

Majorana's Sacrifice
On Agamben's *What is Real?*
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INTRODUCTION

The attempt at directing thinking along a path that is not inaugurated, in the futural sense of 'augury', by a question and by its very form has perhaps of necessity to remain unsuccessful. This is to say neither that one should not *attempt* to direct thinking along other paths, nor that the potential of the form of the question has already been exhausted. The question 'What is Real?', which grounds Agamben's recent enquiry into the conceptual shifts introduced by quantum mechanics, should be heard precisely as the attempt at a transformation of the question itself. For the very asking of this question has immediately two different connotations. First, *what* can in its own right be called real, what complies with the criterion of reality? This chair, this table, this book? Second, what is *the real itself* that is mentioned in the question, what is its element, what is the criterion that delimits its domain and that first allows us to state that this chair, this table and this book are real? At the same time, both of these questions are to exist under the aegis of the 'what is...?' itself, an aegis that has *of necessity* to remain unquestioned – if the questions themselves are to be set forth. Notwithstanding this, the task is not, *once again*, that of addressing the validity of the what-is question, of the foundation of the history of metaphysics itself; nor is the task that of, *once again*, substituting the what-is question with the question of the 'how' or the 'who', the questions of the modes of existence of the entity and of its questioner. The question at stake here, and in *What is Real?* is rather that of *retaining* the form of the question – the question concerning real entities, the element of the real itself, and the what-is itself – in order to assess whether a possibility can arise for this very question to point to a different site, for it to be displaced, but not in its position – for it to be transformed but not by a change of form.

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What is Real? stages the question of the reality of the entity in the context of the conceptual shift brought about by the transition from classical physics to quantum physics. The opportunity is afforded by the mysterious disappearance in 1938 of Ettore Majorana, the brilliant physicist, after boarding a ship in Naples: the *reality* of this disappearance, still unexplained, remains suspended in and by Agamben's text.

Agamben reads this disappearance according to two guidelines, extracted from Majorana's paper, 'The Value of Statistical Laws in Physics and Social Sciences'. At first sight, the two guidelines have nothing to do with Majorana's

vanishing; rather, they represent two important reflections on the theory of quantum mechanics. First: quantum mechanics enacts a fundamental shift from a causal description to a probabilistic and non-deterministic conception of the entity; second: this shift, on a par with the probabilistic turn in the social sciences, 'requires a special art, which is not the least significant support of the art of government' (Agamben 2018, 12). Agamben extends these two claims and raises them to the rank of epochal directives, bearing on the categories and the trajectory of the history of metaphysics itself. Majorana's considerations are then preserved and raised into the following: first, Agamben identifies a *reversal* in the priority granted to the categories of *dynamis* and *energeia*, a sudden end to the subjugation of potentiality to actuality; second, he concludes that this reversal affords us a determinate relation with reality – a relation whose only prospect is no longer that of knowing reality, but that of governing and ruling over the element of the real itself.

It is indeed correct to state that quantum mechanics operates a shift from a description of a physical system in terms of a set of properties (position, velocity, etc.) to an expectation (i.e. a probability) that these very properties will occur upon measurement. Indeed, quantum mechanics entails a lack of determinism that cannot be compared with the statistical considerations taking place in classical physics (e.g. in thermodynamics), in which probabilistic approximations are required by the complexity of the system at hand. It is rather the case that an inherent feature of quantum theory is that one should be able to predict only the probabilities of the outcomes themselves. These statistical predictions are approached asymptotically by means of repeated measurements, but the outcome of each single experiment remains ungrounded. Agamben is therefore correct in associating the shift introduced by quantum mechanics with the completion of a metaphysical trajectory: nature, by its own 'free will', as it is often described, makes a sovereign and autonomous decision in establishing the result of a physical process. The real objectifies itself, no longer simply with respect to the will of a subject that stands over against it, but rather, through its own free will, by establishing a transparent relation of objectification *with itself*. The impersonal notions of a will such as the *conatus*, a will to live or a will to power, give way to the complete projection of a *free* will upon the entity – a free will that enacts the objectification of the entity with respect to itself.

Before confronting the specifics of Agamben's reading, the question might be raised as to why he should have selected these two principal claims from Majorana's text – or better yet, why the present paper should read Agamben as having done so. The aim of this contribution is precisely to assess the claims set forth by Agamben according to a specific reading of the history of metaphysics – to wit, the Heideggerian one – thereby following two guiding directives. The first delineates a trajectory that points to a disclosure of the entity that is marked by a completed horizon of constant presence (*beständige Anwesenheit*). This trajectory finds its inception (*Anfang*) in the Greek experience of being as presence (*ousia* as *parousia*), an experience that leads Aristotle to assign a specific priority to the

notion of *energeia* rather than *dynamis*. Parallel to this trajectory runs another that is directed towards the complete objectification of the entity – an objectification that makes possible the sovereign dominion of the subject which stands opposite this entity. This second directive, which is but the reverse side of the first one, finds its completion in the modern en-framing or *Gestell*, in the primacy of the notion of the will (to live, to power, to will), in that expropriation (*Enteignis*) which is the first form of appropriation (*Ereignis*), and so forth.

