

Giorgio Agamben: Understanding *Oikeiōsis*

Pier Alberto Porceddu Cilione

Abstract: Giorgio Agamben saw in the concept of ‘use’ the term that enables us to understand the oscillation between *having* and *being*, *property* and *inappropriateness*, *being rooted in one’s own land* and *being in exile*. The same oscillation between *property* and *inappropriateness* governs our use of language. Our mother tongue represents what is the most intimate and most personal, what ratifies our origin, what assigns us to a community. But this familiarity, this habit or habitude, is illusory: something, at the centre of our use of language, expropriates *itself* and expropriates *us*. In order to understand this oscillation, Agamben uses the Stoic concept of *oikeiōsis*, which preserves the semantic dimension of ‘familiarity’, of ‘habitude’. ‘Use’ and *oikeiōsis* become the keys to a better understanding of the problem of ‘inhabiting’ our language, our body, and, through the concept of landscape, the world itself.

This article’s aim is to analyse a specific Stoic inheritance in the context of Giorgio Agamben’s *oeuvre*, and to justify the meaning and the role of a key Stoic concept, the concept of *oikeiōsis*, in the wider context of contemporary philosophical debates. The concept of *oikeiōsis*, already present in the earliest stages of Stoic philosophy, denotes the possibility of understanding, through Agamben’s interpretation, the mutual relationship between several key concepts of philosophy. On closer inspection, the concept of *oikeiōsis* enters Agamben’s conceptual lexicon rather late, but it is important to emphasise that this does not mean that the Italian philosopher had not focused on issues implicitly linked to the concept long before. Already his reflection on the theme of ‘property’ and ‘extraneousness’, later specified in the conceptual oscillation between ‘appropriation’ and ‘inappropriateness’, required a formulation that obeyed Agamben’s ‘method’. Not only does the contemporary lexicon require, to be conceptually appropriate, a genealogical and archaeological exercise, but also, conversely, the past (in this case, the Stoic philosophical lexicon) is illuminated by the specific exigences of contemporaneity, far from a mere historical and antiquarian investigation. More specifically, the concept of *oikeiōsis* works as a possible mediator of certain terminological oppositions which, in Agamben’s opinion, fundamentally articulate our way of living in the world, and our way of experiencing it. These oppositions constitute the fundamental terms of this phase of Agamben’s reflection: the oscillation between ‘homeland’ and ‘exile’, ‘property’ and ‘extraneousness’, ‘appropriation’ and ‘misappropriation’, ‘style’ and ‘manner’. It will then be understood that the concept of *oikeiōsis* is the name for the relationship between

progressive ‘familiarisation with’ and ‘estrangement from’ contemporaneity with respect to itself and to its own tradition. The concept of *oikeiōsis* is not a term simply ‘transplanted’ into a contemporary context and re-functionalised according to Agamben’s specific conceptual needs; it rather becomes the term that names the relationship between ‘appropriative’ and ‘disappropriative’ *diastole* and *systole*, and it is this relationship that our contemporary philosophical consciousness entertains with itself and with its tradition.

1.

In Agamben’s work, the presence of the European philosophical-literary tradition encloses an underlying ambivalence.

On the one hand, the Italian philosopher’s texts, asserting a privileged access to the analysis of contemporaneity, are placed in a space that radically ‘secedes’ from the historical continuity of philosophical reflection, ratifying the fact that those who practise philosophy today are, in fact, practising philosophy ‘after philosophy’. Philosophy – after *all*. Contemporaneity, representing a character of absolute *novitas*, a place of ‘otherness’ compared with the conceptual coordinates of the past, has severed any link with European textual and artistic tradition. In this sense, rather than constituting itself as the slow transmission of a shared heritage, it becomes the space of an irrevocable shipwreck.¹ Dominated by the progressive *pathos* of the historical and techno-scientific development, contemporaneity ratifies its estrangement from the spiritual production of the past. Therefore, contemporaneity constitutes a threshold on which what is produced in a ‘previous’ historical and axiological space is deprived of conceptual legitimacy, silently slipping into a past that cannot be recovered.

