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Agata Bielik-Robson
Theology & Religious Studies
University of Nottingham
Institute of Philosophy and Sociology
Polish Academy of Science

The Human Difference: Beyond Nomotropism

Abstract:

The main theme of this essay is *finite life*, which is the bedrock of modern biopolitics. In the series of lectures devoted to the ‘birth of biopolitics,’ Michel Foucault defines it as a new system of ‘governing the living’ based on the natural cycle of birth and death, and the law of *genesis kai phtora*, ‘becoming and perishing.’ Foucault’s answer to modern biopolitics is to accept its basic premise – that life is finite, and, consequently, reduced to the natural law of birth and death – and then slightly correct the naive liberal trust in the ‘naturalness’ of human existence by appropriating and internalizing the true essence of the biopolitical paradigm: the disciplining practices. This essay contests Foucault’s minimalist Neostoic program of the ‘care of the self’ by demonstrating that we can still hope for *another finitude* that refrains from any renaturalization of human existence.

Keywords:

human difference, biopolitics, philosophical anthropology, psychoanalysis

“I have set before you life and death: choose life!”

– Deuteronomy (30:19)

The main theme of my essay is *finite life*, or, rather, the specific way in which human being approaches the problem of life’s finitude. I claim that life does indeed present itself to man as a problem, aporia, or, as Hegel put it, a ‘living contradiction:’ as simultaneously finite because it is closed by death, and infinite, because it is open

to limitless singular interpretations. This view, however, is challenged by a current tendency to dehumanize life and perceive it merely as a simple biological process, where, fully naturalized, it becomes a non-problematic *primum datum* of modern biopolitics. First, therefore, I will refer critically to the biopolitical notion of life, which has been elaborated mostly by Michel Foucault. Then, by basing my interpretation on Freud and his French follower, Jean Laplanche, I will refute the biopolitical concept of life as *biomorphic* and pave way for a new approach. Said approach will emphasize the antinomian character of human existence: the infinite freedom to embrace life and interpret the ‘living contradiction,’ which goes beyond any law, i.e. beyond any nomotropic, law-oriented, tendency.

Biopolitical Naturalization

Philosophical reflection on finite life is the bedrock of biopolitics: the dominating trend in late-modern societies first diagnosed by Michel Foucault. Foucault famously defined modernity at the time of decline of the traditional form of power based on divine sovereignty, which was now to be replaced by the increasing concern with natural life.

In the series of lectures devoted to the ‘birth of biopolitics,’ delivered at the College de France between 1978 and 1979, Michel Foucault defined biopolitics as a new system for ‘governing the living;’ no longer focused on the immortality of individual souls, it now concentrates solely on the natural well-being of citizens forming the modern nation-state. He described this transformation in the technics of government as a transition from power interested in the infinite afterlife of its subjects, to the power investing in the finite life of citizens, spent within the natural cycle of birth and death. Previously, governing consisted in taking care for the proper Christian existence and legitimized itself as the regime of truth and penitence, allowing the subject to arrive safely at the gate of heaven. In modernity, the governing consists merely in administering the living functions of the bodies of people, and catering to their natural needs. Modern biopolitics, therefore, is no longer Christian; the modern shift of paradigm announces a new vision of life which no longer sustains belief in immortality. It is a finite life, flowing from birth towards death, and confined within the limits of the natural cycle and governed by the most fundamental law of nature—as formulated by the Pre-Socratic Greeks in their reflections on the system of *phusis*—the law of *genesis kai phtora*, growth and decay, and becoming and perishing.¹ Thus, long before Nietzsche proclaims the death of God and the end of the great promise of personal infinity, modern Enlightenment politics already proceeds from the basis of the newly recovered concept of natural life spun between cradle and grave.²

1) For instance, as in the classical formulation of Anaximander: “Whence things have their origin,/ Thence also their destruction happens,/ According to necessity;/ For they give to each other justice and recompense/ For their injustice/ In conformity with the ordinance of Time.”

2) Foucault defines ‘biopolitics’ as “the attempt, starting from the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems posed to governmental practice by phenomena characteristic of a set of living beings forming a population: health, hygiene, birth-rate, life expectancy, race...” Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the College de France 1978–79*, ed. Michel; Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell, (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2008), 317. In Foucault’s description of the ‘birth of biopolitics,’ this investment in ‘naturalness’ of the process of governing is completely disenchanting: the *physiocracy* of the first modern biopoliticians does not extoll any sacred and eternal laws of nature that would secure their legitimacy (in other words, this is *not* Leo Strauss’ *phusis*, which preserves all the privileges of the transcendence, but a fully profane and immanent natural process). They rather seek to attune their method of governing to the natural rhythm, based on the rule of all physicians (i.e., literally, the ‘experts on nature’) which is *primum non nocere*, “first: do not interfere.” Naturalness has its own course, its own spontaneous manner of achieving ‘success,’ and it is precisely this natural efficiency which becomes the guiding light of the liberal government: “Political economy does not discover natural rights that exist prior to the exercise of governmentality; it discovers a certain naturalness specific to the practice of government itself [...]

