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Is There Life Before Death? On Agata Bielik Robson's *Another Finitude*

Review: Agata Bielik-Robson,
Another Finitude: Messianic Vitalism and Philosophy
(London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 312 pages.

Since Nietzsche announced (or prophesied) the death of God, thinkers who took his words seriously have been dealing with one crucial question: how to live a life stripped of any references to transcendent divinity? Are we to mourn God's death indefinitely? Will we finally acknowledge and embrace our status of finite and contingent creatures? In her recent book titled *Another Finitude*¹ Agata Bielik Robson addresses these questions. While this is certainly not the first time she has tackled such issues, this study displays the kind of determination, clarity and subtlety that makes it truly exceptional. Further, Bielik-Robson's style is compelling, precise, yet fluent; it boasts a highly affirmative tone.

In the following account of this book, I would like to distinguish three dimensions that the author does not introduce herself. The first is strictly theoretical: Bielik-Robson develops a philosophical concept of finitude or finite life. The second could be called strategic, for lack of a better word, since she forms an alliance with certain authors and criticizes others. Finally, the third one is apologetic insofar as she defends a particular form of theological thinking, namely the metatheology of finite life. Although these three dimensions remain inseparable, I shall attempt to reconstruct them one by one.

1) Hereafter referred to parenthetically as AF along with page numbers.

The Concept of Finitude

The theoretical stakes of Bielik-Robson's book may be defined as follows: how to conceptualize finitude and finite human life without resorting to the discourse of lack? In other words: how to consider humanity's condition of finitude in positive terms? The shadow of the dead (or dying) God is long. Despite recognizing his death, we tend to regard finitude in terms of privation. It is no longer a yearning for something that exists in the netherworld but a seemingly paradoxical lack that we ourselves admit to be an illusion: a sense of being denied access to the one true, eternal life that we actually no longer believe in. Bielik-Robson does a great philosophical job in tracing and refuting the discourse of "acephalic Neoplatonism": "the once most meaningful system of Western metaphysics, now devoid of its head – the apex in the form of ontological infinity. Yet, despite its impairment, the Neoplatonic ontological hierarchy remains stubbornly operative in the lower realms of existence which it continues to give an intensely negative colouring" (AF, x). Indeed, frustrated metaphysicians accuse life in the most fanatic manner, going as far as to "criminalize" it: to live is to be guilty or indebted. Unsurprisingly, the payment date would be the moment of death. For this reason, another finitude must be conceptualized – one free from the grim "thanaticism" that has been dominating modern philosophical thought. Under this new concept, a systematic overestimation of death and emphasis on mortality would be replaced with focus on natality and the prevalence of love as the new principle, or rather a non-principle since death itself is the only certainty.

However, such affirmation of contingent life does not entail an apology for the natural order, finally recognized after God's twilight. Agata Bielik-Robson is just as critical of naturalizing life as she is of its (post)metaphysical culpabilization. She rejects both the modern "thanaticism" and "biomorphism" in the name of a true "biophilia": "Neither life-clinging in the biomorphic manner, nor life-negating in the thanatic way – the biophilic option is a free choice of life, life-affirming and life-enhancing, and ... not just in us, but also in others" (AF, 18). In her view, finitude without life (its mortification with the seal of death) and life without finitude both fail as conceptual figures. She vehemently turns against the idea of *kata phusein*, that is, living according to nature, for she sees nature as nothing more than a "monotone rhythm of growth and decay" (AF, xiv) or a "dull homeostasis" (AF, 164): an infinite and all-encompassing reality where only Life lives at the cost of the living. Certainly, it is not the only way in which *phusis* may be understood. Bielik-Robson suggests a different concept of nature viewed as a dynamic, mutating, and creative reality (AF, 4–5). Still, what seems crucial in this polemic is not so much the concept of *phusis* as the phantasy of a joyful return to natural innocence: "the guilty feeling of life can never be completely dispelled for the sake of the anarchic 'innocence of becoming'" (AF, 128). Anarchic and creative, nature still functions as a mask of plenitude. To grasp the position taken by Bielik-Robson, it needs to be remembered that she is fighting on two fronts: against the denigration of life on the one hand, and against the phantasm of pure, unscathed Life on the other. Rejection of the idea that the living are culpable does not lead her to praise the absolute innocence of Life because she sees this as a great philosophical swindle. Nature's plenitude is in fact a horror from which we have to find a way out.

