

“Leben und Gewalt” or “Gewalt und Leben”

A Commentary on Paragraph 18 of Walter Benjamin’s “Toward the Critique of Violence”

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ABSTRACT In paragraph 18 of “Toward the Critique of Violence,” the terms *life*, *living*, and *violence*, and the relations among them, complicate Walter Benjamin’s justification of divine violence—his text’s main discovery. This article seeks to reconstruct Benjamin’s uses of *life* and *living* in earlier texts and to consider the potential influence of various authors he was reading at the time (Heinrich Rickert, Erich Unger, Kurt Hiller, Gershom Scholem). Benjamin’s distinction between *life* and *living* is crucial for his critique of pacifism and for his shift in perspective: he moves the focus from the victim to the one committing murder, but whose violent act just might bring justice.

KEYWORDS Walter Benjamin, critique of violence, pacifism

Even before writing “Toward a Critique of Violence,” Walter Benjamin had made attempts at examining the relation between life and violence. At the beginning of 1920, he writes “Leben und Gewalt” (“Life and Violence”).¹ Yet a reconstruction of how he uses the word *life* in his early texts, its attributes and variations, is well-nigh impossible because we are missing a short but crucial note on the text. In two letters to Gershom Scholem of that year, Benjamin first says (on April 17) that recently he had composed this brief piece (“I believe I can say that it was written from the heart”), and then (on May 26) that he would send him this “very short” text, “Gewalt und Leben,” “once [his] wife has made a copy of it.”² Although the text never made it into Scholem’s hands, a fragment was saved in Benjamin’s manuscripts.³ In the fragment, the title is reversed to “Leben und Gewalt,” which is how Benjamin mentions it once again in his notes for a critique of Herbert Vorwerk’s “Das Recht zur Gewaltwendung” (“The Right to the Use of Force”).⁴ In addition to returning to the topic on which he had already written before reading Vorwerk’s article (which

inspired him to write something new), Benjamin is also reconsidering the order of the words in the title. It would seem that even though the words *Gewalt* and *Leben* are synonymous, nevertheless the first word in the phrase bears more weight and as such is his focus. If *Leben* is privileged at the beginning, then the sudden appearance of *Gewalt* designates a new challenge and renewed interest.

Based on a few traces of an inordinately important and still very current text that has never reached us in its entirety, indeed that may never have been completed, I would like provisionally to introduce a few points. First, the word *life* and its variations bring Benjamin to the problem of violence, or, rather, *life* introduces the link between life and violence, which will subsequently lead him toward a critique of violence. Second, the topic of life represents a crucial problem: it blows wind in the sails of Benjamin's argument about violence, but it also builds an ambiguity into this future text, for the status of "Toward the Critique of Violence" as a difficult, often problematic, even inscrutable text is above all due to the use and variation of the word *life* and its connection to violence. Third, one of Benjamin's novelties and main contributions to thinking about life and violence lies perhaps in an original sentence from the very end of §17: "divine violence is pure violence over all life for the sake of living."⁵ Yet, the sentence cannot be satisfactorily interpreted or supported, and might be entirely an empty construction. Fourth, there are sufficient reasons to believe that Benjamin incorporated his very short but timely note "Leben und Gewalt" into "Toward the Critique of Violence," namely at that point in §18 when he tries to describe the complicated connection between violence and life (or, conversely, that in the course of writing "The Critique," this note was rejected as insufficient and irrelevant, even though his wife carefully transcribed it). Moreover, he uses the word *theorem* in the brief text, and it appears twice in this paragraph. Fifth, owing precisely to the problems in thematizing the relation of life and violence, the text of "Toward the Critique of Violence" is itself unfinished and unclear. It becomes so irreparably convoluted that it would have been impossible to transform it, as Benjamin dreamt, into a larger project or book about politics. Indeed, Benjamin himself lists a series of steps throughout §17 and §18 ("as cannot be shown here in greater detail" [§17]; "it would be worthwhile to track down the origin of the dogma of the sanctity of life" [§18]; etc.) that he simply does not have the capacity to execute fully, yet are essential to the basic argument of the text.