On the other hand, it is clear that all the pages written by Agamben are constituted through a meticulous relationship with the vast Western literary, philosophical, and artistic canon, indicating a persistent presence of those spiritual testimonies in the context of the present. How should this ambivalence be understood? It is no exaggeration to say that the reflection on this ambivalence constitutes one of Agamben’s fundamental philosophical commitments. The archaeological and genealogical strategies of Agamben’s ‘method’, rather than revealing their obvious debt to Nietzsche and Foucault, signal the philosophical foresight with which Agamben deals with this problem. Contemporaneity affirms itself and substantiates itself precisely to the extent that it is aware of the fact that the past, broadly speaking, is stripped of all legitimacy.

Access to contemporaneity, however, is guaranteed only by the functional relationship with a tradition, that is, indeed, devoid of effectiveness, but which forms the ideal place for contemporaneity to reflect on itself and therefore find its proper dimension. Archaeology, rather than a regression to a supposed ‘original’

¹ See Giorgio Agamben, ‘Situazione di Ezra Pound’, in Ezra Pound, *Dal naufragio di Europa. Scritti scelti 1909-1965* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2016).

archē, is constituted as ‘the sole means of access to the present’.² The solution to this paradox lies in the fact that contemporaneity is the place where the present questions itself by investigating the past, since Europeans ‘can gain access to their truth only by means of a confrontation with the past, only by settling accounts with their history’.³ Far from being the abstract space of the *modus*, of the mere ‘contingency’, contemporariness is the permanent *locus experimentalis*, in which the past is measured on the basis of the present.

Similar to what is mapped out by Agamben, contemporaneity, reflecting on itself, denotes the fact that the present is not enough, for the simple reason that it is originally constituted by forces that derive from earlier chronologies. Contemporaneity is not enough by itself: the infinite exercise of contemporary philosophy coincides with the effort of consciously living one’s own appropriative relationship with contemporaneity. Agamben’s resumption of the concept of *oikeiōsis* becomes legitimate precisely because of this ambivalent mutual relation between past and present. From here, the problem that arises is how to measure *in which way* and *in what sense* the effectiveness of the past must be thought of in the present context. One could assume that the conception of the past proposed by Agamben is an invitation radically to rethink the very concept of ‘effectiveness’. What is the philosophical consistency of the European spiritual tradition if contemporaneity claims the destitution of the effectiveness of this very past? What exactly does it mean that a text, a work, a philosophical conception, a scientific theory, is no longer ‘effective’, no longer ‘working’, no longer ‘operative’ (in the sense in which laws are in force and currency valid)? In what sense does a text or a concept, belonging to a tradition that the contemporary has abrogated, nevertheless demand a presence – operative and effective – in the present?

Contemporary philosophy therefore seems to be constituted as a permanent experiment on the possibility of a new *and* ancient conceptual effectiveness, which, coming from a past that contemporaneity calls to obliterate, is reactivated in a suspensive and problematic space. The prudence with which contemporary philosophers handle the conceptual lexicon of our speculative tradition underlines the problematic semantic consistency of each of its terms, precisely indicating this ambivalence. Contemporaneity is nothing more than the intersectional space between a past that never ceases to pass, and a present that, while claiming its absolute estrangement from that past, finds itself innervated by those previous presences, that emanate from that past. Just to underline the epochal magnitude of this problem, Agamben writes that ‘the crisis that Europe is going through [...] is not an economic problem [...], but a crisis of the relationship with the past. Since obviously the only place in which the past can live is the present, if the present is no longer aware of its past as living, universities and museums

² Giorgio Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy*, trans. A. Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 1.

³ *Ibid.*

become problematic places'.⁴ Contemporary philosophical reflection should not simply think of the present in its 'proper' dimension, but it should know that the present is an intersectional space between what has been 'present' in the past, and what will be present 'as past' in the future.

It is in this context that Agamben's reprise of the Stoic concept of *oikeiōsis* should be understood. This concept carries this double register within itself. The presence of the concept of *oikeiōsis*, re-inscribed by Agamben in the current debate, marks not only this paradoxical functioning of a present, knowing that it has severed any essential link with Stoicism (if not in the form of a philological reconstruction, which has ceased to be valid), but at the same time marks its presence and effectiveness.

2.

