sole being that I can wish to kill.”<sup>10</sup> In this reading, divine violence is bound to the face of the Other, the one whom I may be tempted to kill precisely in the moment of disagreement and conflict.

Critchley’s view does not collapse into passivity. He does not ask subjects to wait while history unfolds. Rather, he points to practices such as civil disobedience, strikes, refusal, and local struggles as ways of interrupting legal and political orders without entering the cycle of counter-sovereign violence. Critchley counters Žižek’s view on the possibility of revolutionary violence, since any disruption of mythic violence through counterviolence remains within the same mythic logic which Benjamin warns us about. Critchley’s insistence on locality is important. The plumbline of nonviolence is not an abstract principle imposed from above on every struggle; rather, it is an ethical guideline that must be brought to bear within each concrete situation. Politics, therefore, is always a question of local conditions, local struggles, and local victories, and the plumbline evades dogmatic blindness: “To judge the multiplicity of such struggles on the basis of an abstract conception of nonviolence is to risk dogmatic blindness.”<sup>11</sup>

Judith Butler also emphasizes the nonviolent structure of divine violence, where divine violence is an alternative to “coercive legal force.” In her reading, Benjamin’s divine violence should be regarded as a force that can be “waged against” the coercive nature of law while maintaining its nonviolent structure.<sup>12</sup> In the *Force of Nonviolence*, Butler develops Benjamin’s account of “pure means” as an open-ended civil technique of conflict resolution, a way of living through conflict without reducing conflict to a violent conclusion. As she notes, “Walter Benjamin’s idea of an open-ended civil technique of conflict resolution (Technik ziviler Übereinkunft) gives us some way to think about living with and through conflictual relations without violent conclusions.”<sup>13</sup> For Butler, nonviolence is not a means to an end, nor an end or a goal in itself. As a technique that exceeds the means-end structure, Butler notes that it is an “ungoverned technique, arguably ungovernable.”<sup>14</sup> As an “ongoing, open-ended” practice, such techniques escape the

9. Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso, 2012), 224.

10. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 198; Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 224.

11. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 239.

12. Judith Butler, “Critique, Coercion, and Sacred Life in Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence,’” in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 201-19.

13. Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2020), 3.

14. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 64.

violent structure and enact nonviolent structure because their ungovernability places them outside the hegemony, utility, and the violence of law.

Butler's reading is especially helpful because it attends to Benjamin's expansion of violence beyond physical injury. A strike can be considered violent from the perspective of law because it negates the "totalizing framework of law:" it refuses the binding characteristics of the legal system.<sup>15</sup> It interrupts the system without necessarily injuring bodies. In this sense, divine violence can be understood as the refusal of the binding force of law rather than a direct assault on persons. Similar to Critchley, Butler insists that the commandment "thou shall not kill" does not mechanically dictate an action; it summons responsibility. Divine violence should not be considered permission to kill but a force against the very system that makes killing legally possible through various apparatus such as the police and the courts.<sup>16</sup>

Over against the pacifist interpretations of thinkers that reduce Benjamin's divine violence to nonviolent ethical protest, Žižek proposes a reading that makes room for violence to disrupt the mythical violence of the legal order. "'Divine violence' stands for such brutal intrusion of justice beyond law."<sup>17</sup> For him, divine violence is even a retaliatory rage: "they are accumulated, the wrong are registered, the tension grows more and more unbearable, till divine violence explodes in a retaliatory destructive rage."<sup>18</sup> This rage, this manifestation of violence, is not calculated; it erupts to disrupt the violence of law. In his Lacanian attitude, Žižek writes, "divine violence is an expression of pure drive, of the undeadness, the excess of life, which strikes at 'bare life' regulated by law."<sup>19</sup> As he emphasizes, divine violence serves no means, "not even that of punishing the culprits and thus re-establishing the equilibrium of justice."<sup>20</sup> Žižek therefore preserves something in Benjamin that nonviolent readings risk losing: divine violence cannot be safely integrated into liberal legality or moral reassurance.

Yet Žižek also insists that divine violence cannot be objectively identified. As he notes, "there are no 'objective' criteria enabling us to identify an act of violence as divine."<sup>21</sup> The risk of this unknowingness, this undecidability, is the subject's own: "there is no big Other guaranteeing its divine nature; the risk of reading and assuming it as divine is fully the subject's own."<sup>22</sup> For this reason, Žižek's reading is not a simple permission to violence and killing whenever rage erupts. Rather, he describes a decision, whether to kill or to lose one's life, made in "solitude, with no cover in the big Other."<sup>23</sup> He calls it "extra-moral," which means that it does not operate in the realm of morality or immorality, where one receives a divine commandment to kill.<sup>24</sup> Žižek thus gives room for divine violence, especially from those who are on the margins, "outside the structured social field strike 'blindly,' where they bring about immediate justice/vengeance."<sup>25</sup> For Žižek, therefore, divine violence should not be reduced to nonviolent civil unrest, but might occur as a violent rupture of the legal system from outside and elsewhere.