But whence *life* in Walter Benjamin in the first place? How does it crop up? How do the various influences leading up to §18 of "Toward the Critique of Violence" play out in relation with one another? Can the theater of these influences, which crucially determine Benjamin's important text, be explained in detail by identifying and separating all the main actors and mechanisms on stage? Provisionally, let us say that there are four characters or figures, although in Benjamin's theater, they swap roles and change function.

Benjamin inherits the term *life*—“philosophy of life” in a strictly philosophical register—from Heinrich Rickert, whose course *Philosophie des Lebens* Benjamin had taken as a student. Paradoxically, Rickert’s resistance to and distance from *blosse Leben* (mere life), which Benjamin later thematizes in paragraph 18 of “Toward the Critique of Violence” and connects to the thinking of Kurt Hiller, will be useful to Benjamin in confronting Hiller’s pacifism. The resistance toward Hiller will also be accompanied by an effort (in which one may discern Scholem’s influence on Benjamin) to transform his resistance to pacifism into a form of Judaism. What *life* means in the context of violence and war is introduced not only by the contemporaneity of the Great War, which left a deep impression on Benjamin’s thinking, but above all by Benjamin’s reading of Erich Unger’s “Der Krieg” from 1915 and 1916. Unger’s argument against pacifism and his thematization of the defense of life in the context of pacifism will be directly carried over a few years later into Benjamin’s debate with Hiller. Finally, Benjamin’s readings of Hiller and Scholem permeate the structure of paragraph 18 both explicitly and implicitly. Pacifism, and particularly socialism (or Bolshevism for Scholem⁶) and the justification of revolutionary violence—which is to say, the Judaism with which Benjamin occasionally flirts, often ineptly—all fuel his argument and the justification of the idea regarding a new or different kind of violence, apart from the kind recognized by legal theory.

The fiction of mere or bare life (*das blosse Leben*)—that is, a life that seems to precede everything that is not itself (and thus also law, i.e., the norm)—is also opposed to life ruled by the norm. What is “mere life?”⁷ What is a life?⁸ Is it even possible to ask, What is the life of one living?⁹ One definition—among the many insufficiently convincing, it seems to me—from the beginning of the twentieth century is: “La vie est l’ensemble des fonctions qui résistent à la mort” (Life is a set of functions that resists death).¹⁰ This definition deploys a negation: the negation and end of life, but it also implies a concept of organization or plurality of functions that allow life to resist and withstand its own end. Even this definition, then, implying as it does that life is a complex and complicated order, still exceeds the fiction of “mere or bare life.”¹¹ For Rickert, the idea that life can be determined without the help of other terms (*dass das Leben ohne Hilfe anderer Begriffe bestimmt*), that life can be directly experienced (in *Philosophie des Lebens*, Rickert assigns this fantasy to intuitive vitalism¹²), is empty banter. “Das blosse Leben halte ich für sinnlos,” Rickert says, because it is of no value¹³ and because it is naught but vegetating.¹⁴ Explaining over the course of a hundred pages that *die Philosophie des blossten Lebens* has no future whatsoever, Rickert is adamant about revealing the limitations of this model, more current than any other in our times.

Rickert’s terminology entirely saturates Benjamin’s early theoretical work, later providing a preamble to Benjamin’s first major publication “The Life of Students” (of 1915), where *life* is used excessively and in the most disparate contexts.

But this changes with the advent of the Great War.¹⁵ This change of perspective seems to emerge from an encounter with a text by Erich Unger, Benjamin's personal acquaintance whose work he had been following for a while.¹⁶ The first part of Unger's 1915 text presents two opposed positions, which Benjamin reconstructs for "Toward the Critique of Violence" (and in paragraph 18 in particular). The first position regards the description of the violence or cruel war that is "blasphemy against the living" — that is, an opposition not to life (as such), but to the living.¹⁷ For a person incapacitated for war or committing violence — Unger is speaking neither of a pacifist nor a wounded war veteran — war or violence represent an attack on what is living. The second position refers to the possibility of terrible or catastrophic violence being transformed into something entirely different, such as peace. Here is a strikingly Benjaminian passage from Unger's text: "Still, world peace is a thousand times more likely to emerge from the pure cruelty [*sauberen Grausamkeit*] of the bloodiest conflict [*blutigsten Abrechnung*] among the ancients — where it was considered a crime *not* to destroy the suckling babes of the enemy because *the whole* people was a unit and *a single* enemy — than from this love toward one's fellow man, the fruits of which can now be plainly seen."¹⁸