Considered by Max Pohlenz 'the beginning and the foundation of Stoic ethics',⁵ the term '*oikeiōsis*' is difficult to translate into modern languages, due to the need to capture the semantic density of the term '*oikos*', from which the term *oikeiōsis* is formed. The term *oikeiōsis* opens a semantic field with two fundamental pillars: 'familiarisation' and 'appropriation'. In order to grasp the original meaning of the term, modern languages need the Latin mediation of the term *familia, familiaris*. The concept of 'familiarisation' indicates the process by which a being enters into a relation of 'familiarity' with itself or with an environment. Stoic ethics insists on the idea that every living being enters a relationship of growing familiarity to itself. This feeling of *relatio ad se* arises as the fundamental constitutive requirement of the relationship of the living being to itself. The second semantic pillar, however, is even more clearly inscribed in Agamben's speculative path. The concept of *oikeiōsis* as 'appropriation' plays a fundamental role in numerous texts by the Italian philosopher. In Agamben's perspective, therefore, it is necessary, in the concept of *oikeiōsis*, to look at the conceptual constellation that has its fundamental roots in the idea of 'property', in that of 'use', and in the very idea of the 'inappropriable'. Precisely because of this strategic centrality, it is not an exaggeration to say that the concept of *appropriation* constitutes one of the fundamental themes of Agamben's intellectual research. Is it now possible to give a working definition of the term *oikeiōsis*?

As Jean-Louis Labarrière has pointed out in the *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*,

'appropriation' is the literal translation [...] of the Stoic term *oikeiōsis*, derived from the word *oikeioō* [οἰκεῖω], 'to make familiar' and later

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Max Pohlenz, *Grundfragen der stoischen Philosophie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1940), 11.

‘to make specific to, to appropriate’; ‘to appropriate to oneself’, in the reflexive sense, ‘related to the family, to the estate; belonging to the family’, whence ‘proper to’.⁶

It is relevant to notice that *oikeiōsis* is opposed to *allotriōsis*, ‘alienation’, and indicates what nature has originally ‘appropriated or attached to us or conciliated with us’. The term also has an affective dimension that is very poorly rendered by ‘appropriation’.⁷

Providing the transition from the physical to the ethical, the notion of *oikeiōsis* is used by the Stoics in two different arguments, which makes understanding and translation even more difficult. This notion suggests that living beings do not seek primarily pleasure, but instead what is ‘appropriate’ to each of them, starting with the preservation of their own constitutions. This entails a certain form of self-esteem and implies that in accordance with this tendency or primary impulse (*prōtē hormē*), we can posit for rational beings this double equation: living in accord with nature = living in accord with reason = living in accord with virtue.⁸

As Jean-Louis Labarrière states,

oikeiōsis also has the purpose of founding relationships of justice between human beings by ensuring that self-esteem is the foundation for the love for one’s relatives, a love that must be understood as love for their own good. This love is destined to broaden so as to encompass all rational beings, thus founding in nature the social bond, or even the cosmopolitanism cherished by the Stoics, whether this is merely a cosmopolitanism of the wise, as in the older Stoicism, or that of all human beings, as in Panaetius and later writers.⁹

⁶ Jean-Louis Labarrière, ‘OIKEIŌSIS’ [οἰκείωσις] in Barbara Cassin (ed.), *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, trans. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁷ See *ibid.* For a general overview of the Stoic concept of *oikeiōsis*, see Robert Bees, *Die Oikeiōsislehre der Stoa*, 2 vols. (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2004–2005); Émile Bréhier, *Les Stoïciens*, (ed.) P. -M. Schuhl (Paris: Gallimard/La Pléiade, 1962); Brad Inwood and Pierluigi Donini, ‘Stoic Ethics’ in K. Algra et al. (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); S. G. Pembroke, ‘Oikeiōsis’ in A. A. Long (ed.), *Problems in Stoicism* (London: Athlone, 1971); Gisela Striker, ‘The Role of *Oikeiōsis* in Stoic Ethics’ in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy, Vol. 1* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

⁸ Jean-Louis Labarrière, ‘OIKEIŌSIS’, *ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

It is interesting to observe that Cicero, ‘contrary to his usual practice, does not give the Greek term *oikeiōsis*, but instead leaves it to his interpreters to give priority to *conciliatio* (literally, “association”, “union”) or *commendatio* (literally, “recommendation”).¹⁰ The current Italian translation of *oikeiōsis* is ‘appropriazione’, ‘appropriation’: Agamben’s reflection on the term starts from here.

3.