Alison Ross similarly rejects readings that reduce divine violence to endless linguistic mediation. She proposes that divine violence should be read alongside Benjamin's earlier essay "Goethe's Elective Affinities," where myth, fate, "semblance" (the world of appearance, where

15. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 66.

16. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 66.

17. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 178.

18. Žižek, *Violence*, 179.

19. Žižek, *Violence*, 198.

20. Žižek, *Violence*, 199-200.

21. Žižek, *Violence*, 200.

22. Žižek, *Violence*, 200.

23. Žižek, *Violence*, 202.

24. Žižek, *Violence*, 202.

25. Žižek, *Violence*, 202.

beauty becomes a “false totality” that seduces people into accepting fate), and totalizing nature are opposed to revelation, decision, and escape from myth.<sup>26</sup> For Ross, pure or nonviolent means “are ineffective against the mythic force of legal violence.”<sup>27</sup> Benjamin’s critique aims at “deposing legal violence with revolutionary violence,” and this aim makes room for revolutionary violence even though such violence can never be securely identified in advance.<sup>28</sup>

Ross’ reading is valuable because it places divine violence within Benjamin’s broader critique of mythic totality. In Goethe’s essay, myth is tied to the demonic, semblance, beauty, fate and irresponsibility; revelation, on the other hand, is tied to moral decision and standing “before God.”<sup>29</sup> In an interesting way, she connects divine violence to faith, not as a stable possession, but as a leap beyond mere natural existence. If myth traps life in material and natural conditions, and thus in bare life, faith in something beyond natural existence offers a way out. Ross refers to Benjamin’s imagery of water in Goethe: still waters represent mythic danger, while lover’s leap of faith into the current represents moral decision and reconciliation beyond mere natural life.<sup>30</sup> One can see Kierkegaard’s ethical life here, where unique responsibility and individual decision, in contrast to common morality, become the sign of faith, as in Abraham’s response to the command to sacrifice his son. Goethe’s essay “calls for shattering false totality,” so just as revolutionary violence stands to law, so divine violence relates to myth.<sup>31</sup> Ross thus insists that divine violence makes room for revolutionary violence, noting: “Benjamin forges an idiosyncratic mode of critique of modern life in which the “annihilation” of totalizing forms of semblance is advocated. This is the meaning of divine violence in his essay on violence and the motive behind his attempt to connect it to revolutionary violence.”<sup>32</sup>

The interpretive field therefore presents two temptations. The first is to neutralize divine violence by translating it fully into nonviolent ethical protest. The second is to romanticize divine violence as revolutionary explosion beyond moral accountability. This article resists both. Critchley and Butler are right that divine violence must not become a sacred alibi for killing. Žižek and Ross are right that Benjamin’s divine violence is more than polite reform or moral persuasion. The question is how to preserve the force for interruption without freeing interruption from responsibility and without forgetting that the target of interruption is the production of bare life.

The debate also shows why divine violence cannot be detached from the problem of discernment in contexts. Critchley and Butler protect the concept from the fantasy of redemptive bloodshed, but they risk making Benjamin less disturbing than he is. Žižek and Ross preserve the disturbing force of Benjamin’s interruption, but they leave the reader with the problem of how a finite subject can assume such interruption without converting undecidability into self-authorization. The problem is not solved by balancing the two sides. It requires a different register, one in which the act is judged not by its purity, success, or intensity, but by the responsibility it bears toward those whom law has rendered disposable.

26. Alison Ross, “The Distinction between Mythic and Divine Violence: Walter Benjamin’s ‘Critique of Violence’ from the Perspective of ‘Goethe’s Elective Affinities,’” *New German Critique* 41, no. 1 (2014), 111.

27. Ross, “The Distinction between Mythic,” 117.

28. Ross, “The Distinction between Mythic,” 94.

29. Ross, “The Distinction between Mythic,” 111.

30. Ross, “The Distinction between Mythic,” 114.

31. Ross, “The Distinction between Mythic,” 115.

32. Ross, “The Distinction between Mythic,” 119.



*Bare Life as the Site of Confrontation*

The phrase bare life appears relatively late in *Toward the Critique of Violence*, but it illuminates the essay as a whole. Benjamin's concern is not simply that law uses violence against living beings. It is that law claims authority over living beings by reducing them to the kind of life that can be threatened, judged, punished, spared, or killed. Law presents its own violence as the defense of life and thereby makes survival appear to be the final measure of justice. This is the structure of bare life: life preserved as an object of power while deprived of freedom, alterity, ethical agency, and fullness.