Modernity only needed to rediscover the idea of natural life, which, in fact, is as old as philosophy itself. According to the classical definition of Aristotle, *phusis* is a system of all beings that fall under the inexorable rule of cyclical alternation between *genesis* and *phthora*, generation and corruption: the rule that knows no exception. And while the conception of nature and natural laws will be changing during the intellectual history of the West, one general criterion defining the natural mode of existence will always remain the idea of ‘natural necessity,’ which links birth and death in an insoluble knot. Whether the Pre-Socratic *phusis*, scholastic *natura pura*, or Darwin’s ‘natural selection,’ nature is always defined in the light of this mysterious ambivalence: “What causes birth tends to cause death too.”³

This transcendental concept of *phusis* designates a paradigmatic point of reference for the whole Western philosophical tradition, which assumed the idea of *kata phusein* – ‘living according to nature’ – as its most fundamental normative ideal. For Foucault, the modern decline of Christian religion, and the loss of belief in personal immortality, are strictly correlated with the process of man’s *renaturalization*: the moment human being loses its footing in religious transcendence and becomes as finite as everything else, it immediately and automatically returns to the ‘system of nature.’ Finitude and denaturalization do not coincide.

Foucault’s paradigmatic answer to modern biopolitics, therefore, is to accept its basic premise – that life is finite and because of that reduced to the natural law of birth and death – and then slightly correct the naive liberal trust in the ‘naturalness’ of human existence, by appropriating and internalizing the true essence of the biopolitical model, i.e., the disciplining practices. This naiveté, in fact, appears to be only a hypocritical decoy. While liberal ideology claims to be ‘physiocratic,’ (in the sense of only smoothly administering the life processes of the population running according to the laws of nature), it submits the life of the citizens to powerful regimes of regulation. This is accomplished through government supervision, discipline, and punishment: treating human beings as always somehow ‘deficient,’ not fully ‘successful’ from the purely naturalistic point of view. Hence, the only possible way of resistance is to take over the disciplining macro-practices of the liberal politics and internalize them as the micropractices of the self, and the Stoic ‘conversion to self’ (*epistrophe eis heauton*) is to serve as a foil for building a system of defense against the biopolitical technologies of the state.

This is the reason why, in the third volume of the *History of Sexuality*, called *Le souci de soi* [*Care of the Self*], Foucault famously advocates a return to the ancient technics of self-discipline, exercised within life conceived as finite and mortal. In this manner, he inaugurated the last Neostoic turn in his thought. This turn may indeed be treated as a highly characteristic *signum temporis*, epitomizing the minimalist late-modern

The notion of nature will thus be transformed with the appearance of political economy. For political economy, nature is not an original and reserved region on which the exercise of power should not impinge, on pain of being illegitimate. Nature is something that runs under, through, and in, the exercise of governmentality. It is, if you like, its indispensable hypodermis [...] governmental practice can only do what it has to do by respecting this nature” (ibid., pp. 15–16). But the modern disenchantment – so well epitomized in the biopolitical notion of natural efficiency – begins already with the previous state-formation in which governmentality obeys only the sovereign *raison d’Etat*: “The government of the state must respect divine, moral, and natural laws as laws which are not homogenous with or intrinsic to the state. But while respecting these laws, government has to do something other than ensure the salvation of its subjects in the hereafter, whereas in the Middle Ages the sovereign was commonly defined as someone who must help his subjects gain their salvation in the next world” (Ibid. 4).

3) The best speculative account of the history of the concept of *phusis* is given by Pierre Hadot in his book *The Veil of Isis. An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, trans. Michael Chase (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. 2006) where he begins with Heraclitus, goes through Schiller and Nietzsche, and ends with Merleau-Ponty. The main subject of the essay is the ‘secret of nature’ which “loves to hide” (p. 1), i.e. the mysterious bond of inner natural necessities which organize every individual “growth” into a system of becoming and perishing. Hadot thus interprets the famous aphorism of Heraclitus – *phusis kruptesthai philei* – as “what is born tends to disappear” or “what is born wants to die” (p. 11).

ambition to ‘take care’ of life as it is, without either imposing on it excessive demands, or luring it with false promises. Despite being hailed as the last resort of resistance, the Neostoic option is anything but rebellious. On both planes of macro- and micro-strategies, which reflect one another, there is a basic agreement as to the general rule of *kata phusein*. Nature, regulating the flow of life from and birth to death, appears as the ultimate lawgiver, simultaneously offering a model for civil discipline *and* self-control: self-growth and self-preservation within the pre-established confines. Since time is pressing within these confines, one needs to ‘hasten.’ “Find out what is in accord with your nature and hasten to that [...] Hasten then to the end, discard vain hopes, and if you care for yourself at all, rescue yourself while you still may.”⁴