Part 2 of the text appeared in 1916 and is dominated by the figure of a disabled war veteran: through his long, final speech Unger constantly distinguishes between violence (war) and the living (*das Lebendige*). He compares and connects them, placing them in a relation of mutual dependence, as if violence and the living were complementary. Yet, despite Unger's ambivalence, the living has an advantage that is difficult to interpret. Above all, Unger insists that war, although it has grown into some "monstrous thing" (*ungeheures Ding*), must never be confused with the power of the living itself (*Verwechselt ihn nicht mit der Macht des Lebendigen selbst*). War does not possess the power of the a priori (*Macht des Apriorischen*), whereas the living has an a priori origin (*apriorische Ursprung des Lebendigen*).¹⁹ For Unger, however, war or violence spurs life; or, paradoxically, violence insists on life. "It is necessary to be rid of everything symbolic, metaphoric, and face the reality of these living magnitudes [*lebendigen Grösse*], whose *content* is determined by plurality, and whose form is the individual. Violence is the only thing competent to demand the life of the individual [*Das ist die Gewalt, die einzige, die kompetent ist, dem Einzelnen das Leben abzufordern*]."²⁰

A few years later, the reading of Hiller's text (which Benjamin quotes in "Toward the Critique of Violence"²¹) as well as Vorwerk's (whose name does not appear) reignites Benjamin's old interest, finally motivating him to thematize the relation of life and violence as well as the right to the use of violence. However, in responding to these texts, Benjamin compounds new problems that burden and terribly complicate his endeavor: the juridical or legal perspective of violence; the imperative to find some kind of "pure immediate form of violence" (§17); and an attempt to harmonize analogies and counter-analogies of violence against Niobe

and Korah, who represent respectively mythological and divine violence.²² He also adds two entirely new contexts that further shade the relation between life (and the living) and violence. The first is Hiller's near "hysterical" or "radical" pacifism, combined with a revision of the socialist or Bolshevik idea (the role of violence, arms, and revolution in establishing a new and just world). The second is the thematization of Judaism and messianism that Benjamin is attempting to share with his best friend in a letter.²³ It is interesting that Benjamin uses Hiller's text that posits no connection between war or violence and life in Judaism or Jewish philosophy to thematize Judaism for the first time in §18 of "Toward the Critique of Violence." (Although in §17 he implicitly mentions one of the "axioms" or foundational "theorems" of Judaism regarding the connection of blood and life: "blood is the symbol of mere life.")

Kurt Hiller's "Anti-Kain" begins with the problem that violence is opposed only by violence (*und gegen Gewalt kommt nur Gewalt auf*) and contains the striking sentence that in the parliament of humanity (*Menschheitsparlament*), the *radikale Pazifist* sits even further to the left than the Bolshevik or the spiritual terrorist (*der geistige Terrorist*).²⁴

We do not wish for war among peoples to be replaced with class war; we wish that war be replaced by struggle. What kind of struggle? Struggle by any means that leaves life intact [*Durch den Kampf mit allen Mitteln, die das Leben unangetastet lassen*]. Whose struggle? Certainly, also the very justified struggle of the poor against rich, but more importantly still: the spiritual struggle against the demi-spirit, un-spirit, anti-spirit [*durch den Kampf des geistigen Typus gegen Halbgeist und Ungeist und Widergeist*]. *We anti-terrorists must take the first step* in unconditionally spurning Cain's means. It is not right to respond to terror in kind. . . . Socialism with military duty is the silliest doctrine of reform in the whole world. It fills stomachs, while deaf to the beating of the heart. It guarantees a certain standard of life; but not life [*Er garantiert einen gewissen Standard des Lebens; das Leben garantiert er nicht*]. It is progressive in secondary issues, conservative in elementary ones, arrogantly imposing itself as guiding the rebellion.²⁵