It might not be wrong to think that the genealogy of Agamben’s interest in this term dates back to his old acquaintance with Hölderlin’s texts. It is Agamben himself who, in his autobiography, points out the fundamental encounter with the great German poet’s lyrics, letters, and aesthetic writings.¹¹ A passage that has little less than a talismanic value, and which is quoted in many of Agamben’s works, is the famous letter that Friedrich Hölderlin sent to his friend Casimir Ulrich Böhlendorff on December 4th, 1801, and which constitutes a fundamental milestone for the understanding of Hölderlin’s aesthetics. Here Hölderlin writes,

In the progress of culture, the truly national will become the ever less attractive. Hence the Greeks are less master of the sacred pathos, because to them it was inborn, whereas they excel in their talent for representation, beginning with Homer, because this exceptional man was sufficiently sensitive to conquer the Western Junonian sobriety for his Apollonian empire, and thus to veritably appropriate what is foreign. With us it is the reverse. [...] Yet what is familiar must be learned as well as what is alien. This is why the Greeks are so indispensable for us. It is only that we will not follow them in our own, national [spirit] since, as I said, the free use of what is one’s own [*der freie Gebrauch des Eigenen*] is the most difficult.¹²

Understanding this passage of extraordinary density would presuppose an analysis of the complex thematisation that Hölderlin’s aesthetics makes of the issue of the ‘translational’ relationship between Ancient Greek and German, between Greece and Germany, between antiquity and modernity, between ‘celestial fire’ and ‘Juno-esque sobriety’ (note here that, without a clear understanding of this *stasis* and this problematic *philia* between ancient Greece and modern Germany, little is understood of European spiritual history, in particular between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). In the context we are interested in, the passage is of great

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ See Giorgio Agamben, *Autoritratto nello studio* (Milan: Nottetempo, 2017), 44–45.

¹² Friedrich Hölderlin, *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. T. Pfau (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 149–150; trans. mod.

interest, because it could have constituted the first impulse for Giorgio Agamben's elaboration of a renewed attention to the concept of 'property', of 'appropriation'. It can well be said that the passage holds a revelation: the term 'proper', the problem of the relationship of 'property', the theme of 'appropriateness', of 'appropriation', and of its reverse, the 'inappropriate', all of which are derived from this first Hölderlinian formulation, become decisive for Agamben's speculative 'method'. Also, the reactivation of the term *oikeiōsis* should therefore be inscribed in this trajectory. Notice that the Hölderlinian formula ('the free use of what is one's own is the most difficult') articulates three key terms of Agamben's own reflection: *proper*, *use*, and *freedom*, which – although not so clearly thematised – constitute the tacit premise for that emancipatory exigence that touches every page written by the Italian philosopher.

This is not the place for an in-depth analysis of that Hölderlinian passage, but it is useful to reflect on how the conceptual device of the 'proper' and 'property' works. Hölderlin is clearly dealing with themes in which poetic and cultural issues between Greek and German attitudes based on the binary oppositions previously mentioned are intertwined. There is a 'proper element', a specific 'property' (*das Eigene*), in which we are originally inscribed as 'cultural' and 'spiritual' creatures. The idea of 'national' must certainly also be understood as what is close to 'birth': the whole Latin etymological constellation of *nascor*, *nasci*, and 'nation' contributes to this notion. But this original element, which is 'proper' because it is inscribed in the original/archaic dimension of 'birth', is always captured in a polarity with an extraneous element, with a dislocation, with a misappropriation (the *'disappropriata maniera'* ['inappropriate manner'] of Giorgio Caproni, a poet closely and passionately read by Agamben).

The experience of 'homeland', which inscribes us in a 'birth', because it is in a relation with the experience of an 'exile', is always as such an experience of a foreign territorial dislocation, of a 'colony' (*Kolonie liebt der Geist...*, 'the Spirit loves the colony', as a famous passage from the great Hölderlinian elegy, *Brot und Wein* affirms). Our mother tongue, which defines our identity and our cultural context, is certainly a place of 'property' (one's *proper* language, *our* language, the language we can speak in an *appropriate* way), but it is constantly crossed by 'distorting' elements, by internal forces of translation, by etymological loans, by the distant origins of its lexical roots, by barbarisms, by the 'inappropriate' use of its terms. The relationship to oneself, just like the relation that an individual language maintains with itself, is a relation of 'appropriation', of *oikeiōsis*.