The whole thrust of Foucault’s project, therefore, is not so much to break with the biopolitical tendency to renaturalize human beings, but to recover an alternative, more ancient and noble idea of *kata phusein*, ‘living according to nature.’ Foucault knows very well that the ‘Greek wisdom’ from which his Neostoic ‘technologies of the self’ derive is predominantly tragic, and, as such, not very favourable towards the phenomenon of singular life. In this tragic vision, life – most of all human life, as the least orderly of all living beings – is the source of destructive *hubris*: the excessive will of every singular living thing to stay alive as long as possible, and, thus, to avoid the fate of death. Nature, *phusis*, on the other hand, is the system of all things in which *hubris* undergoes necessary correction – best exemplified by the lethal punishment of the most hubristic of all individuals: the tragic hero. Nature, therefore, is not so much life itself as, in a way, the opposite of life. *Phusis* is the reality principle of *zoe* that has to limit itself, to contract a *peras* [limitation], and live according to the fateful rule of the totality of all beings: alternating between growth and decay. This is precisely why Foucault will choose the ‘history of sexuality,’ starting from the ‘Greek tragedy of incest,’ as the most exemplary domain of the disciplining practices; for it is precisely in human sexuality where “the *hubris* is most fundamental.”⁵

The very term *souci*, which underlies Foucault’s late project of self-governmentality, says it all: it is an elementary care of oneself and others, as if human life were indeed nothing but an affliction to be partly cured and partly endured, or a ‘deficiency’ to be corrected by the technics of self-help.⁶ There is no sense of hope or promise here, as Foucault tells us explicitly in his essay on life: life is an aberrant process that only the conscious correction of the self can mitigate. The only answer to the original anarchy of human drives is the discipline of self-control, which offers a necessary ‘lawful’ correction to their somewhat deficient ‘naturalness.’ By alluding to Georges Canguilhem’s theory of life as rooted in the process of erring, Foucault asks:

Should not the theory of the subject be radically reformulated, so, instead of basing itself on the consciousness that itself to the truth of the world, it rather finds its roots in the ‘errors’ of life?⁷

This radical reformulation mirrors the nature of the change that occurs in modernity on the plane of politics, steering away from the sovereign rationality of the law into the domain of life. Foucault’s late

4) Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill, 1963), 16;14.

5) Michel Foucault, “Le souci de la vérité. Entretien avec F. Ewald,” *Dits et écrits II, 1976-1988*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2001) 1492.

6) Foucault makes this ‘medicinal’ connection very clear himself: “In keeping with a tradition that goes back a very long way in Greek culture, the care of the self is in close correlation with medical thought and practice [...] The practice of the self implies that one should form the image of oneself not simply as an imperfect, ignorant individual who requires correction, training, and instruction, but also one who suffers from certain ills and who needs to have them treated, either by oneself or by someone who has the necessary competence. Everyone one must discover that he is in a state of need, that he needs to receive medication and assistance”: Michel Foucault, *Care of the Self. The History of Sexuality III*, trans. Robert Hurley, (London: Penguin, 1986) 54; 57. For Galen, irrational passions and logical mistakes belong to the same domain: “both are commonly called errors in a generic sense” (Ibid, 56).

7) Michel Foucault, “La vie: l’expérience et le science,” *Dits et écrits II, 1976-1988*, p. 1595.

project of the care of the self departs from phenomenology, with its unflinching reliance on *cogito* – and moves from the idea of the rational exercise of the *maîtrise de soi* [mastery of oneself], expressing the triumphant domination of reason over instincts, towards the necessary correction of control and discipline in response to the ‘erroneous’ and anarchic, biological *datum* of human existence. In this alternative, more *lebensphilosophisch* approach, *souci* indeed acquires the medicinal character of the remedy to the original, ‘hereditary’ affliction.⁸

Another Finitude

Is it really the case that the loss of belief in personal immortality necessarily entails the biopolitical reduction of the finite life to the basic law/necessity/limitation of nature? Do finitude and denaturalization truly exclude one another? Contrary to what Foucault approaches as a non-questionable self-evidence, there is still hope for another finitude which refrains from the renaturalization of human existence. By drawing mostly on the psychoanalytic theory (Freud, Lacan, Laplanche), I will sketch an alternative project based on the critique of the *nomotropic desire*, i.e. a tendency in human psyche to orient itself ‘according to the law.’ Though the idea of nomotropism (introduced by Eric Santner in his study on Moses and the Mosaic Law) originally applied