Benjamin is not denying the value of bodily life. Nor is he opposing embodiment, nature, or physical vulnerability. His critique is directed against the reductions of subjectivity to mere survival. When life is separated from justice, freedom, and responsibility, domination can appear as protection. A state can keep a population alive while stripping it of speech, agency, movement, and political existence. The subject survives, but survives as exposed life, as life available to the order that claims to secure it. In this sense, bare life is not simply biological life; it is life captured by law's power and emptied of its excess beyond administration.

This account of bare life resonates with Agamben's figure of *homo sacer*,<sup>33</sup> an archaic Roman juridico-religious figure who is placed under the ambiguity of *sacer*<sup>34</sup>: set apart as both sacred and accursed. The *homo sacer* may be killed without the killing counting as homicide, yet he cannot be offered as a sacrifice. This paradox clarifies the structure of bare life: the person is not simply outside the law, but included in the juridical order through exclusion, abandoned by law while still held within law's power. This is important for Benjamin because it shows how mythic violence joins law, sacredness, guilt, and exposure to death in a single structure. Mythic violence does not merely kill; it produces a form of life that can be threatened, punished, or disposed of in the name of order while being deprived of ethical and political significance. Divine violence, on my reading, interrupts precisely this mythic-sacral economy: it breaks the bond by which law turns the living person into guilty, disposable, and administrable life.

The theological parallel with John 10 clarifies the point at which Jesus contrasts his own mission with the destructive logic of the thief: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (English Standard Version). The Good Shepherd discourse can be read politically: the promise of protection can become a form of domination when the flock exists merely for the preservation of the shepherd's authority or the security of the system. In such a structure, the sheep remain exposed, disposable, and ready to be sacrificed when danger appears. By contrast, Jesus introduces a different logic in which authority is reconfigured through responsibility for the life of the other rather than the preservation of power. This reversal becomes clearer in the following verse, where the Good Shepherd is described as the one who gives his life for the sheep: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10: 11).

This theological contrast helps clarify Benjamin's point about bare life: life placed at the disposal of law and separated from justice, ethical agency, and Otherness, to use Levinas's language. Levinas's argument against being (ontology) as first philosophy is precisely an argument against this reduction, assimilation, and absorption of the Other into a genus, whether as human being, citizen, subject, enemy, or population. In each case, the Other becomes something or someone under my control, fully understood, and therefore reduced from otherness to

33. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 71-74.

34. The ambiguity of *sacer* is that it can mean both sacred/consecrated and accursed/outcast. In Agamben's use, the *homo sacer* is "set apart," but not in a simple holy sense. He is separated from ordinary legal and religious protection, exposed to death, and yet excluded from sacrificial ritual.

sameness. It is the reduction of life to mere life or survival, Benjamin notes, that allows domination to portray itself as protection. A state might keep a people alive while stripping them of agency, subjectivity, and freedom.

This is also why Benjamin's critique of the sanctity of life should not be mistaken for contempt for life. He is criticizing the way a legal-mythic order can sacralize mere survival while emptying life of justice, freedom, and fullness. A regime can speak constantly of protecting life, security, tradition, morality, or public order while denying agency and alterity to the very persons it claims to protect, recognizing them only within the hegemony of law. The sanctity of life becomes ideological when it protects the biological continuation of subjects only so that they may remain obedient to the power that administers them. Benjamin's target is this reduction of life to bare preservation, not embodied life itself.

The centrality of bare life for mythic violence begins with mythic guilt. Mythic violence assumes bare life into its hegemony and totality through inculcation (*Verschuldung*) of individuals. This guilt is not primarily the result of individual transgression or breaking of the law. It is a basic condition into which life is delivered when it is reduced to mere natural existence and placed under law, fate, and punishment. The legal system is unable to solve or dissolve the guilt because this guilt is not caused by an individual action. In addition, the system has the power to punish, judge, and cleanse, but it cannot free life from the hegemonic guilt-structure that it presupposes. As Benjamin notes: "Now, the release [*Auslösung*] of legal violence stems (as cannot be shown here in greater detail) from the inculcating [*Verschuldung*] of mere natural life, which delivers the living, innocent and unfortunate, into the hands of an expiation that 'atones' [*sühnt*] for this inculcation [*Verschuldung*] – and doubtless also de-expiates [*entsühnt*] the guilty, not of guilt, to be sure, but of law. For the domination of law over the living ceases with mere life."<sup>35</sup> The whole structure of law, with its ceremonies of punishment and atonement, judgment and mercy, keeps bare life inside and under guilt, trapped with no outside. The logic is clear: legal violence is released through the inculcation of mere natural life, and law's domination over the living ceases with mere life.