The claim put forth here is that the shift introduced by quantum mechanics is questioned in *What is Real?* according to the two-fold directive that enjoins thinking to consider entities in the order of presence and the objectification that ushers in the reign of the subject. At the same time, Agamben's reading is surprising to the extent that it identifies *in the reversal* of the hierarchy between *dynamis* and *energeia*, i.e. in a reversal of the first trajectory, *exactly* the actual completion of the second directive of the history of metaphysics. For at stake, Agamben writes, is the following:

A potency [*potenza*] emancipated from its hierarchical subjection to the act. Insofar as it has secured an existence that is independent of its actual realisation, such a possibility tends *to replace reality* and thus to become the object of a science of the accidental – unthinkable for Aristotle – that considers possibility as such, not as a means of knowing the real, but as a way of intervening in it in order to govern it. (2018, 40, emphasis added)

Put otherwise, a reversal of the priority granted to potentiality and actuality, rather than liberating the entity from the frame of objectification and machination (*Vergegenständlichung, Machenschaft*), provides instead the conditions for the possibility of an ultimate and perhaps *irreversible* government of the real. Irreversible to the extent that only Majorana's disappearance can be said to fulfil the criterion of reality: 'The hypothesis I intend to put forward is that, if quantum mechanics relies on the convention that reality must be eclipsed by probability, then disappearance is the only way in which the real can peremptorily be affirmed as such and avoid the grasp of calculation' (2018, 42-3).

The plan of this essay is as follows: In the first section, the two moments that structure the putative reversal of the *dynamis-energeia* metaphysical machine are set forth. The question of the notion of presence that underlies both potentiality and actuality is addressed. In the second section, it is claimed that this very horizon of presence is transformed by the relation that, according to quantum theory, allows the entity to be disclosed. For the study of this 'pre-supposing' relation it is necessary to turn once again to Agamben's work. The final section confronts the directive of the government of the entity from the standpoint obtained, with the aim of asking once again, upon a displacement of the horizon of presence that grants the disclosure of the entity, the question concerning the reality of the real itself.

OF *DYNAMIS* AND *ENERGEIA*

The question to be addressed is then first one of priority — of the priority of *energeia* over *dynamis*, or, conversely, a priority of the latter over the former. The task is then that of attending to the two moments which, according to the posited reversal enacted by the shift to quantum physics, articulate the functioning of the *dynamis-energeia* metaphysical machine.

I

As Agamben recalls in *What is Real?*, Aristotle asserts the unequivocal priority of actuality over potentiality. He writes in Book Theta of the *Metaphysics*: ‘To all such potentiality, then, actuality is prior both in formula and in substance; and in time it is prior in one sense and in another not’ (1049b 10–12). The ambiguity alluded to here concerns the examples of the seed and the capacity for sight, and the question is whether these are, as potentialities, prior in time to the actualities of corn and sight. This is resolved by giving priority to actuality: every chain of potentiality and actuality has to terminate, for ‘there is always a first mover, and the mover already exists actually’ (*Metaphysics*, 1049b 27). But despite that, the conception of the entity is not exhausted by the dimension of its actuality. Such was, on the contrary, the position of the Megarians, followers of Euclid of Megara and heirs of the teachings of the Eleatic school. Here we do not need to recall the entire confrontation that Aristotle stages with the Megarian thought of potentiality; it is however pertinent to recall that the only mode of existence which the Megarians grant to potentiality is that of its actualised enactment: the potentiality for seeing exists only in the mode of actual sight; an architect is capable of his craft only when practising it, and so forth. In collapsing the notions of potentiality and actuality, the Megarians would have no choice but to renounce the existence of motion itself — thus agreeing with the Eleatic lesson.

Countering this perspective, Aristotle distinctly comprehends how the architect preserves the craft of architecture as a capability even while resting, and, similarly, every man preserves the capability for sight even when his eyes are closed. Potentiality is then to have a mode of presence that is not exhausted in the enactment of a capability. Aristotle calls this mode of existence of potentiality *hexis*, from the verb *echein*: that is, a having, a possession or a disposition. Only then does motion as such become possible — *kinēsis*, as the ‘actuality of what is potentially, as such’ (*Metaphysics*, 201a 11). This is the directive that will have structured not only the unfolding of the history of metaphysics, but also the development of classical physics. The entity is conceived in terms of its own self-presence, its self-identity and the presence of its properties or physical attributes at a certain moment. These attributes (position, mass, density, etc.), as ‘properties’, are ‘owned’ by the system at hand and can be acquired and disposed of. At the

same time, however, the entity is not thought only in terms of its actuality: it ‘has’ or ‘possesses’, as a *hexis*, a dimension of potentiality, a reserve of future actualities. A system in motion is distinguished from a system at rest through a potentiality that individuates it not only in its present state, but also in its potentiality for future states. Classical physics – setting aside the question of its retroactive positing – can then be understood as a general form of phronomy, a science of the movement of substance in space and time.