8) The same motif appears also in Sloterdijk’s concept of *Zähmung/Züchtung* [domestication] as opposed to the dangers of *Enthemmung* [unchainment]. In his essay, *Regeln für den Menschenpark* [Rules of the Human Zoo], Sloterdijk sketches the biopolitical vision of postmodern humanity as the Nietzschean Last Men who alternate between domestication and unchainment; between the necessary submission to the laws regulating human behaviour and occasional outbursts of instinctual anarchy. Similarly to Foucault, Sloterdijk accepts the ‘natural’ confinement of human life as finite, mortal, and reduced to the physiological cycle of birth and death, but rejects liberal naiveté in regard to the seemingly natural human capability of lawful self-regulation. Sloterdijk follows the German school of philosophical anthropology, deriving from Herder’s definition of man as *Mangelwesen* [deficient being] which, deprived, naturally, has to compensate for this lack in cultural self-formation. Culture may then, indeed, be seen as a process of cultivation: of turning an anarchic, dangerous, and destructive, human animal into a tamed creature, only then capable of survival. Following Herder, but also Heidegger (who himself followed Herder, despite all his reluctance towards philosophical anthropology), Sloterdijk calls man an ‘early birther’ (*frühgeburtliches Wesen*), paradoxically characterized by a “growing excess of animal unpreparedness to survive in its surrounding world” (*der wachsende Überschuss an animalischer Unfertigkeit in ihre Umwelten herausstraten*). Human being is thus a creature determined by the concepts of neoteny and “the chronic animal immaturity”: “Man is the product of a hyper-birth which turns him from a suckling into a worldling [Weltling].” Because of his premature birth, human being is born unable to survive on its own and far more helpless than any other natural being – yet this natural lack is soon compensated by the richness of the world-experience which no animal, always limited to its niche, can attain: Peter Sloterdijk, *Regeln für den Menschenpark. Ein Antwortschreiben zu Heideggers Brief über Humanismus*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999, pp. 33–34. And while Sloterdijk refers to Herder, Foucault finds an analogical support in the French historian of biological sciences, Georges Canguilhem. Just like Herder, Canguilhem saw the instinctual equipment of human being deficient and regarded culture as a necessary compensation for this natural lack, and perceived life – and particularly human life – as the ‘process of error’ to which cultures, with their religious, philosophical, and, finally, scientific insistence on ‘truth’ offer indispensable ‘correction’: “The opposition of true and false [...] is probably nothing else but the secondary response to the possibility of error intrinsic to life [...] For Canguilhem, the error is the permanent aleatory matrix around which the whole history of life and human development evolves”: Michel Foucault, “La vie: l’expérience et le science,” p. 1593–4. In fact, Stoics already maintained a similar view of the anthropological difference. In *Care of the Self*, Foucault, while referring to Epictetus, summarizes it as follows: “Man is defined in the *Discourses* as the being who was destined to care for himself. This is where the basic difference between him and other creatures resides. The animals find that which they need in order to live ‘ready prepared,’ for nature had so arranged things that animals are at our disposal without their having to look after themselves, and without our having to look after them. Man, on the other hand, must attend to himself” (p. 47). And although Epictetus immediately adds that this care is not a “consequence of some defect that would put man in a situation of need and make him in this respect inferior to the animals” (Ibid.), the ‘medicinal’ context in which he discusses *epimeleia heautou* or *cura sui* as indeed ‘curation’ leaves no doubt as to the final conclusion: that the human ‘situation’ is not blessing in itself, but it can turn for good – as the exercise of self-care unknown in the animal kingdom – only if properly ‘treated.’

only to the domain of the Jewish legal system,⁹ I want to expand its use and show that the human psyche is predominantly nomotropic in response to its initial anarchy of drives: it seeks law, order, and disciplining structures in order to counteract the primary condition of lack/excess which characterizes the human instinctual arrangement. From the point of view of psychoanalysis, therefore, modern biopolitics would be a result of the nomotropic fixation on the legality of nature, which, as Jean Laplanche convincingly shows, is one of the most powerful tendencies of the young human psyche. He calls this prevalent wish to be ‘like nature,’ *kata phusein*, by the term *biomorphism*: the desire to form the psyche according to the natural demands of life. In my critical approach to biopolitics, I wish to demonstrate how we can overcome the ‘biomorphic fixation’ by venturing beyond nomotropism, i.e. by trying to recover the lost ‘anarchic’ dimension of human psyche, this time emerging as reflexive subjective freedom.

As Foucault has already established, modernity, even before it explicitly formulates it, is from the start the epoch of the finite life, no longer investing in the hope of personal immortality. After Nietzsche, who advocated the return to the tragic paradigm as the only thought capable to endure the verdict of human finiteness, and after Heidegger, who redefined the life of the subject around the *Endlichkeit* of *Dasein*, the idea of the finite life becomes a staple subject of late-modern philosophy. To repeat: my aim here is not to criticize this development in order to revert to the ontological idea of infinity secured in the sacred image of the immortal life. My purpose is different. Instead of giving up on infinity altogether, I would like to see it transposed, as an indispensable moment of the finite human life, as the site of the true ‘human difference.’