Agamben's reading is simultaneously helpful and insufficient. Agamben sees that law's domination and bare life are inherently connected. Stine Holte points out that Agamben's antinomian interpretation of bare life places bare life as the locus where law rules but also the locus from which juridical violence simply dissolves. As Agamben writes, "[n]ot only does the rule of law over the living exist and cease to exist alongside bare life, but even the dissolution of juridical violence, which is in a certain sense the object of the essay, stems from the guilt of bare natural life."<sup>36</sup> Yet Holte rightly warns against such a conclusion since it is based on a mistranscription of "*Auslösung*" as "*Auflösung*": the former means "release" or "triggering," while the latter indicates "dissolution." Holte concedes that Agamben is partially right to connect law's domination to bare life, but she insists that "only divine violence may for him put an end to the mixing up of guilt and expiation of mythic violence. Divine violence de-expiates not only from law but from the guilt of mere life itself."<sup>37</sup> Divine violence does not destroy natural life because it is natural, nor is it against the body or nature (Benjamin is not anti-body). Rather, divine violence redeems natural life by connecting it to supernatural or higher life, something beyond mere survival. As Holte explains, this disappearance of the supernatural is

35. Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence*, 57.

36. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 65; Stine Holte, "Legal, Mythic, and Divine Violence: Post-Secular Entanglements in Walter Benjamin's 'Toward the Critique of Violence,'" *Literature and Theology* 36, no. 3 (September 2022), 328.

37. Holte, "Legal, Mythic," 328.

not a loss of religion but appears “as guilt that may be seen to belong to a certain immanent sacral sensibility, in which guilt and retribution are mixed up indiscriminately.”<sup>38</sup> This is the structure of mythic law, or mythic sacredness, where life, blood, sacrifice, guilt, punishment, and retribution all get mixed together inside the world.

According to Benjamin, divine violence is annihilating, “only in a relative sense, with regard to goods, right, life, and the like, never absolutely with regard to the soul of the living.”<sup>39</sup> If mythic violence injures the living at the level of the soul because it binds life to guilt and fate, divine violence releases life from the mythic guilt and its submission to law. Holte, however, insists that divine violence is lethal, even if it is bloodless. Expounding on Friedlander’s interpretation of the story of Korah, Holte notes that this story is not about punishing rebellion but about the annihilation of a system in which a privileged group, the sons of Korah, had a monopoly of power. Here the individuals vanish or disappear, swallowed by the earth, without a remnant and without a symbol attached to a person who carries guilt. There is no trace of domination afterwards. Lethal violence exposes the false equality in legal tradition, as Holte points out: “The lethal violence could thus be seen as part of a redemptive critique made possible through the historical-philosophical idea of justice, displaying the violence inherent in the supposed ‘equality of rights’ in the legal traditions.”<sup>40</sup> Law might portray itself as equal, but in its structure it hides privileges and domination.

Bare life is therefore the hinge, or more precisely the site of confrontation, between mythic and divine violence. Mythic violence produces bare life by reducing persons to guilty, exposed, administrable existence. Divine violence interrupts the order that produces such life and opens life to responsibility beyond mere preservation. The question remains whether this interruption can be thought without being claimed by another sovereign power. If divine violence is interpreted as a human power to kill in the name of justice, it risks returning to mythic violence. If it is interpreted only as nonviolent moral witness, it risks losing Benjamin’s insistence that law’s violence may require a rupture more radical than a mere strike. The Levinasian question is therefore unavoidable: what keeps interruption responsible to the Other?

### *Levinas and the Subject Beyond Bare Life*

Levinas enters this argument not as a replacement for Benjamin but as an ethical guideline placed upon Benjamin’s notion of divine violence. If the central problem is the production of bare life, then the question becomes what kind of subject can stand beyond this reduction. Levinas’s responsibility for the Other provides a criterion, or better an orientation, that keeps the divine aspect of violence from becoming a human claim to divine authorization. The commandment “thou shall not kill” does not settle all political conflicts, but it refuses to let political necessity become absolute. It is the demand that any interruption of law remain answerable to the life and face of the Other.