4.

It is useful to keep in mind that, in Agamben's texts, the concept of *oikeiōsis* must be inscribed in an even broader constellation than the one outlined so far. The concept of *oikeiōsis* is always found in relation to other key terms of Agamben's reflection. As we saw earlier on, the concept of *oikeiōsis* works as a possible

mediator between certain terminological oppositions which, in Agamben's opinion, fundamentally articulate our way of living in the world and our way of experiencing it. What are these conceptual oppositions? They constitute the fundamental terms of this phase in Agamben's work: the oscillation between homeland and exile, property and extraneousness, appropriation and misappropriation, style and manner. If the concept of 'use' means 'to oscillate unceasingly between a homeland and an exile: to inhabit',¹³ the term 'use' is thus given the task of thinking about the space in which these conceptual oppositions seek their mediation, the place in which they operate and are suspended, at the same time.

Following research by Thomas Bénatouïl,¹⁴ Agamben points out that the topic of 'use' (specifically that of 'self-use', in the Stoic context) intersects with that of *oikeiōsis*, of 'appropriation' or 'familiarisation' with oneself (UB, 49). But Agamben goes on to claim that we are not dealing with a mere conceptual 'intersection' here, or some terminological coincidence, but with the fact that 'the doctrine of *oikeiōsis* becomes intelligible only if one understands it as a doctrine of use-of-oneself' (*ibid.*). It is no coincidence that Agamben's more elaborate passages on the Stoic doctrine of *oikeiōsis* are to be found in his vast investigation of the 'use of bodies'. It is precisely at a strategic point in this text that Agamben confronts the original sources of Stoicism. A passage from the *Life of Zeno* by Diogenes Laertius contains some essential lines for reconstructing the Stoic doctrine of *oikeiōsis*:

Τὴν δὲ πρώτην ὀρμὴν φασὶ τὸ ζῶον ἴσχειν ἐπὶ τὸ τηρεῖν ἑαυτό, οἰκειούσης αὐτῷ τῆς φύσεως ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, καθὰ φησὶν ὁ Χρυσίππος ἐν τῷ πρώτῳ Περὶ τελῶν, πρῶτον οἰκεῖον λέγων εἶναι παντὶ ζῳῷ τὴν αὐτοῦ σύστασιν καὶ τὴν ταύτης συνείδησιν: οὔτε γὰρ ἀλλοτριῶσαι εἰκὸς ἦν αὐτὸ <αὐτῷ> τὸ ζῶον, οὔτε ποιήσασαν αὐτό, μήτ' ἀλλοτριῶσαι μήτ' οἰκειῶσαι. ἀπολείπεται τοίνυν λέγειν συστησαμένην αὐτὸ οἰκειῶσαι πρὸς ἑαυτό: οὔτω γὰρ τὰ τε βλάπτοντα διωθεῖται καὶ τὰ οἰκεῖα προσίεται.

An animal's first impulse, say the Stoics, is to self-preservation, because nature from the outset endears it to itself, as Chrysippus affirms in the first book of his work *On Ends*: his words are, 'The dearest thing to every animal is its own constitution and its consciousness thereof'; for it was not likely that nature should estrange the living thing from itself or that she should leave the creature she has made without either estrangement from or affection for its own constitution. We are forced then to conclude that nature in

¹³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. A. Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 87-88. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as UB.

¹⁴ See Thomas Bénatouïl, *Faire usage: la pratique du stoïcisme* (Paris: Vrin, 2006), 21-22.

constituting the animal made it near and dear to itself; for so it comes to repel all that is injurious and give free access to all that is serviceable or akin to it.¹⁵

In this passage, we learn that the idea of *oikeiōsis* is originally linked to the ‘self-love’ of the living. This self-love constitutes a primary impulse of the animal (a *prōtē hormē*) and enrolls the living being in the orbit of ‘self-preservation’. The *prōton oikeion* is therefore not only what has been familiar to every being since birth, but that which must be understood as something that belongs to its own constitution, and to the sensation that it has of itself (see UB, 50). Aligned with a ‘providential’ vision of nature, typical of a certain Stoicism, *physis* (nature) therefore makes the living being familiar to itself, ‘appropriate’, ‘appropriate to itself’.