At first glance, this seems like a paradox – a ‘living contradiction’ – but then one soon realizes that the best modern philosophy has to offer has been circling precisely around this problematic: Herder, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Freud – to name just a few modern giants – all try to think about finitude in a way which does not automatically exclude infinity. Yet, the current climate, which attempts to think finitude to the end (literally, to exhaustion) does not take well to *paradoxa*. Instead, it explores all traditional attributes of things finite: limitation (*Beschränkung*), conditioning (*Bedingtheit*), and, most of all, death. Hegel collectively named these attributes with the term *negativity*, signifying the very essence of bound and constrained finitude, perceived in pejorative contrast to the free and unbound infinite. If Kant was indeed right in his definition of radical autonomy as requiring freedom from natural limitations, the very rediscovery of finitude – putting the human being back in nature, the realm of all things bound, material, and finite. This announces the return of the crippling ‘limit’ – what Heidegger calls *peras*, the ‘circumference’ – indicating the primary constraint, the law of everything that comes to be only in order to perish.¹⁰

9) Santner defines nomotropism as the Jewish mode of legalistic discipline which ‘exits’ the pagan world of natural erotic enjoyment and submits the subject to a thorough reconstitution ‘according to the law’: “By nomotropism, I mean the obsessive compulsive preoccupation with *nomos*, in the matters of law, justice, and ethics, which for Freud also comprised the compulsive dimension of the search for scientific truth, the *Zwang* internal to *Wissenschaft*. In the one case – cosmotheism – we find direct enjoyment of cosmic Eros, of *deum sive natura*, while in nomotropism ‘enjoyment’ is conceived as an ambiguous libidinal tension strictly correlative to the turn to the Law”: Eric Santner, “Freud’s *Moses* and the Ethics of Nomotropic Desire,” in *October*, Vol. 88 (Spring, 1999), 14. And while Santner, here following the Jewish tradition, identifies the natural element within the human psyche with the erotic anarchy of drives, I claim that already the idea of nature emerges as a canvas for existential legislation and that the Greek rule of *kata phusein* (‘according to nature’) is the first nomotropic step beyond the original instinctual anarchy. In that sense, the biopolitical paradigm may indeed indicate a regression to the ‘pagan’ philosophy of life, yet not in terms of the return of repressed instincts, but rather in the Foucauldian Neostoic terms of ‘living according to nature.’

10) “The terms *ptosis* and *enkklisis* mean a falling, tipping, or inclining. This implies a dropping-off from an upright, straight stance. But this standing-there, this taking and maintaining a *stand* that stands erected high in itself, is what the Greeks understood as Being. Whatever takes such a stand becomes *constant* in itself, and, thereby, *freely and on its own runs up against the necessity of its limit, peras*. This *peras* is not something that first accrues to a being from outside. Much less is it some deficiency in the sense of a detri-

Yet, is it at all possible to think about our finitude differently, out from under the auspices of the natural law of birth and death, the necessary *peras* of de-finity and de-lineation? The whole thrust of such project would mean to try to think finitude *outside the box* of seemingly necessary limitations: to imagine a life finite, yet not automatically bound, closed, and incapacitated. The image of the finite life as a ‘living contradiction’ – torn between desire for immortality and the verdict of death, between acceptance of, and resistance to, the condition of finitude, not debilitated by this *Zerissenheit*, but, rather, spurred by it to the effort of ‘more life’ – emerges for the first time in Hegel. For Hegel, life is a true point of departure for the dialectical speculative thinking, the goal of which is the solution of this original contradiction: the reconciliation of the finite and the infinite. But as long as life is an existing and abiding, and not yet a reconciled contradiction, its dominant manifestation is *pain*:

Pain is therefore the *prerogative* of living natures; because they are the existent Notion, they are an *actuality of infinite power*, such that they are within themselves the negativity of themselves, that this their negativity is for them, and that they maintain themselves in their otherness. It is said that contradiction is unthinkable; but in fact, in the pain of a living being it is even an actual existence.¹¹

Hegel’s notion of the finite life as a dynamic ‘living contradiction’ stands in glaring opposition to the late-modern biopolitical notion of life as a smooth and uneventful cycle of growth and decline, seemingly at ease with the condition of finitude and its inner limitation (*peras*). Pain is a *prerogative*, which also means *privilege*: it is not to be taken away in the anaesthetic pursuit of a painless life which, in biopolitics, became a hardly disputed synonym of happiness. This does not mean, however, that such designation of pain as the symptom of the living contradiction leads to the conservative affirmation of the hardships of life. Quite the contrary, though pain may not be an easily sublatable ‘disappearing moment,’ it is nonetheless the sign which – very much like in the psychoanalytic ‘body language’ – cannot be semantically ignored. In his concept of pain as a sign, Hegel pioneers the Freudian, psychoanalytic, and anti-anaesthetic, approach which attempts to solve the riddle of human life by deciphering its unique idiom of suffering. Every finite life, which suffers because of its unfulfilled dream of ‘more life,’ is a human life-in-pain, and the whole Hegelian dialectics derives from this one fundamental recognition that lends it an immediate existential urgency.