II

One may therefore claim that with quantum physics a shift takes place that consists in the inversion of the priority granted to *dynamis* and *energeia*. The entity is no longer conceived in terms of its own actuality and that of its properties, but, rather, it is thought of first as a potentiality endowed with an independent existence – or, in Agamben’s words, a ‘potency [*potenza*] emancipated from its hierarchical subjection to the act’. This reversal is mirrored in the shift to a purely probabilistic description of the system under observation. The latter, Agamben argues, never deals with the singular and concrete case at hand, but rather, in suspending its reality, abstracts a pure *ens rationis* in order to assign a number to an ideal case. The turn to a probabilistic description is then part and parcel of the metaphysical reversal which has been claimed to subvert the hierarchy between *dynamis* and *energeia*, and through which the reality of the entity is suspended: ‘[probability] is nothing other than that very world, a world whose reality is suspended in order for us to be able to govern it and take decisions about it’ (Agamben 2018, 32–3).

To confirm this reading, one may turn to Heisenberg himself, one of the most attentive thinkers when it comes to the conceptual implications of quantum mechanics. He writes: ‘The atoms or the elementary particles themselves are not as real; they form a world of potentialities or possibilities rather than one of things or facts’ (Heisenberg 2000, 128). And again: ‘One might perhaps call it an objective tendency or possibility, a “*potentia*” in the sense of Aristotelian philosophy. In fact, I believe that the language actually used by physicists when they speak about atomic events produces in their minds similar notions as the concept “*potentia*” (2000, 124). One should nevertheless be cautious, and ask once again whether at stake is simply a reversal of the *dynamis-energeia* metaphysical machine. Quantum physics effectively thinks the system at hand in terms of a potentiality, in the epistemological form of a probability distribution. But is the situation exactly symmetrical with respect to the one observed in classical physics?’

First, the question arises as to the status of actuality with respect to this notion of potentiality. For reasons of symmetry, one would be led to postulate that potentiality ‘has’ or ‘possesses’ (as a *hexis*) its own actualisation – or better yet, at stake would be a possession that, in being inverted, would be but a dis-possession. Potentiality would in fact dis-possess itself in passing to the act; it would, in being actualised, be dispossessed of all the potentialities it owns, until it would have

nothing potential to dispose of, and as such it would be compelled to pass to the act. This is Aristotle's crucial definition: 'A thing is said to be potential if, when the act of which it is said to be potential is realised, there will be nothing impotential' (Agamben 1998, 45).¹ That would mean, however, that this potentiality, when not actualised, is present to itself in the same way in which actuality possesses itself, its properties or the dimension of potentiality: that is, in terms of a *hexis*. But can a potentiality possess anything at all – can potentiality be dispossessed of anything that it 'owns'? That would mean, once again, to think potentiality as being present to itself, through a self-presence that would allow it to dispose of its potentialities – through a dispossession that takes place in a continuous expenditure, whereby a wealth of potentialities comes to be constantly dissipated in order to allow the passage to the act.

But then again, is this the shift introduced by quantum physics? It would appear that one could in principle remain within a classical framework and still operate the inversion of priority between *dynamis* and *energeia*, without introducing anything fundamentally new from a physical point of view. The crucial question is then whether the shift introduced by quantum mechanics simply inverts the priority attributed in turn to *dynamis* and to *energeia*.

Is it possible instead to think of a mode of existence for potentiality that is not simply a projection of the presence of actuality and its determinations? Agamben himself recognises that the mode of actuality *of* potentiality is not simply that of another actuality. He does so in remarking that the fundamental feature of potentiality is the possibility that it has of *not* passing to the act, which is grounded on two of Aristotle's assertions: first, that 'all potentiality is impotentiality (*adynamia*) of the same and with respect to the same' (Agamben 1999, 182), and second, that 'what is potential can both be and not be, for the same is potential both to be and not to be' (ibid.). But if the mode of presence of potentiality cannot simply be borrowed from that of actuality, since a potentiality-not-to (*adynamia*) is in no way simply an impotence or an absence of potentiality, then what is the mode of existence of potentiality itself?

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Heidegger's 1931–32 lecture course on Book Theta of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* represents a fundamental interpretative *archē* both for the discussion of *dynamis* and for Agamben's thinking more broadly. The grounding question of the lecture course is indeed the following: 'how is the essence of *dynamis* actually present when

¹ This is Agamben's translation of Aristotle. Ross's translation is notoriously quite different: 'A thing is capable of doing something if there is nothing impossible in its having the actuality of that of which it is said to have the capacity' (1047a24–25). Cf. Heidegger's translation: 'That which is in actuality capable, however, is that for which nothing more is unattainable once it sets itself to work as that for which it is claimed to be well equipped' (Heidegger 1995, 188).

it actually is?’ (Heidegger 1995, 144).² Laying the ground for Agamben’s interpretation, Heidegger locates the fundamental feature of potentiality’s mode of presence precisely in the fact that *adynamia* is not simply an absence of potentiality. As ‘*dynamis* is in a preeminent sense exposed and bound to *sterēsis* (i.e. privation)’ (1995, 95, emphasis removed), it follows that ‘what is in question is the actuality of *dynastai* qua *dynastai*’ (1995, 152), an actuality that cannot be reduced to that of constant presence (*beständige Anwesenheit*). Heidegger writes:

Because [in the Megarians’ thesis] the presence of a *dynamis* means its enactment (*Vollzug, energein*), non-enactment is equivalent to absence. Aristotle is able to encounter this thesis only in such a way as to show that the non-enactment of a *dynamis* is not already its absence and, vice versa, that enactment is not simply and solely presence. This implies fundamentally that the *essence of presence* [das Wesen der Anwesenheit] must be understood *more fully* and *more variously*. (1995, 157)

The question then is not so much that of the priority granted to either *dynamis* or *energeia* as that of their respective modes of presence — a shift which amounts to preparing for a potential transformation in the notion of presence itself. For what does Heidegger, and according to him, Aristotle, intend by the very notion of presence? Presence, on Heidegger’s reading of Aristotle, is connected to the bringing forth of the entity, pro-duction in the etymological sense of a leading forth, *Her-stellung*. Heidegger writes: ‘This *having been produced* is the actuality of the work; that which reveals itself in such a way “is” [...]. Presence is having been produced’ (1995, 154). One can then understand *dynamis* accordingly: Aristotle defines it as ‘*archē metabolē*’ or ‘*archē kinēseōs*’, namely the origin of change or the origin of movement, the possibility of the bringing forth of presence as such. Heidegger writes: ‘*Archē metabolē* [*dynamis*] means then: being an origin for a transposing pro-ducing, a bringing something forth, bringing something about. This means being an origin for having been produced, having been brought about’ (1995, 75). *Dynamis* is then a potentiality for presence.

The question with respect to quantum physics is then the following: is there a sense in which presence, as ‘having-been-produced’, might come to be shifted? Equivalently, is there a sense in which *kinēsis*, namely the ‘actuality of *dynamis* as such’, could come to be thought differently? Heidegger will repeatedly state that the tradition of metaphysics has always thought motion simply in terms of change of place, as a general phronomy. He writes in ‘On the Essence and Concept of

² The question of potentiality and actuality is indeed not a categorial one — we would today say a transcendental question — for indeed, ‘we do not find *dynamis* and *energeia* in any of Aristotle’s enumerations of the categories’ (Heidegger 1995, 6). *Dynamis* and *energeia* constitute rather one of the four ways of saying the existent and its very existence: ‘*to on, to einai, kata dynamin ē energeian*’ (14).

Physis': 'We of today must do two things: first, free ourselves from the notion that movement is *primarily* change of place; and second, learn to see how for the Greeks movement as a mode of *being* has the character of emerging into presence' (Heidegger 1998,19).³ And again, in *Contributions to Philosophy (Beiträge zur Philosophie)*: 'motion (even understood as *metabolē*) is always related to *on* as *ousia* [i.e. metaphysical being-ness, *Seiendheit*]. In this relation also belong *dynamis*, *energeia*, and the later concepts descended from them' (Heidegger 2012, 220). The question is then whether quantum physics can confirm or disprove this notion of coming to presence, whether the relation of disclosure or unconcealment of the entity that has structured the notions of presence, potentiality for presence, motion, and change is to remain the same, or whether a transformation in the notion of presence itself is possible.

THE PRE-SUPPOSING RELATION

The question then is *how* presence as having-been-produced and the origin of this presence — *dynamis* — are to be thought from the standpoint of quantum mechanics. The principal site of difference between a classical account of a physical phenomenon and a quantum mechanical one lies in the accountability — the transparency — of the interaction between the observer and the system at hand. For, in classical physics, the interaction that brings about a measurement can be disregarded as negligible: to this extent one does not assume that the measurement of a property changes the property that is to be measured, or that it does so in a way that can be compensated for. The observer then knows both the measured property *and* the import of the interaction, and is thus able to subtract the latter from the former to reach a property that is autonomously owned by the system before the measurement.

Quantum mechanics, on the other hand, is grounded on the very impossibility of accounting for the import of the measurement interaction. If in classical physics the measurement of a certain property is 'ten' and the measurement interaction has contributed 'two', then the autonomous value of that property is taken to be 'eight'. In quantum mechanics, the contribution of the measurement interaction cannot be evaluated (the 'two' in this example). Since the latter cannot be 'subtracted' to reach an independent property, the measurement as such does not 'measure' any pre-existing property, but rather acquires a relational feature: it states a 'property' of the system at hand *relative* to the instrument or apparatus, *with the automatic proviso* that nothing be said about the system at hand prior to this interaction.