This does not mean, however, that Levinas simply corrects Benjamin or resolves the ambiguity of divine violence. Their relation is better understood as a productive oscillation in which each thinker inflects and keeps the other in check. Benjamin prevents ethics from becoming a merely moral language that leaves mythic law intact; he forces us to see how law itself can found, preserve, and administer violence while naming itself order. Levinas, by contrast, prevents interruption from becoming another sovereign gesture, another act that reduces the Other to the Same in the name of liberation. Their insights therefore should not be collapsed into harmony.

38. Holte, “Legal, Mythic,” 329.

39. Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence*, 58.

40. Holte, “Legal, Mythic,” 332.

Benjamin gives us the critique of law's mythic production of bare life, while Levinas gives us the ethical orientation by which any interruption of that production remains answerable to the face of the Other. Their encounter does not produce a rule, code, or final doctrine of action, but an optics for political judgment in which interruption is continually moderated by responsibility.

For Benjamin, divine violence does not emerge from within bare life as one more immanent force. It arrives from outside the mythic order as an interruption of history, law, and guilt. It entails a messianic intervention: an interruption of history that shatters the existing mythic order and opens space for a new way of being and living. Here Levinas's account of the advent of the Other can be placed in illuminating analogy. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas introduces the notion of the *il y a* ("there is") the anonymous materiality of being/world in which the self is portrayed as suffocated by this anonymous being. The separated subject is confronted by the shame of the excess of her own being and attempts to evade it until she is eventually freed by desire—in the sense of ethical, metaphysical desire—for the Other. Bare life and *il y a* are not identical, but both name a condition in which life is absorbed into a totality that precedes individuation and responsibility. In both, life is bound to biological existence, nature, and genus, rather than individuated and separated beyond the hegemony of being or the totality of law. It is the face of the Other that interrupts my self-sufficiency and this totality. It comes from elsewhere and commands before it can be possessed.

Levinasian ethics stands against the hegemony of ontology, knowledge, and the Same. Violence begins when the Other is reduced to a concept, a member of a genus, a manageable object, or a function within my world. In Benjaminian terms, this reduction resembles the legal production of bare life. The Other reduced to the Same is exposed, stripped of alterity, and made available for use. Bare life is similarly exposed before law, available for judgment, administration, and sacrifice. In both cases, totality destroys transcendence by making the person fully legible to power.

The analogy further clarifies divine violence. If mythic violence is the legal-totalizing order that captures life, divine violence is the interruption of that capture. If ontology and politics reduce the Other to the Same, ethics interrupts that reduction. The face functions as a kind of non-sovereign interruption: it does not conquer me, but it commands me; it does not found a new law, but it places my freedom under responsibility. This is why Levinas helps distinguish interruption from domination. A rupture is not divine simply because it breaks a system. It becomes ethically meaningful only insofar as it answers to the Other and opens life beyond the status of bare survival rather than using the Other as a tool for a new project of power.

Levinas also complicates the matter because ethics is not the whole of political life. The appearance of the Third introduces comparison, judgment, institutions, and justice. The *ego's* infinite responsibility is now extended to all of humanity. Ethics is universalized and institutionalized in order to account for others. This marks the entrance into the formation of the state, institutions, and laws.<sup>41</sup> As Levinas himself proclaimed, "our highest calling . . . is not to a 'wild philanthropy', but to be about building just institutions."<sup>42</sup> The question is how institutions can remain answerable to the face rather than becoming impersonal machines.

Levinas elucidates the oscillation between ethics and justice through the linguistic analogy of the Saying and the Said. Ethics is found in the an-archival realm of the Saying, while justice is a

41. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 300.

42. Cited in Dudiak, "Structures of Violence, Structures of Peace," 168.

part of the totalizing realm of the Said. In this framework, the Saying marks the ethical subjectivity whereas the Said represents the ordinary realm of social and political life. Ethics and justice exist in both relation and separation. Neither can be reduced to the other. Thus, justice cannot diminish the infinite responsibility for the Other; the *ego* remains infinitely, asymmetrically, and concretely responsible for the Other. This responsibility always maintains its potency. However, the *ego* is also invariably transported by the Third into the realm of the Said. The *ego* must weigh its obligations, though, for it is not possible to respond infinitely to all others.<sup>43</sup>

The Third clarifies why this oscillation is necessary rather than accidental. The face-to-face relation with the Other is never a closed relation of two; the Other already refers me to other others, to the third and the fourth, who also make claims upon me.<sup>44</sup> Responsibility therefore cannot remain only an immediate exposure to the singular face before me. It must pass into comparison, judgment, institution, and law. This passage from Saying to Said is necessary but never neutral because the realm of the Said can expose singular persons to the tyranny of the universal and the impersonal, reducing them to cases, citizens, numbers, or members of a genus.<sup>45</sup> Yet it is also necessary because without the Third, responsibility for one person could become injustice toward others. Justice is therefore not the abandonment of ethics but the extension of responsibility from the face-to-face relation into the realm of the Third, where all others also make claims upon me. The problem is that this extension never exhausts the ethical demand from which it arises. This is precisely why Levinas matters for Benjamin: interruption must enter the realm of political judgment, but it must never allow judgment, law, or revolution to silence the singular face in whose name interruption is undertaken.