Beyond Nomotropism

Hegel, the first philosopher of human desire, and Freud, the creator of the theory of drives, are the two paradigmatic thinkers who place the human *differentia specifica* in the particularity of man’s energetic endowment – in the singular arrangement of human drives, both excessive and ‘without qualities’ – which makes human being stand out against the background of all other creatures. In contrast to all those philosophers (and they are majority) who locate human difference in the *hermeneutic* moment – i.e. in man’s moment of initiation into

mental restriction. Instead, the self-restraining hold that comes from a limit, the having-of-itself wherein the constant holds itself, is the Being of beings; it is what first makes a being be a being as opposed to non being. For something to take such a stand therefore means for it to attain its limit, to de-limit oneself. Thus a basic characteristic of a being is its *telos*, which does not mean goal or purpose, but end [...] The essence of form, as understood by the Greeks, comes from the emergent placing-itself-forth-into-the-limit”: Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt, (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2000), 62–3.

11) Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969) 770, my emphasis.

the symbolic sphere – they believe that (only seemingly tautologically) human being is born human from the very start: from the onset, man emerges with its characteristic drive-arrangement that determines the vicissitudes of its ‘humanity.’ Man, therefore, is not so much a being that speaks – or rather, not firstly so – as a being endowed with a specific mode of life: a *problematic life*.

Man is born man, which means a being unable to live and survive. If we are to believe Freud, man’s fundamental, vital given consists in a bundle of drive-energies which not only makes him unable to live, but also oppose life. The first manifestation of this original energy in human existence is simultaneously helpless and destructive – i.e. the very opposite of adaptiveness – usually so highly awarded in the natural world. It is precisely due to this problematic endowment of human being, simultaneously natural and unnatural, that it becomes a psychic being; psyche is, in fact, nothing but a system of defensive strategies, devised to take care of man’s primordial incapability to live and survive. In Freud’s view, therefore, the human life is essentially and originally anarchic: although unliveable in its original form (or rather, the lack of it), it also gains the primordial sense of freedom by not submitting automatically to the fundamental law of all nature, i.e. the law of self-preservation. In terms of the Hegelian dialectics, it would mean that this initial drive-anarchy must be sublated by a necessary submission to ‘natural’ law and order, so the psyche can survive, but also preserved in order to be rediscovered at the higher level, where it appears as freedom. And freedom’s fundamental manifestation is *antinomian*: it is a power which counteracts the ordering principle of sheer survival, by rebelling against all seemingly necessary laws. The Hegelian ‘living contradiction,’ therefore, consists in the fact that the psyche is constantly torn between two opposing tendencies: the *nomotropic*, oriented towards laws capable of ordering and disciplining the amorphous drives within the finite natural cycle of life, and the *antinomian*, recollecting the original anarchy of drives in the sense of inner, potentially infinite, freedom.

According to Freud, the immediate effect of psyche’s initial helplessness is her *mimetic* strategy: the in/de/finiteness of the energetic endowment makes her prone to instantaneous imitation, in which she learns what it means to be and to survive from those surrounding beings which already exist and manage to survive. The whole of what we call man’s psychic existence is such a realm of fundamental *mimesis*: a nomotropic pursuit of the law that could be assumed as a non-negotiable necessity, thus organizing and subjugating the unlivable chaos of drives. At first, therefore, life does not yet offer itself as an option, but merely as a necessity of survival to be immediately embraced. Jean Laplanche talks here about the ‘dyad stage,’ in which the newly fangled psyche enters into a vital union with the mother’s body and learns the indispensable technics of staying-alive.¹² The quasi-monistic arrangement of this prolonged, primary narcissism does not yet present any alternative, any true ‘otherness’ to this immediate initiation into life that takes the form of a simple *biomorphism*: a defensive formation of the drives which ‘forget’ their own in/de/finite character and let themselves be shaped by the ‘vital order’ of self-preservation. In the biomorphic stage, the exigency of survival is so pressing that everything that puts the precarious life of the infant in danger becomes ‘forgotten,’ overwritten, and overruled by the *Lebensordnung* of the elementary ‘livability.’