In one and the same gesture, the interaction points to the existence of an autonomous system *and*, in being unaccountable, *bars* the very existence of such

³ For a recent attempt at thinking change or *metabolē* beyond its phronomic component one should turn to Catherine Malabou's work in *The Heidegger Change*.

an independent entity, whose image is left suspended as a retro-active post-supposition. Two reasons underlie this state of affairs: First, it is necessary that every measuring instrument or apparatus should be treated in classical terms, neglecting any quantum contributions and using the language of classical physics (i.e. ordinary language or a technically refined version thereof). This is the condition of possibility for the experiment itself: in the last instance, it is necessary that the measurement experience, the ‘experiment’, be returned to the experience of the observer and to a linguistic form that affords understanding and communicability. One is either to let the system interact in its full quantum mechanical glory and know nothing about it, or one is to perform an experiment that will of necessity have to introduce a classical element. Bohr writes:

It is decisive to recognise that, *however far the phenomena transcend the scope of classical physical explanation, the account of all evidence must be expressed in classical terms.* The argument is simply that by the word ‘experiment’ we refer to a situation where we can tell others what we have done and what we have learned and that, therefore, the account of the experimental arrangement and of the results of the observations must be expressed in unambiguous language with suitable application of the terminology of classical physics. (Bohr 1987, 39)

The second reason that underlies the impossibility of accounting for the measurement interaction follows directly from the first one. To measure the import of the interaction between the apparatus and the system at hand, a second instrument would have to be introduced. But this second instrument would also come with an uncontrollable interaction, and one would need to resort to a third instrument, and so on. Once again, Bohr writes:

Any attempt to control the interaction between objects and measuring instruments will imply that the bodies so far used for fixing the experimental conditions will now themselves become objects under investigation. Additional measuring instruments with new uncontrollable interactions with the objects would therefore be demanded, and all which could be achieved will be the replacement of the original system by a new, more complicated one. (Bohr 1998, 151)

That the import of the measurement interaction be necessarily unaccountable implies that one always and only measures systems *relative to* some (classical) instrument of observation, without ever speaking of any properties that precede the interaction. Therefore, nothing can be said of unrelated being, of any primary quality that is ‘owned’ by the system before it interacts with a measuring instrument. The interaction itself, *in having been established*, creates the presupposition of an unrelated entity with some autonomous physical properties; *at the same time*,

however, in being unaccountable, this very interaction rules out the existence of both an unrelated being and its independent properties.

The principal shift that takes place with the introduction of quantum mechanics is therefore not simply a hierarchical inversion in the functioning of the *dynamis-energeia* metaphysical machine, but rather a transformation of the very presence that underlies the notions of actuality and potentiality themselves. For if one is to identify presence with having-been-produced, in the etymological sense of having been brought forth (pro-duced, *her-gestellt*), it is clear that quantum mechanics brings the entity forth through a relational structure that is inherently irreconcilable with the one that defines the domain of classical physics. In the latter case, a relation is established between two present substances: this relation is but a transparent and self-present medium which affords the reading of an autonomous property that is owned by the system at hand. In quantum mechanics, the relation instituted by the measurement interaction is altogether different: it grants some residual or classical presence to one of the two *relata*, at the price of barring the other pole — while at the same time producing the self-presence of the latter in the form of a retroactive positing. In being ‘un-subtractable’, this relation points to the site of emergence of its own coming to presence — a site that nevertheless can no longer be considered a substratum or a *hypokeimenon*, whose order of self-presence would be preserved by the relation. On the contrary, the relational structure introduced by quantum mechanics points to the origin of its own coming to presence as to a site that signals simply a liability to become present, an *archē metabolē* that in Heidegger’s words is ‘an origin for a transposing pro-ducing, a bringing something forth, bringing something about’. At stake then is not a potentiality for a metaphysical presence, but rather a potentiality for a presupposing relation that, in barring the very order of metaphysical presence, produces it as a retroactive hypostatisation.

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The presupposing relational structure just presented might seem somewhat artificial or *ad hoc*, but to appreciate its relevance, one need only ask whether its appearance is just a contingent occurrence or whether an element of necessity can be discerned. Once again, at stake is a relational structure that brings forth, produces into presence the entity while retroactively granting it an independent imaginary existence; a relation whose unavoidable implication can never itself be implicated in trying to account for its import; and an accountability that is necessarily impossible due to the lack of an external meta-structure that would imply a pure disclosure — that is, the abolition of the relation itself. One may here turn to Agamben, in *The Use of Bodies*, for an account of this relational structure:

The pre-supposing relation is, in this sense, the specific potential [*potenza*] of human language. As soon as there is language, the thing named is

presupposed as the non-linguistic or non-relational with which language has established its relation. This presuppositional power is so strong that we imagine the non-linguistic as something unsayable and non-relational that we seek in some way to grasp as such, without noticing that what we seek to grasp in this way is only the shadow of language. The nonlinguistic, the unsayable is, as should be obvious, a genuinely linguistic category: it is in fact the ‘category’ par excellence. (Agamben 2016, 119)

In light of the above, is the answer to the question of the contingency or necessity of the relational framework introduced by quantum mechanics to be traced back to the structure of language itself? Or could we not claim the converse to be true? Namely, that linguistic predication must *necessarily* establish a presupposing relation with being precisely *because* it is grounded on a material experience that involves an implication of the kind described, i.e. an implication that is excluded from being accountable in its very being included or implicated. Perhaps the issue to be confronted is not simply either ‘linguistic’ or ‘material’, but concerns the *logic* which underlies all producing and bringing forth into presence. A logic of exception, the study of which we once again owe to Agamben.⁴