Thus, Levinas offers the peculiar formulation that justice is un-ethical and even a kind of entry to violence: "Only justice can wipe it (ethical responsibility) away by bringing this giving-oneself to my neighbor under measure, or moderating it by thinking in relation to the third and the fourth, who are also my others, but justice is already the first violence."<sup>46</sup> In a discussion following the delivery of his lecture *Transcendence and Height*, Levinas spoke of the tears that the bureaucratic functionary cannot see.<sup>47</sup> He thereby acknowledged that, however justly and smoothly the political realm might be functioning, it remains insufficient from the ethical perspective. The invisibility of the face of the Other to the Third leads to "the tyranny of the universal and of the impersonal," the tyranny of politics and of the judgment of history as seen from the standpoint of the victor.<sup>48</sup> But this tyranny needs to be exposed by the face. The ethical needs to reorient the political.<sup>49</sup> But on the other hand, Levinas also insists that "in no way is justice a degradation of obsession, a degeneration of the for-the-other, a diminution, a limitation of anarchic responsibility."<sup>50</sup> The result is not a stable synthesis but "a never-ending oscillation"<sup>51</sup> in which ethics judges politics and politics institutionalizes responsibility without exhausting it.

43. Simmons, "The Third," 94.

44. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 212-14, 300.

45. E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 156-72.

46. Levinas and Rötzer, "Emmanuel Levinas," 62. By 'first violence' Levinas does not mean literal violence but a kind of marker of what the social and political realm is as separate from the intensity of ethical encounter in the structure of self.

47. E. Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," in *Levinas' Basic Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1996), 23.

48. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 242-244.

49. Bernasconi, "The Third Party," 80.

50. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 159.

51. William Paul Simmons, "The Third: Levinas's Theoretical Move from An-Archical Ethics to the Realm of Justice and Politics," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 25 (1999): 83-104.

This oscillation is essential for reading Benjamin. Mythic violence appears when law forgets the ethical demand that exceeds it and treats its own order as final. But a purely anti-institutional politics may also become mythic if it turns the Other into an instrument of rupture. Levinas therefore gives us neither legalism nor anarchic purity. He gives us an optics for judging political action: does this act remain responsible to the concrete Other, including the third and the fourth, or does it sacrifice them to history, security, revolution, or sovereignty? Does it release the subject from bare life, or does it reproduce bare life under another name?

This also reframes Benjamin's pure means. Pure means should not be understood as means that are morally immaculate because they never touch conflict. They are pure because they do not derive their meaning from the legal calculation of ends and instruments. Language, agreement, strike, refusal, and responsibility can interrupt the totality of law when they suspend the mythic demand that every conflict be resolved through coercive judgment. Levinas deepens this point: the purity of a means is not its innocence but its exposure to the Other. A means becomes mythic when it closes itself around power and produces disposable subjects; it becomes ethically interruptive when it remains answerable to the one who exceeds the system.

According to Levinas, ethics and politics are both needed, but each has its own specific justification. Neither ethics nor politics should be taken to their extremes; each must be moderated by the Other because there is a "direct contradiction between ethics and politics, if both these demands are taken to the extreme."<sup>52</sup> Ethics must temper the political because unbounded politics leads to tyranny, the absolute power of the strongest. Politics ignores the individuality of each citizen, treating each as a cipher, a member of a species. If the moral-political order totally relinquishes its ethical foundation, it must accept all forms of society, including the fascist or totalitarian, for it can no longer evaluate or discriminate between them. Levinas's return to Platonism, his appeal to the Good-Beyond-Being as his standard would restore "the independence of ethics in relation to history."<sup>53</sup> This is especially important for Benjamin, whose divine violence cannot be identified by success. A victorious revolution is not divine because it interrupts. The ethical remains outside the verdict of history. This is why for Levinas, ethics must remain the first philosophy.<sup>54</sup>

This ethical demand also forms a subject. Levinas calls for a self whose subjectivity is structured by responsibility, a self that receives the Other before mastering the world.<sup>55</sup> I name this transformed subject the "New Host Self":<sup>56</sup> a self whose agency is not grounded in possession, mastery, or sovereign control, but in being interrupted and reconstituted by responsibility for the Other. In the context of this article, the New Host Self clarifies what lies beyond bare life. Ethics as an optics functions here like an eschatological vision, not as the end of history or the completion of totality, but as a relation beyond history that interrupts history from within by signaling the Other's excess, alterity, and infinity. If mythic violence reduces persons to administrable survival, Levinasian responsibility restores the significance of each concrete life and calls every subject to responsibility. This optics refuses reduction to a system of thought, a

52. Levinas, "Ethics and Politics," 292.

53. Emmanuel Levinas, "Signature," in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, 295.

54. Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas," 30.

55. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 23, 29.

56. I develop the notion of the "New Host Self" more fully in my dissertation, Diako Alikhani, "Radical Hospitality: Height and Excess of the Other and the New Host Self" (PhD diss., University of Denver, 2024)

120, <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/2387>. Here I argue that radical hospitality establishes/transforms the self/host through the encounter with the Other, stranger, refugee, or migrant. The host does not merely give hospitality; the host is also changed by the guest and becomes a new ethical-political subject.

moral code, or a political program. The New Host Self is therefore not a heroic subject who acts upon the oppressed from above, but a subject transformed by the face of the Other, one who resists structures of abandonment without turning the abandoned into instruments of another project of administrative power.

Ethics as an optics for politics, then, does not function as a moral code, a universal rule, or a doctrine that predetermines every political decision. It functions more like a plumbline: a way of seeing and judging political action from the demand of the Other.<sup>57</sup> In the terms of my earlier work on radical hospitality, this optics is a fragile orientation shaped by the Other's claim on me, by a goodward movement toward the vulnerable, and by a trembling responsibility that refuses political self-certainty. This matters for Benjamin because divine violence cannot be identified simply by rupture, intensity, success, or opposition to law. It must be judged, if it can be judged at all, through the face of those whom law has rendered disposable. Ethics as an optics therefore interrupts both legal domination and counter-violence by asking whether a political act releases persons from bare life or repeats their reduction under another name. It gives rise to the New Host Self: a subject whose political agency is formed not by mastery, possession, or sovereign certainty, but by responsibility, hospitality, and concrete answerability to the suffering Other.

A theological analogy helps make this political optics concrete and clarifies the relation between divine violence and bare life. In the Christian narrative, Jesus appears as the Christ, the Messiah, while Herod stands as an anti-messianic figure of political sovereignty anxious to preserve itself. Returning to the interplay of ethics and politics, we may speak of Herod as the embodiment of political, social, and economic totality that opposes and reduces alterity. Through its hegemony, dominance, and control, this totality, represented by Herod, stands in opposition to the ethical arrival of the Messiah. In this sense, the story of the birth of Jesus can be read as a story of politics, as the realm of the same, doing everything in its power to obliterate infinity and interruption. The massacre of the children of Bethlehem makes this logic explicit: sovereignty preserves itself by rendering vulnerable children disposable, reducing them to bare life in the name of securing power. What the Messiah analogy adds to the Benjamin-Levinas argument, then, is a theological image of interruption that does not found a new order of violence but exposes the murderous logic of mythic power. When politics blocks the arrival of the messianic infinite, it also blocks the possibility of the command "thou shall not kill." Emphasizing the radically hospitable opening to the Other as a New Host Self, we may therefore consider the Christian sense of *anticipation* for the Messianic *parousia*, not simply as the realization of a fixed and finite moment in history. This always-anticipated messianic – and we might here add, ethical – hope invites us once again to resist the reduction of the Other to bare life.

Ethics as an optics for politics does not give us a list of dos and don'ts, rules, or codes. Rather, it orients us to the political, inviting a certain comportment to neighbors and strangers. Ethics as an optics for politics concerns how the Other-directed structure of subjectivity helps us act in certain ways rather than others in the world. In relation to Benjamin, this means that the divine cannot be named by intensity, rage, rupture, or success. It can only be approached under responsibility. The face does not make politics innocent, but it keeps politics from becoming mythic by refusing to let law, revolution, or history have the final word.

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57. See Diako Alikhani, "Radical Hospitality," especially chapter 3, where I develop "ethics as an optics" through Simon Critchley's notion of the "plumbline," Sarah Pessin's account of bonomythy, and the formation of the New Host Self as a trembling political subject oriented toward the Other.