It is only later that the first alternative emerges: the first *possibility* to choose. It occurs only with the intervention of the Father, who acts as the first true Other, capable of tearing up the seemingly natural self-evidence of the symbiotic union with the maternal body. At the moment the Name of the Father penetrates the dyad, the drives are being ‘recollected’ from their biomorphic path and ‘reminded’ of their proper destiny (all associations with Plato’s anamnesis are non-accidental), which, according to Jacques Lacan, is not life-clinging Eros, but the

12) See, most of all: Jean Laplanche, *Entre séduction et inspiration: l’homme*, (Paris: Quadrige / Presses Universitaires de France, 1999).

life-negating Thanatos. When, by ‘the inverted ladder of the Law of desire,’¹³ the drive unlearns what it means to live, and follows its more primordial death-wish – or, simply, the original indifference to self-preservation – the psyche becomes initiated into the realm opposite to the biomorphic life, i.e. into the symbolic sphere of language, which can be reached only via the way of Thanatos. One set of laws, the *nomos of the Earth*, which teach all beings natural survival, become thus replaced by another: the death-governed law of the symbolic. There is not return to the initial anarchy of the drives, but the cost of this second subordination is the ‘loss of life:’ the subject initiated into the symbolic sphere does not live, but, by abiding in death, merely exists.

This is as far the current psychoanalytic theory takes us. We stand at the gates of life and death, Eros and Thanatos, where the choice lies between the *quasi-animality of the biomorphic existence*, which is never simply biological, but aims at the smoothness of physiological functionality as its regulative idea, and the humanity of the symbolic existence, which is conditioned by the law of death. By assuming that human psyche is fundamentally *nomotropic*, Lacanian psychoanalysis poses the sole alternative: either we learn to survive by imitating the self-preserving ‘vital order,’ and assume the natural laws of survival, or we remain faithful to our original inability to survive and follow the sublime law of death, which takes us, its subjects, under its dark wings. Yet, my purpose here is to venture beyond Lacan, beyond the dualism of biomorphism and thanaticism – which also means, beyond any nomotropic tendency – and into a more dialectical solution, where it becomes possible to ‘choose life:’ this time, choosing freely, to invert or *turn* the ‘ladder of desire’ into the life-affirming act of *biophilia*.

This reflexive choice of life, or, biophilia, is no longer bound by the dualism of Eros and Thanatos and their respective laws; it is beyond both the survivalist imperative of *imitatio naturae* and the sublime, anti-naturalist gesture of withdrawal from life. In the stage of biophilia, life – the true human life – is given new possibilities that could never flourish under biomorphic constraints: made possible by the drives’ return to their original in/de/finiteness. Now, however, this in/de/finiteness is no longer just helpless, or destructive. There is no longer an opposition to life, but an affirmation of it, and said in/de/finiteness subsumes survival, aiming at something more, that is, ‘more life:’ a new kind of existence which replaces egotistic self-preservation with other, less necessitarian, goals. This is the moment Hegel calls the ‘recollection of freedom:’ the recovery of the anarchic energy of the drives at the higher level, drives that now antinomically oppose the nomotropic temptation of the subject who previously looked only for submission.

The biophilic choice finds confirmation in the biblical injunction that I have chosen for the motto to my essay: the passage from Deuteronomy where God says in deceptively simple terms - “I have set before you life and death: choose life” (30:19). *Choosing life* means here more than just taking the side of life in its opposition to death. On the one hand, it means taking life out of the context where life and death lie bound with each other in the secret bond of *phusis*: it means taking life out of nature and the limitation of natural laws. It does not necessarily imply, therefore, to pitch life infinitely against mortality: it merely means that human life must be enhanced as such in the conditions of finitude. Even if our existence is to be spent on earth with no prospect of a spiritual afterlife, it does not yet indicate that it is to be ruled by the ‘system of nature.’ On the other hand, the imperative to choose life precludes any identification with Thanatos, which is the other temptation to which the nomotropic psyche is prone to succumb to. Neither life-clinging in the biomorphic manner, nor life-negating in the thanatic way, the biophilic option is a free choice of life. It is life-affirming and life-enhancing, not just in us but also in others. As in the Judeo-Christian messianic antinomian tradition, this love of life stands above any law.

13) Jacques Lacan, “Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectics of Desire,” in *Écrits. A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (London: Routledge, 1989), 324.

Conclusion

Anarchy – nomotropism – antinomianism: such is the Hegelian triad superimposed on the Freudian story of psychogenesis, where the final ‘love of life’ goes beyond any attachment to the law, either natural or thanatic. Man is born man, a being-unable-to-live, but it remains a question whether man remains a man. This is the question of whether the psychic strategies of survival – chosen at the intersection of individual and collective-cultural influences – aim at the erasure of the human problem, and thus opt for the biomorphic *renaturalization* of man, or whether they aim at the enhancement of the human problem, and thus opt for the even further *denaturalization* of man, i.e. for an opening of an even wider gap between him and the rest of the so called ‘natural’ beings. Strategies maintaining the problematicity of becoming human are full of psychic risks, but they are also less deceptive than the strategies of rendering man unproblematic and quasi-natural, because they always leave an energetic remnant that cause anxiety and pain: the symptom of a never completely fulfilled wish for perfect adaptation. As we have seen, these anthropogenic (*sensu stricto*) strategies fall under two very different headings: *thanathic* and *biophilic*. In its thanathic version, the anthropogenic strategy locates the human *differentia specifica* in the sublime law of death or indifference-to-life; it is its intimate (or, as Lacan, the great exponent of this variant, calls it: ex-timate) arch-presence in the human energetic system that emphasizes the gap between man and the rest of ‘the living’ that enjoy the simple ‘natural’ life. In its biophilic version, the anthropogenic strategy proceeds along a more complicated, antinomian path, simultaneously opposed to both the Law of Life and the Law of Death. It aims at the decisive reorganization of the system of drives: what appears originally as merely a ‘problem,’ perhaps even a ‘curse,’ in the end turns into an advantage through a love of ‘more life’ which desires life to be intensified, augmented, and taken out of the natural limitations.