In passages referring to psychoanalysis Bielik-Robson acknowledges the role of anxiety and depression in the process of forming the finite subject. It is especially the latter, defined as a "withdrawal from the life with objects," (AF, 189) that makes it possible for a human being to establish a new type of loving relation with the world: a "connection without attachment" (AF, 188). On a more abstract level, the imperative is to abide by the *aporia*, that is, to adopt a dialectical position. "Every finite life suffers because of its unfulfilled wish of 'more life'," (AF, xv) although "too much life will kill you" (AF, 179). Suffering is not a punishment for being alive, nor is it the result of original sin. It stems from the fact that finite life longs for more: not for an afterlife of any sort, but for the intensification of life "here below," that is, for a life that would be more

vigorous without collapsing into the *pleroma* of eternal, infinite Life itself. It is a sign of life's "in/de/finitude": its indefinite appetite for more and thus a sign of transcendence, one found in immanence. *Finitum capax infiniti*, as Bielik-Robson puts it.

The League Against Death

The concept of another finitude is forged by Agata Bielik-Robson in dialogue and dispute with the philosophical tradition, most of all with modern and contemporary thinkers. She rarely speaks directly about her views on life, death, and infinity. Instead, she reads and reinterprets works by authors she deems her allies or adversaries. Her main opponent is obviously Heidegger and his idea of finitude as being-towards-death. It is precisely overestimating death or making one's intimate relation with it the warrant for authenticity that Bielik-Robson debunks as yet another ruse of modern "thanaticism" (whose champions also include Hegel and Kojève). On the other hand, (or front), she engages Deleuze and other thinkers whose vitalism of infinite Life she declares false. Does she do justice to her adversaries? No, if this would mean respecting all nuances and ambiguities, or rejecting any simplification. Still, one's own image of intellectual opponents is always a construct. All one may expect is that it does not lapse into caricature. Luckily, this is not the case in *Another Finitude*. Bielik-Robson is clear about the interpretative choices she makes and (most often) their justification. As for Heidegger, she admits that, according to certain interpretations, "death in ... *Being and Time* is a philosophically modified *different death*: just a neutral marker of finitude that works as a catalysing and intensifying factor. All that passes through this narrow 'opening', which is Dasein, aware of its finite existence, acquires infinite urgency and pathos of absolute intensity" (AF, 43). This would make Heidegger's reflection on finitude closer to her own. Nevertheless, Bielik-Robson rejects this reading of Heidegger, proposed by Jean-Luc Nancy, and chooses one by Maurice Blanchot, although she has more in common with the former, while the latter is in fact a representative of "thanaticism." This is done only to show that Heidegger could not have been right. Reading Heidegger against the grain, she shows that even when he "stubbornly insists on maintaining his 'different death' as the gate to *die eigentliche Existenz* full of heroic self-actualizations, he in fact does the very opposite" (AF, 49). Even if her strategy in the dispute with Heidegger is determined by a reluctance of ethical and political nature, it is also theoretically grounded and justified, at least as one possible way of dealing with the idea of *Sein-zum-Tode*. She also offers a contrary reading of Freud, although with a different intention, defending him from his own "thanaticism" and reviving his "major discovery: the indefiniteness of the human drive" (AF, 162).

According to Bielik-Robson, Deleuze concludes the tradition of *Lebensphilosophie*, which "extols ... the *unliveable pure life*" (AF, 9). In the case of this philosopher, her strategy is less explicit yet still possible to identify. The interpretation exposes certain elements that are undoubtedly present in his theory, while other aspects or ambiguities remain latent. "A life" praised by Deleuze in one of his last essays becomes the infinite "*pleroma* of a not yet actualised virtuality" (AF, 203). If it is true that he views the singularity of "a life" as excluding its individual character,² it is also true that his thought is marked by the tension between virtuality and its actualizations, or, in his later writings, between the indeed unliveable, purely schizophrenic process of deterritorialization and acts that establish territories of different kinds. It is in this tension that subjectivity emerges. Being singular, in the Deleuzian sense, means neither being in-dividual nor dissolving in the neutral, abyssal plenitude of the *phusis*. Bielik-Robson acknowledges the presence of a similar conceptual tension in Deleuze – one "between self-preservation and creativity" (AF, 137) – but this hardly affects her interpretation. Once

2) Gilles Deleuze, *Immanence: A Life, in Two Regimes of Madness. Texts and Interviews 1975–1995*, trans. Ames Hodges, Mike Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), 386–87.

again, there are no “just” interpretations, especially when they are developed polemically. Bielik-Robson needs Heidegger as a whipping boy. At the same time, however, she does not need Deleuze because she has other allies, who comprise what she calls “a league against death” (AF, 20).