In reference to socialism, the sentence "Er garantiert einen gewissen Standard des Lebens; das Leben garantiert er nicht" could be simplified with the explanation that, while fighting and violence risk the lives of some individuals, they do so for the eventual protection or improved welfare of other individuals. This position, which Benjamin fiercely opposes, is significantly altered and suddenly transformed at the end of "Anti-Kain." Adopting the literary form of the commandment, Hiller offers something entirely different as a conclusion: "Du sollst nicht töten. Du sollst auch nicht um einer Idee willen töten. Denn keine Idee ist erhabener als der Lebendige" (Do not kill. Do not kill even for an idea. For no idea is more sublime than one living).²⁶

In “Toward the Critique of Violence,” Benjamin places the living (*Lebendige*) in opposition to life (*Leben*) and claims that an idea is necessarily more sublime than life.²⁷ But does he consider “the idea” more sublime than the “living,” and how much does he hesitate when giving the idea the advantage? Had he not attempted, in his engagement with various texts and right up to the time of writing “Toward the Critique of Violence,” to explain the proximity of violence, the idea, and the living, all the while privileging the living? Is the aim of “Toward the Critique of Violence” to theorize a potential violence that would be perpetrated in the name of an idea and of the living, or is it to imagine a new violence that, committed in the name of an idea, would act to preserve the living? In either case, the emphasis would necessarily be on violence (and not life or the living). What is more, why does Benjamin neglect to thematize the end of Hiller’s text, which contains the argument that interests Benjamin the most and the one that might even be in harmony with his own construction?

Those “thinkers” who like Hiller do not recognize that “Judaism . . . expressly rejected the condemnation of a killing done in self-defense” (§18) misinterpret “the doctrine of the sanctity of life” (*der Heiligkeit des Leben*) by using an extreme line of argument. Benjamin quotes Hiller: “If I do not kill, I will never establish the worldwide reign of justice . . . thus thinks the spiritual terrorist [*der geistige Terrorist*]. . . . We, however, profess that higher still than the fortune and justice of an existent being [*eines Daseins*] . . . stands existence in itself [*Dasein an sich steht*]” (§18).²⁸

Benjamin finds this reasoning utterly ignoble. Even today, it would be difficult to argue against Benjamin’s objection to Hiller and others: “Under no condition does the human being coincide with the mere life [*blossen Leben*] of a human being. However sacred the human being is (or the life therein, which stays identical in earthly life, death, and living-on), its [physical] states are not sacred, nor its body life, which is vulnerable to injury by fellow human beings” (§18). Even more important than this objection, however, is the shift in perspective that precedes these sentences and that makes the murderer, not the victim (the murdered, injured), the center of attention. From this perspective, under certain conditions it is possible to kill or wreak havoc upon goods, law, and life and still not abuse/diminish the living (“the soul of the living”) of the one committing these acts (§18). There is an “obligation,” says Benjamin, “to seek the basis of the commandment no longer in what the deed does to the murder victim [*was die Tat am Gemordeten*], but in what the deed does to God and the perpetrator himself [*was sie an Gott und am Täter selbst tut*]” (§18). There is a kind of violence, then, that destroys everything, but at once confirms the living of the one who conducts it. Such violence could be called divine, messianic, revolutionary—and could be justified.