The guiding statement is then the following: the pre-supposing relation is but part and parcel of the same logic of exception that structures the disclosure of being in language and of language in being. For every making present is always relative to a residue, to an implicated whose implication in this making present is necessarily unaccountable. This residue, unable to make itself fully present to itself – for that would require a mediation, an interaction whose import could be evaluated only if the sought after self-presence had been given to begin with – this residue is never able to recuperate itself due to the transcendental non-coincidence that defines it, or rather that prevents the self-presence of any definition. It then has no choice but to try and project its spectral presence onto an object, hoping to find a confirmation of its self-presence in the mirror image of a self-present object. Language, as *the*

⁴ The case could be made that Agamben approaches the matter at hand from an exclusively linguistic perspective. He writes in *The Use of Bodies*: ‘It is possible, however, that the mechanism of the exception is constitutively connected to the event of language that coincides with anthropogenesis’ (Agamben 2016, 264). Can the logic of exception, however, be reduced to its linguistic instantiation? Human language lacks a completeness that would afford the closure of all signifying chains; it requires the including-exclusion of a sub-posed that is to serve as ground and as a *hypokeimenon* for predication. If there were no ground for the functioning of language through the mechanism of the exception, one could set out to find a complete language, a language which did not necessitate the exception of a pre-sub-posed. But then again, it is always problematic to find a ground for a transcendental necessity. The claim here is rather that the logic of the exception, rather than grounding a specific disclosure of language in being, or of being in language, operates through the creation of a space of indifference for the traditional domains of the ‘linguistic’ and the ‘material’, the ‘epistemological’ and the ‘ontological’.

structure of disclosure into presence, necessarily establishes a presupposing relation with being that is grounded on the logic of exception:

According to the structure of the presupposition that we have already reconstructed above, in happening, language excludes and separates from itself the non-linguistic, and in the same gesture, it includes and captures it as that with which it is always already in relation. That is to say, the *ex-ceptio*, the inclusive exclusion of the real from the *logos* and in the *logos* is the originary structure of the event of language. (Agamben 2016, 264)⁵

The logic of exception is therefore responsible for a shift in the notion of presence itself. The order of the presupposing relation, and that of the potential for this relation to take place, can be related to the order of presence *only if* the latter itself comes to be shifted. For if we take presence as the domain of 'having-been-produced' or brought about, it becomes clear that no substratum or *hypokeimenon* precedes the presupposing relation, other than as a retroactive positing. All the same, *dynamis*, as *archē metabolē*, the 'origin for this having been brought forth', is then not a potentiality for a metaphysical presence to take place; it is rather a potentiality for a presupposing relation that *bars* exactly this order of metaphysical presence. The order of presence comes to be shifted by quantum mechanics to that instituted by the pre-supposing relation, and the order of potential for presence to that of this relation's being liable to take place. *Metaphysical* presence, on the other hand, is in turn promised by this potentiality and barred by the actuality of the relation, but as such is never attained.

The second directive that structures Agamben's reading in *What is Real?* is to be addressed from this standpoint. How is the government of the element of the real to be comprehended in terms of the logic of exception – a logic that grounds the pre-supposing relation between the observer and the physical system, between language and being? If the shift introduced by quantum mechanics is not simply exhausted by an inversion of the priority granted to the notions of *dynamis* and *energeia*; if instead it is the notion of presence itself, which underlies both potentiality and actuality in their mode of existence, that is transformed – then what becomes of the governmental turn that was posited as being grounded upon the inversion in the functioning of the *dynamis-energeia* metaphysical machine?

THE GOVERNMENT OF THE REAL

The question now to be addressed is the one indexed by the two-sided directive that has structured the history of metaphysics – a first trajectory that establishes the

⁵ See also in *Homo Sacer*: 'Language is the sovereign who, in a permanent state of exception, declares that there is nothing outside language and that language is always beyond itself [...]. It expresses the bond of inclusive exclusion to which a thing is subject because of the fact of being in language, of being named' (Agamben 1998, 21).

horizon of actuality and constant presence within which the entity is disclosed, and the reverse side of this trajectory that enacts the concurrent objectification of the real with the prospect of instituting the kingdom of a sovereign subject. Agamben, in reflecting on the import of quantum mechanics for the philosophical categories, puts forth the claim that a reversal takes place in the priority granted to the two poles of the *dynamis-energeia* metaphysical machine. The inversion in the trajectory of this first directive nevertheless preserves the course of the second one: never more so is the entity objectified in order to lay the conditions of possibility for a determinate intervention by the hand of a governing subject. On the contrary, if it is to be claimed that, after having gone through all the figures of presence, it is presence itself that comes to be transformed, one is led to ask the following: is a transformation of the second metaphysical trajectory possible, a transformation that would not be exhausted by a further step in the direction of the objectification of the entity and the establishment of the dominion of the subject?