Members of this league – Rosenzweig, Arendt, Derrida, Freud, and others – seem to have little in common, but each in their own way helps Bielik-Robson to elaborate her concept of finitude and break the spell of thanatosis. From Rosenzweig she borrows the idea of love as the highest (non)principle of finite life. It is a love that refuses to transform into an exalted admiration of everything that exists, but becomes a form of disillusioned neighborly love. In Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption*, “love strives towards God, but becomes rejected and, thanks to this fortunate frustration, comes back to the creaturely world where the one great unattainable object ... becomes diffused into a metonymic sequence of small objects ... the neighbours” (AF, 67). From Arendt she draws the idea of natality, confirming the transitive character of life and introducing an actual novelty into natural Being: “*initium* allows for a creative disruption of the cosmic monotony, into which there suddenly enters a *novitas*, something radically new. ‘The child is born’: this sentence announces a revolution of newness disturbing the natural *nihil novi sub sole*” (AF, 78). Finally, Freud’s “major discovery,” later betrayed and abandoned by both him and (even more categorically) by Lacan, namely the “polyperverse” nature of the drive, or free libidinal energy, which can never be fully reduced to sexuality (or at least a “sexuality properly sexualized” that follows the royal path to genital satisfaction), serves as an argument in favor of the in/de/finiteness of life, as Bielik-Robson understands it.³

An exceptional role is played in her arguments by Jacques Derrida. His reflection on anthropological difference and the delimitation between animal and man, as well as his critique of the death penalty, are important points of reference for Bielik-Robson. However, apart from these particular ideas and arguments, Derridean inspirations lead directly to the third, apologetic dimension of her study. *Force of Law*, where Derrida comments on Benjamin, offers a critique of biologism as the “awakening of a Judaic tradition” (AF, 4). This formula becomes a refrain in Bielik-Robson’s book. The vitalism she defends is “messianic” in the sense developed by Derrida. Ultimately, his philosophical understanding of messianism seems to be crucial for the project outlined in *Another Finitude*.

The Wakening

Bielik-Robson argues that “the best language to capture the dialectic of life and thought philosophically is *metatheological*” (AF, 135). The imperative to affirm finite life, the critique of the idea of lack, the fight with headless metaphysics, and the rejection of the death drive can be all found in other authors. Nevertheless, the author’s “metatheological” declaration allows one to fully recognize the unique character of her project and philosophical perspective. Unsurprisingly, it is also here that things become more complicated.

Surely, members of Bielik-Robson’s “league” refer to the same Judaic tradition whose awakening she has been looking forward to. However, this question cannot be reduced to the choice of allies. There is a deeper, philosophical motivation at work here. It is rooted in the idea that theology or religion, specifically Judaism, could inspire

3) This reading of Freud resembles, unexpectedly, the one proposed by Deleuze and Guattari. For them, “the great discovery of psychoanalysis was that of the production of desire.” Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 24. By desire they understand a plastic, “deterritorialized” energy that is indeed in/de/finite. This discovery “was soon buried” by Freud himself and his successors “beneath a new brand of idealism” (Ibid., 24) of Oedipal familialization, which is also the moment “when the dualism passed into a death instinct against Eros”; according to Deleuze and Guattari, “this was no longer a simple limitation, it was a liquidation of the libido.” Ibid., 331.

and support the concept of finitude. Also, the use of figures such as the Exodus – found in the description of the act of breaking the chains of natural necessity or “walking away from the Egyptian swamps of the birth enigma” (AF, 99) – is not just a question of finding a suitable metaphor (which could be easily replaced with another). In the end, the affirmation of finite life has to assume the form of belief: “a *belief* in life, which tests the ‘might’ of this belief as nothing but belief from the point of view of the singular living: the religion of the finite life” (AF, 32). It is only in this form (or at least predominantly), that is, as an act of religious belief, that finite life may be praised philosophically. This thesis clearly raises many questions concerning the nature of belief and religion, the relation between religion (or theology) and philosophy, and so forth. What kind of religion is the “religion of the finite life”? Is Judaism one such religion? What is the difference between regular theology and the “metatheology” that provides the most adequate terms for her new philosophy? Should we not speak of “metareligion” as well?

This aspect of Bielik-Robson's book could be called “apologetic” because in exposing her metatheological argument she distances herself from dominant forms of theological and religious thinking, defending religion against itself, just like she defends Freud's revolutionary discovery against psychoanalytical reaction. In this apology, she adopts Derrida's concept of messianism “that derives from the certain religious tradition but is by no means reducible to it” (AF, 118). At stake here is the “possibility of *another* political theology that knows nothing higher than the precarious and vulnerable existence of a singular living thing” (AF, 119). It has to be “another theology” for the existing or dominating one is its opposite. It fits “the sovereign paradigm,” where “religion is the cult of the absolutely indemnified and thus absolutely powerful: the power transcending the vulnerable condition of the living, *beyond* life-and-death, as well as *over* life and death” (AF, 121). “Within this religious complex,” she continues, “death becomes the model of the Absolute, as well as the mystical foundation of all authority: virginally pure, ideal, ultimate, unflinching legality that knows no exception, no extenuating circumstances” (AF, 122). According to Derrida and Bielik-Robson, messianism constitutes “an alternative tradition” (AF, 121) that gives up the logic of sacrifice and abolishes the Law, dissolving “its hardness into a fluid and supple element of mercy” (AF, 121). Is this the core of religion as such, its non-essence, forever repressed and forgotten in all forms of religious cult? Although Bielik-Robson does not admit it explicitly, she hints that this may be the possible meaning of her metatheology. Her ambition would be thus to extract this messianic non-essence from dogmatic theology, in the course of a specific philosophical-chemical reaction.⁴