Not to be *kata phusein*, not to fall mimetically for natural beings, not to form oneself according to the vital order of self-preserving drives, means to venture beyond survival into the realm which immediately bifurcates into Death and More Life. This is precisely the biblical choice of life and death which stands before the living psyche on her path towards subjectification. According to the ‘thanatic,’ Lacanian strain of thought, the subject can only be constituted when it liberates itself from the natural law of survival and *subjects* itself to the superior, more intimately human law of death which determines the *true* law of desire (hence, the ‘subject’ as the result of this ultimate self-offering in *soumission*). As Slavoj Žižek says, faithfully following his Absolute Master, Lacan: “Serving the Law is the highest adventure.”¹⁴ However, according to the alternative, more Hegelian, reading of the psychogenetic story, the subject constitutes itself as a gradual recollection (*Erinnerung*) of freedom, which transcends *any* nomotropic tendency: the real subjectivity is the formation which simultaneously ventures beyond the necessity of survival and the sublime necessity of self-sacrifice, into a new ‘happy and lawless’ way of living. Translating this narrative of subjectification into the idiom of modern politics, we could say that it wishes to transcend both the biopolitical paradigm, based on the biomorphic law of natural survival, and the revolutionary paradigm based on the thanatic law of the ‘symbolic suicide.’¹⁵

14) Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf. The Perverse Core of Christianity*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 56.

15) The notion of the ‘symbolic suicide,’ as the model for the modern revolutionary who boldly disdains the necessities of life and is ready to ‘die for a Cause,’ is championed mostly by Slavoj Žižek, who locates in this act of self-offering/submission to the Law of Death the very gist of humanity. Žižek is so critical of the biopolitical paradigm, governed by the ‘pagan category of happiness,’ that he is ready to praise in contrast the terrorist suicidal attacks: “*happiness* is a category of the pleasure principle, and what undermines it is the insistence of a Beyond of the pleasure principle [...] the radical pursuit of secularization, the turn toward our worldly life, transforms this life itself into an ‘abstract’ anemic process—and nowhere is this paradoxical reversal more evident than in the work of de Sade, where the unconstrained assertion of sexuality deprived of the last vestiges of spiritual transcendence turns sexuality itself into a mechanical exercise devoid of any authentic sensual passion. And is not a similar reversal clearly discernible in the deadlock of today’s Last Men, ‘postmodern’ individuals who reject all ‘higher’ goals as *terrorist*, and dedicate their life to a survival replete with more and

In order to be constituted as a subject, the human psyche has to steer away from nature, or, more precisely, from what presents itself as natural law in the early stage of psychogenesis – namely, the biomorphic temptation. But it also needs to steer away from another form of submission, which presents itself as more authentically human: the Law of Death. Serving the law – either in its biomorphic, or thanatic variant – is not the highest adventure of the subjective life. The true adventure lies in the uncharted territories of antinomian freedom, which chooses life in all its experimental plasticity by simultaneously taking human life out of nature and the dominion of death.

more refined and artificially excited/aroused small pleasures?": *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, pp. 42; 39. In *The Fragile Absolute*, Žižek defines the symbolic suicide as the revolutionary destruction of all previous forms of social life, which creates a Void, where only one object is allowed to emerge: the sacred Cause: "For Lacan, creative sublimation and the death drive are strictly correlative: the death drive empties the (sacred) Place, creates the Clearing, the Void, the Frame, which is then filled by the object 'elevated to the dignity of the Thing.' Here we encounter the third kind of suicide: the suicide that defines the death drive, *symbolic* suicide – not in the sense of 'not dying really, just symbolically,' but in the more precise sense of the erasure of the symbolic network that defines the subject's identity, of cutting off all the links that anchor the subject in its symbolic substance. Here, the subject finds itself totally deprived of its symbolic identity, thrown into the 'night of the world' in which its only correlative is the minimum of an excremental leftover, a piece of trash, a mote of dust in the eye, an *almost-nothing* that sustains the pure Place-Frame-Void, so that here, finally, 'nothing but the place takes place.' Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute Or, Why is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London: Verso, 2000), 30.