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Notes

1. Benjamin, *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910–1940*, 162; Benjamin, *Briefe*, 1:237.
2. Benjamin, *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910–1940*, 164; Benjamin, *Briefe*, 1:241.
3. Only fifteen lines of this “text” survive. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 791. Clearly, the text was written after Benjamin read Hiller’s 1919 “Anti-Kain” because Benjamin refers to terrorism in the phrase “terroristische Praxis” (terrorist praxis), hence his belief that the text is very timely. In the fragment, Benjamin insists that complete nonviolence (*Gewaltlosigkeit*) is absurd, that such a thing would negate life and suicide, and that it could not be grounded in any reason whatsoever. Finally, he writes: “Thus violence cannot be stamped out with violence, begging the question: how shall people in a free community be secure in their lives? Only the tendency (*die Neigung*) disarms in it [i.e. the community] the evil act (*böse Tat*), but the original violence as such remains entirely untouched.” How should we understand this *Neigung* (tendency, inclination), and what is *die ursprüngliche Gewalt* (the original violence)?
4. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:106. Vorwerk’s text is published in 1920 in *Blätter für religiösen Sozialismus*, 1:4.
5. “Denn mit dem bloßen Leben hört die Herrschaft des Rechtes über den Lebendigen auf. Die göttliche reine Gewalt über alles Leben um des Lebendigen willen. Die erste fordert Opfer, die zweite nimmt sie an” (For the domination of law over the living ceases with mere life. 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). Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, bk. 1, 200; Benjamin, “Toward the Critique of Violence,” 31. Subsequent citations are given parenthetically in the text.
6. Scholem’s manuscript “The Bolshevik Revolution” (“Der Bolschewismus”) is about a Jewish revolution, messianic empire, blood, rebellion, and the famous “dictatorship of poverty” (*die Diktatur der Armut*). Scholem, *Tagebücher 1913–1917*, 556–58.
7. Benjamin uses *blosses Leben* many times in “Toward the Critique of Violence”: four times in paragraph 17 and six in paragraph 18.
8. Butler, *Frames of War*, 3.
9. Canguilhem, “Vie,” 546. At the beginning of his 1966 lecture “La nouvelle connaissance de la vie,” Canguilhem is more precise: “By live, we mean the present participle or the past participle of the verb to live, the living and the lived.” Canguilhem, *Études d’histoire et de philosophie des sciences*, 335.
10. Bichat, *Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort*, 57.
11. In 1930, Georg Misch used the phrase *bloss menschliches Leben*. Misch, *Lebensphilosophie und Phänomenologie*, 24.

12. Rickert, *Philosophie des Lebens*, 9, 74–75. Peter Fenves recently announced a reconstruction of Rickert’s 1913 course and philosophy of life in the context of Benjamin’s messianism. Fenves, “Completion Instead of Revelation,” 56–74.
13. Bruno Bauch repeats this argument seven years later in *Philosophie des Lebens und Philosophie der Werte*. In the Foreword to the second edition, Rickert writes: “Das bloße Leben halte ich für sinnlos. Erst eine Philosophie des sinnvollen Lebens, das stets mehr als bloßes Leben ist, scheint mir ein erstrebenswertes Ziel, und nur auf Grund einer Theorie der unlebendigen, geltenden Werte, die dem Leben Sinn verleihen, wird das Ziel sich erreichen lassen” (I consider bare life meaningless. Only a philosophy of a meaningful life, which is always more than mere life, would seem to me to be a goal worthy of striving for, and only on the basis of a theory of valid, non-living values that give meaning to life will such a goal be attainable). Rickert, foreword, xi.
14. Rickert, *Philosophie des Lebens*, 129. Rickert varies the term *vegetating* several times, even using the phrase *vegetative Dasein* in one place. Later, Benjamin will transform this phrase into “vegetal life” when he compares mere life with the life of animals and plants. Benjamin, “Toward the Critique of Violence,” §18.
15. It does not seem plausible to me that Benjamin could have followed Rickert’s analysis of Max Scheller’s 1915 book on the war in real time. Nevertheless, there is a remark by Rickert that he finds very insightful and shows Rickert’s position on violence and war. “Therefore, war must be valid as a permanent institution of all truly living life [*alles wahrhaft lebendigen Leben*]. Pacifism is the enemy of life and the state [*Der Pazifismus ist lebensfeindlich und staatsfeindlich*].” Rickert, *Philosophie des Lebens*, 102. Benjamin’s texts on the life of students, aside from being the first to mention critique and radical critique, insist on life forms and institutions (*Lebensinstitutionen*) that surpass life as such. Creativity, spirituality, science, and academic study all determine life and continuously contribute to its “reconstruction” (*Neuaufbau*).
16. Unger’s text “Der Krieg: Erstes und Zweites Gespräch zwischen einem Feldgrauen und einem dauernd Untauglichen” (double dialogue between a green-uniformed foot soldier and a man permanently disabled for military service) was published in August 1915 and February 1916 in the journal *Der Neue Merkur*, with the first part published in the same issue that featured Benjamin’s text about student life. Margarete Kohlenbach was the first to signal the importance of Unger’s text for Benjamin, as it contains sharp criticism of liberalism and its institutions.
17. The permanently disabled man (*der dauernd Untaugliche*) addresses the private (*der Feldgrau*): “Du lästerst das Lebendige” (You blaspheme against the living). Unger, “Krieg,” 53.
18. Unger, “Krieg,” 55.
19. “One *must* be living—thus we live *presently* [*einstweilen*], *without* orientation [*ohne Orientierung*]—and so through the ages.” Unger, “Krieg,” 56; emphasis added.
20. Unger, “Krieg,” 59.
21. Kurt Hiller’s text “Anti-Kain. Ein Nachwort zu dem Vorhergehenden,” which Benjamin read in the journal *Das Ziel*, is preceded by Rudolf Leonhard’s short text “Endkampf der Waffengegner!” dealing with the Spartacist strike. It ends with a call for a fight against arms (“Kampf gegen die Waffe!”). Hiller’s text attacks Bolshevism in the name of a revolution without arms and terror. He says that it is better to remain a slave than instigate an armed uprising (*gewalttätige Rotte*). Aside from Hiller and Leonard, the best-known member of this group is Armin Wegner.