What is the relation between this messianic spirit and Judaism? Even if we agree that perceiving “Jewish Law as the epitome of the sovereign imposition from ‘beyond’” is a “common prejudice” (AF, 88), the question still lingers. Do other religions also contain and transmit the messianic message, despite prevailing theological and institutional dogmatisms? *Another Finitude* does not provide a clear answer. Agata Bielik-Robson argues in favor of this metatheology in many other essays and books, but never neutralizes the key ambiguity. The religious idiom of metatheology, which she chose for her philosophical project, has enabled her to deal with the most complex philosophical problems, but it cannot be reduced to any existing religious traditions, although it clearly derives from one of them, just like Heidegger's *Dasein*, which, “though not man, is nevertheless *nothing other* than man.”⁵

4) Bielik-Robson does not directly address the question whether religion, or any other historical phenomenon for that matter, has a “core” that could be revealed or revived. It remains uncertain if she follows Nietzsche in this respect. The author of *The Gay Science* claimed that “the whole history of a ‘thing,’ an organ, a tradition can to this extent be a continuous chain of signs, continually revealing new interpretations and adaptations, the causes of which need not be connected even amongst themselves, but rather sometimes just follow and replace one another at random.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 51. What she calls messianicity would be a lucky incident in the history of religion rather than its hidden essence.

5) Derrida, *The Ends of Man*, in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 127.

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If the use of metatheological or metareligious language eventually serves philosophical goals, why not believe in philosophy in the first place? Why is this detour through theology necessary to explicate the problem of finitude? This debate may never lead to any conclusion. For some authors, philosophical questions are essentially religious, while for others the religious ones are basically philosophical. They all address these issues in different ways. However, the case of Agata Bielik-Robson seems to be more complicated. She does not begin from the metareligious position, but rather assumes it as original and necessary in a retroactive gesture. Perhaps it is the failure of philosophy or Bielik-Robson's disappointment with modern philosophical attempts to think finitude that motivate this. Signs of profound dissatisfaction may be traced in several passages devoted to Nietzsche. Bielik-Robson knows well that it was Nietzsche who first formulated the problem she addresses: how to think the finite reality of *Diesseits* without referring to the empty heavens of *Jenseits*? How to shake off the shadow of dead God and metaphysics? And yet, "Zarathustra has not entered the stage: after the night of the longest error seemingly gone, none of the Nietzschean affirmative prophecies has been fulfilled" (AF, x). Was it because the diagnosis was false right from the beginning, while the prophecies immature? Bielik-Robson's attitude to Nietzsche seems ambiguous. On the one hand, he inspired (though in radically different ways) both Heidegger and Deleuze – her two philosophical opponents. On the other hand, "in his subtler phases" (AF, 166) he would always affirm life, understanding it as something more than just a biological fact. How would Bielik-Robson's concept of another finitude look if she followed Nietzsche's subtler phases rather than the messianic anti-tradition? It is also possible that her dissatisfaction with the way modern and contemporary post-Nietzschean thought deals with the question of finitude is itself religiously motivated, or rather ethically, the ethics of neighbourly love being, as it were, the metareligious core of religion. This ethical moment is absent in Heidegger, as well as in most of the philosophy of life.

I principally share Agata Bielik-Robson's intention to break away from the priestly philosophical *dispositif* that compels us to regard finite life in terms of sin, fall, and lack. However, I have one important reservation. What her new concept of finitude demonstrates is just a possibility of affirmation. Indeed, if people do not *experience* their own lives in the mode of living-loving, it is not because they are philosophically or metatheologically wrong. They think of life as misery and torment because they *are* tormented, because their relations with others are not grounded in love but marked by fear, violence, possessiveness, hypocrisy, and hatred. They are depressed and angry because they are exploited, or because the world as we know it is likely to perish. They do meaningless or deleterious things to earn a living. Bielik-Robson knows this. It is not enough to adopt an adequate concept of life – life itself has to be changed. This is precisely the "slight adjustment" (AF, 147) that messianism seems to be all about. Nevertheless, while reading *Another Finitude*, especially the long passages devoted to psychoanalysis, one may arrive at the conclusion that she sees this change predominantly in terms of an internal conversion of the subject. However, can there be *torat hayim* without *tikkun olam*? Can the principle of life rule without repairing the world first?



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