*By way of Conclusion: Iran, Responsibility, and Bare life*

The Iranian situation sharpens the problem rather than settling it. In a context such as the Islamic Republic, bare life is not a hidden structure requiring elaborate excavation. It is visible in the state's treatment of dissenting subjects as lives available to surveillance, imprisonment, execution, exile, and public discipline. I write from the position of someone unable to return to my country for many years because disagreement with the regime can place one at the disposal of its legal and political apparatus. In such a situation, Benjamin's critique of law is not abstract. Law, order, security, and public morality can become the language through which mythic violence preserves itself and produces subjects who are allowed to survive only as administrable life.

During the 2025-2026 Iranian protests, which began on December 28, 2025, and especially during the crackdown of January 8-9, 2026, reports alleged that the death toll reached into the thousands, with some estimates ranging much higher, though the precise number remains contested and difficult to verify. Peaceful protests in the streets were met by bullets and street executions, alongside the daily execution of young men and women. The nationwide internet blackout began on January 8, 2026, available only for a hefty fee, controlled and provided by the regime. The regime's rationale is that such measures are necessary for maintaining public security and keeping the people of Iran safe. Here we see bare lives fully at the disposal of a privileged group and a privileged ideology, where the face of the Other and the alterity of the Other have no value outside the hegemony of the regime, mythic violence and its law-preserving tyranny.

The questions asked at the beginning of this essay remain: what should we do in the face of evil? What is divine violence, and what does it entail in such a situation? Would intervention from the outside be considered divine violence as long as it operates as an interruption? Should individuals and countries become involved in liberating people from the explicitly mythic and violent structures of countries like Iran? What is my own but also my country's responsibility toward the marginalized, and in this case an entire country under tyranny for 47 years? Should this intervention be understood as a form of divine justice, even though the end might not be clear and the result might not be the shattering of the mythic structure, but rather an end to a purely tyrannical system?

Both Benjamin and Levinas resist the formulation of a concrete universal solution that could be applied to every historical situation as though it were itself another law. Benjamin thinks of divine violence as the interruption of the bond between law and violence, while Levinas insists on the necessity of ethics: responsibility for the Other that unsettles every ethical or political decision in which the suffering Other disappears behind strategy, sovereignty or historical necessity. To ask what should be done in the face of evil is therefore not to produce a final doctrine of intervention or nonintervention. Nor is this undecidability a permission to evade violence, responsibility, or decision. It is, rather, the intensification of the struggle of decision-making in the face of concrete violence and systemic evil, where nonaction may abandon the vulnerable and action may reproduce domination. The demand is to oppose the structures that render people disposable without turning those same people into instruments of another political project. The question remains open, but it is not empty. In a Levinasian sense, I am always already responsible for the Other.

Benjamin prevents us from taking the regime's language of law, order, and security at face value. A state may claim to protect life while actually preserving the power that reduces life to obedience and exposure. In the case of Iran, the resistance to such an order may be necessary,



and the interruption of mythic violence cannot be dismissed in advance as disorder. But Levinas prevents us from treating interruption itself as pure. If outside powers act in the name of liberation while using the people of Iran as instruments of geopolitical strategy, then the oppressed are again reduced to bare life, this time within another project of power. The question is not only whether a regime is evil. It is also whether the means of opposing the regime remain answerable to the people whose lives are at stake and to the kind of subjectivity such opposition produces.

For this reason, the question of Iran cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between intervention and nonintervention. Nonintervention can become complicity when it leaves a people abandoned under a violent order. Intervention can become domination when it treats those same people as terrain, leverage, or collateral material. The Levinasian demand is more exacting than either slogan. It asks what forms of solidarity, pressure, protection, refusal, witness and, in some cases force can remain ordered toward the lives and agency of those who suffer rather than toward the self-justification of external powers.

This is the final contribution of reading Benjamin with Levinas: Benjamin teaches us that law can be violent at its foundation and in its preservation, and that such violence produces the subject as bare life. Levinas teaches us that rupture must remain accountable to the face. Together they refuse both quietism and romantic violence. They do not tell us that nothing can be done in the face of tyranny. Nor do they allow us to baptize any act of force as divine because it opposes a violent order. They press a harder question: how can one oppose a regime's reduction of persons to bare life without repeating that reduction in the very name of liberation?

Divine violence, if it can be spoken of at all, must therefore be approached as an interruption of mythic violence that does not found a new mythology of power. It is not possessed by the state, the revolutionary, the victim, or the intervener. It is judged, if judged at all, by its relation to the living Other released from guilt, exposure, and sacrifice. This is why Levinas is not an external addition to Benjamin but an ethical intensification of Benjamin's own danger. The divine cannot be claimed wherever law is broken. It can only be approached where the breaking of law answers to the life of the Other rather than to the glory of the self or power, and where life is opened beyond survival toward responsibility, alterity, and fullness.