22. Benjamin's now famous example of divine violence—the destruction of Korah and his group—causes a great deal of trouble, as Korah is a leftist fighter for egalitarianism. Here, divine violence is revolutionary violence or messianic violence against a rebel, a “revolutionary” and a “messiah.” Such violence represents a victory for Moses and Aaron as well as for the current order and violence perpetuated for the sake of order. Cf. Bojanić, “Divine Violence, Radical Violence.”
23. Unfortunately, Benjamin read Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* only after the final corrections of “Toward the Critique of Violence.” This precluded the possibility of thematizing Benjamin's resistance to Rosenzweig and Rosenzweig's conception of Judaism. (Is it possible that Benjamin's interest in the theory and sources of Judaism wanes at the very moment he encounters Rosenzweig?) Pertinent to Benjamin's discussion are above all certain phrases that Rosenzweig uses in another work from 1919: “unser lebendiges Leben”; “lebendige jüdische Menschen” (Rosenzweig, *Gesammelte Schriften, Briefe und Tagebücher*, 640), “ein wirkliches, lebendiges, tatsächliches Leben” (Rosenzweig, *Zweistromland. Kleinere Schriften zu Glauben und Denken*, 450). Life, for Rosenzweig, is the unconditional condition of all that exists, the first concept, and the concept that holds all other concepts together as it constructs them. There is no better sentence about life than the one Rosenzweig includes in the conclusion of the third section of *The Star of Redemption* that is dedicated to “Jewish Essence”: “Aber das lebendige Leben fragt ja nicht nach dem Wesen. Es lebt. Und indem es lebt, beantwortet es sich selbst alle Fragen, noch ehe es sie stellen kann” (But living life does not ask about the essence. It lives. And in living, it answers for itself all questions even before it can pose them). Rosenzweig, *Star of Redemption*, 327; Rosenzweig, *Stern der Erlösung*, 342.
24. Hiller, “Anti-Kain,” 24.
25. Hiller, “Anti-Kain,” 26, 31.
26. Hiller, “Anti-Kain,” 32.
27. In “Toward the Critique of Violence,” the term *life* appears first when Benjamin speaks of the death penalty as the greatest violence against life and death. It appears again later when Benjamin speaks of the bloody death of Niobe's children and a violence that is not destructive because “it stops short of taking the mother's life (*Leben der Mutter*).” Benjamin, “Toward the Critique of Violence,” 27. Finally, in paragraph 18, *life* appears in an argument refuting the conflation of holy life with “mere life.” “Finally, there is something in the thought that what is here called sacred is, according to ancient mythical thinking, the designated bearer of inculpation: mere life.” Benjamin, “Toward the Critique of Violence,” 34.
28. The word *Dasein* appears twice in Hiller's text and is synonymous with *life* for both Hiller and Benjamin.

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