Agamben claims: ‘Science no longer tried to know reality, but – like the statistics of social sciences – only intervene in it in order to govern it’ (2018, 14). There is then a direct implication that links the *intervention* of the observer with the governing aims that are at stake. However, it has been argued in this contribution that any such intervention takes place only through a pre-supposing relation in which the very presence of the observer is at stake. It then becomes necessary to enquire into the residue of presence that establishes the presupposing relation. One of the two *relata*, it has been claimed, enters the relation only through a pre-supposition *a posteriori* – which would lead to the conclusion that, if any form of presence, however residual it may be, is to be ‘present’ at all, then it will be at the opposite end of the relation.

At once, it is clear that there can be no *self*-presence that is responsible for establishing the relation: the import of any interaction, mediation or self-mediation that is *necessary* to attain such a self-presence cannot be accounted for, unless that very self-presence has been given to begin with. As unaccountable, any self-mediation cannot be subtracted to infer *either* any self-coincidence that presence is supposed to enjoy before the mediation, *or* any property that presence is supposed to be able to (re-)present to itself. In enacting a change whose import can neither be recuperated nor accounted for, any mediation or interaction, while being the condition *of possibility* for the self-presence of the residue (i.e. for the [re-]presentation of its presence to itself) – this mediation is also the condition *of impossibility* for this very self-presence.

But, once again, we are led to state: if the self-presence of a subject that establishes a presupposing relation is also an imaginary post-supposition, one can for this reason be no less exempted from granting *some* presence to the residue that establishes the relation – for otherwise there would never be any possibility for presence to circulate in the presupposing relation: the world would simply be left alone in its presence-less self-interaction.

At stake in the presupposing relation is then a presence that can never be made present to itself, a presence that is at stake only to the extent that it is a *staking of* presence which takes place. For, indeed, every interaction that institutes a presupposing relation, with one and the same gesture enacts the retroactive hypostatisation of an autonomous entity *and* stakes or wagers a presence that can never be made self-present. Presence is included in the presupposing relation *only by* the exclusion of the possibility of its own presentation; stated otherwise, it enters the circulation of the retroactive presentations only by sacrificing its very own. Effectively, in the presupposing relation, presence is not simply staked, but rather *sacrificed* in the etymological sense of *sacrum facere*, which Agamben describes in *Language and Death*:

The fact that man, the animal possessing language, is, as such, ungrounded, the fact that he has no foundation except in his own action (in his own 'violence') [...] [entails that] the essential thing is that in every case, the action of the human community is grounded only in another action; or, as etymology shows, that every *facere* is *sacrum facere*. At the centre of the sacrifice is simply a determinate action that, as such, is separated and marked by exclusion; in this way it becomes *sacer*. (Agamben 1991, 105)

The sacrifice of presence that takes place in the presupposing relation is not an irrecoverable relinquishment or gift, but rather a making *sacer* that includes presence by preventing or excluding its very presentation – that is, according to a logic of the *ex-ceptio*. The intervention of the observer, which has been claimed by Agamben to ground the metaphysical motto 'intervene to govern', takes place according to a logic of the exception. The question which then remains to be asked is the following: what is the connection that links the intervention of the observer and the prospect of a governing relationship to the element of the real?

Agamben invests the dimension of probability with the capacity of effectively suspending the concrete reality of the entity and enabling the governing aims of the observer: 'The principle that supports the calculation is the replacement of the realm of reality with that of probability, or the superimposition of the one upon the other' (Agamben 2018, 32). It is through the calculus of probability, through the suspension of the element of reality itself and the creation of a purely ideal *ens rationis*, that the very horizon of a governing relationship with the real opens up. Agamben writes: '*Probability* is never punctually realised as such, nor does it concern a single real event, but, as Majorana understood, it allows us to *intervene* in reality, as considered from a special perspective, in order to *govern* it' (2018, 35, emphasis added). It is therefore the dimension of *probability* which allows us to make an *intervention* in reality with the prospect of *governing* it. Probability, intervention, government of reality: what is the exact chain of implications linking these three notions, and how is the dimension of probability connected to the

sacrifice of presence that has been argued to characterise the presupposing relation?

The tendency to believe that probability is a property inherent to the observed system is, Agamben continues, a common misconception, known as the ‘naturalistic fallacy’ (2018, 37). On the contrary, probability is to be considered as the degree to which the observer is willing to make a bet according to the information at his or her disposal:⁶

The concept that underlies probability is not so much frequency over a long period of time as the ‘*critical odds for a bet*’, in which frequency is used not to infer a supposedly real property of the system, but – precisely as happens in quantum mechanics – to corroborate or refute a previous conjecture (which is fully comparable to a wager). (2018, 37)

The probabilistic statement is then a form of bet, the promising of an intervention that will entail a sacrifice of presence, an oath in which the connection between words and things is at stake.⁷ For indeed what is a bet but a kind of oath? Agamben writes: ‘The term *sacramentum* did not immediately designate the oath but the sum of money (of fifty or five hundred asses) that was, so to speak, put at stake by means of the oath. The one who did not succeed in proving his right lost the sum’ (Agamben 2011, 64). The probabilistic assertion, as a form of bet, can then be considered a form of oath, a *sacramentum* – and a *sacramentum*, Agamben writes, is always a *devotio* and a *sacratio*, a making *sacer* (‘*sacramentum*, meaning both oath and *sacratio*’ [2011, 31]). Agamben relies on Benveniste to draw the connection between the oath, or *sacramentum*, and the sacrifice: ‘The oath (*sacramentum*) implies the notion of making “*sacer*” [i.e. of *sacrum facere*]. One associates with the oath the quality of the *sacred*, the most formidable thing which can affect a man: here the “oath” appears as *an operation designed to make oneself sacer conditionally*’ (2011, 30, translation modified, emphasis added).⁸ The probabilistic statement, as a bet and an oath, *as a way of making oneself sacer conditionally*, is the structure which must underlie the sacrifice that takes place through the intervention in the physical system: the *sacramentum* and the *sacratio*, the oath and the sacrifice, are indissolubly connected.

Once again, Agamben’s diagnosis reads: *probability* allows an *intervention* within reality that enables its *government*. The horizon of a governing prospect is then seen to be instituted by the two dimensions of the calculation and the intervention: that is to say, by the staking (*sacramentum*) of presence and by its

⁶ This is the ground for an important interpretation of quantum mechanics, known as QBism.

⁷ The study of this connection and the role of the oath in its establishment is carried out by Agamben in *The Sacrament of Language*.

⁸ Benveniste continues: ‘The *sacramentum* is properly the action or object by which one anathematises one’s own person in advance [...]. Once the words are spoken in the set forms, one is potentially in the state of being *sacer*’ (Benveniste 2016, 447).

sacrifice (*sacratio*). The shift in the notion of presence detailed in the previous sections signals a modification of the first metaphysical directive, namely the one indexing the entity according to the presence of its actuality; concurrently, we observe a parallel shift that affects the trajectory along which the entity comes to be objectified with the prospect of establishing the sovereign dominion of the subject that stands over against it. The presence of the latter is in fact sacrificed or made *sacer* every time an intervention takes place, and the presence of the former, of the object whose autonomy was to serve as a model for the independence of the subject, is retained only as a retroactive hypostasis posited by the pre-supposing intervention. Presence indeed circulates in the presupposing relation, but it emerges only in the form of a spectral condensation, a transient sediment or a residual hypostasis: a hypostasis whose 'originary meaning', Agamben reminds us, 'alongside that of "base, foundation" — is "sediment" and refers to the solid remainder of a liquid' (Agamben 2016, 136). Presence is in turn staked and pre-supposed, consecrated by the impossibility of its own presentation, attained only in the residual form of the sedimentation produced by its own circulation.

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The analysis carried out in this contribution has tried not to contest Agamben's reading of the shift introduced by quantum mechanics, but rather to attempt to be, as it were, more Agambenian than Agamben himself — if one may dare to do so. It is beyond the scope of this paper to confront the political dimension that is inherent in a governmental order founded upon the logic of exception. It would involve the question of the violence of the sacrificial set up, namely the question of a violence no longer founded on the presence of the ground, according to the notion that, 'the ground of all violence is the violence of the ground' (Agamben 1991, 106, translation modified) — for the presence of this ground now comes to appear only through its self-sacrifice. Agamben's own thinking stands as *the* attempt to think through the implications, according to a shift dictated by the logic of exception, for the notions of government, sovereignty and violence, or said otherwise, for the notion of the political itself.

As already mentioned, the question 'What is Real?' can quite easily be heard in two ways, namely as the question of what (still or no longer) complies with the criterion of reality, and as such can rightly be called real; or it can be heard as the question concerning the criterion of reality itself, the question of what qualifies *the real* as such.

One can then perhaps refer to a different site in which Agamben asks the question concerning the reality of the real itself. In the context of the exhibition 'Realistas de Madrid' that took place at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid in 2016, Agamben writes: "The word "realism" makes sense, however, only if one specifies what is intended by "reality" — what, in particular, these artists have in mind when they speak of *realidad*' (Agamben 2017, 267). Their aim, Agamben

claims, is not simply that of representing reality on a canvas, by a classical ‘levelling of the painting to a window from which one contemplates reality’ (ibid.). Rather, by making thematic *the window itself* – ‘almost as if the concern were not that of representing reality directly, but first and foremost painting (in) itself’ (ibid.) – they portray the window through a painting that, in turn, is supposed to be but a window from which the contemplation of reality is to be made possible. Through this double operation, the *Realistas de Madrid* have perhaps managed to create a space of indifference that deactivates the oppositions of painting and reality, representation and being, and one might add, intervention and knowledge. So Agamben is able to conclude: ‘Reality – this is their message – is not that which the window of painting represents: real is only the coincidence of painting and reality on the surface of the canvas’ (2017, 269). The claim set forth in the current work is that of a reading of the shift introduced by quantum mechanics that affords a parallel deactivation of the oppositions between knowledge of reality and the intervention that affords it, between pre-supposed and unrelated being: such that *real* comes to be the coincidence that takes place in the liminal space – the canvas – in which our intervention in the world and the representation that it produces touch one another; such that *real* comes to be Majorana’s sacrifice, namely the *sacratio* of presence that alone allows reality to touch itself.

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