From the text of Diogenes Laertius, we can extract a passage by Chrysippus according to which, ‘the most proper thing’, ‘the dearest thing’ (*prōton oikeion*) of every living being is its own ‘constitution’ (*sustasis*) and its own ‘consciousness’ (*suneidēsis*), i.e. the ‘co-science’ (*sun-eidēsis*) of its own constitution, the ‘proper’ feeling of inhabiting the scheme of its own self-conscious body.

In Agamben’s interpretation, there is another interesting element. It is important to note that, in *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben points to the fact that Max Pohlenz, following a different reading, reads the term ‘*sunaisthēsis*’, or ‘co-sensation’, in the passage quoted from Chrysippus, rather than the term ‘*suneidēsis*’. For a long time a Professor of Aesthetics, Agamben must have been struck by the idea that the concept of *oikeiōsis* (i.e. this process of ‘appropriation’ to oneself) is only conceivable from the experience of a *sunaisthēsis*, a ‘co-feeling’ of oneself and of one’s own constitution (see UB, 50). If we should read the term *sunaisthēsis* contained in the passage of Diogenes Laertius, we must then admit that the term *oikeiōsis* not only denotes a coincidence of the living being with itself based on an ‘appropriative’ plan of *physis*, but also indicates that, at the core of the ‘appropriative’ relationship, the living being entertains with itself a fundamental *feeling*. According to this interpretation, every being would then be constituted by a fundamental ‘synesthetic’ dimension, that appropriates it to itself. The living being, in its fundamental inscription in the space of nature, lives in an ‘appropriate’ way, to the extent that a fundamental ‘aesthetic synthesis’ makes it feel ‘familiar’ and ‘dear’ to itself.¹⁶

Therefore, aesthetics, instead of being a theory of ‘external’ perception (i.e. a theory of *experience*) or the ideal place where the relationship between a subject and the world is constituted through the senses, would then become the fundamental ‘science of appropriation’ of the living being to itself. Aesthetics would

¹⁵ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R. D. Hicks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Loeb Classical Series, 1925), 7.85. See Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 49–50.

¹⁶ On this point, see Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (New York: Zone, 2007).

thus denote the fundamental ‘co-sensation’ inscribed in the habitation of the self *within itself*, which coincides with its process of *self-appropriation*. As Agamben writes, ‘*oikeiōsis*, familiarity with the self, is thinkable, in this sense, only on the basis of a *synaisthesis*, a con-sentiment of the self and of one’s own constitution’ (*ibid.*).

This analysis, however inevitable for understanding the Stoic doctrine of *oikeiōsis*, works, in Agamben’s text, as an introductory consideration to the fundamental theme of his research, the theme of ‘use’. How should this term be understood? Agamben’s *The Use of Bodies* opens with a meticulous etymological and linguistic analysis of this term, investigating above all the meaning of the Greek verb ‘*chrēsthai*’ and its corresponding Latin verb ‘*uti*’. The first task of Agamben’s research is to deconstruct the misleading ‘instrumental’ meaning that the verb ‘to use’ has in many modern languages. This analysis of the construction of the verb *chrēsthai* (see UB, 24–25) reveals how difficult it is to trace the uses of this verb to a single meaning. At first glance, the verb *chrēsthai* ‘does not seem to have a proper meaning but acquires ever different meanings according to the context’ (*ibid.*, 24). Based on the uses of the verb, and the terms that follow it, *chrēsthai* can mean ‘to consult an oracle’, ‘to have sexual relations’, ‘to speak’, ‘to be unhappy’, ‘to punch someone’, ‘to feel nostalgia’..., without us being able to understand the sense common to all these uses. ‘The fact is that the verb in question seems to draw its meaning from that of the term that accompanies it’ (*ibid.*, 25).

Analysing a series of uses of the verb *chrēsthai* and *uti*, Agamben concludes that the verb in question cannot have the modern sense of ‘using something’. On the contrary, ‘each time it is a matter of a relationship with something, but the nature of this relationship is, at least in appearance, so indeterminate that it seems impossible to define a unitary sense of the term’ (*ibid.*). With the help of a monographic study by Georges Redard published in 1950, Agamben hypothesises that the term ‘use’ does imply a relationship between a subject and an object, but this relationship is ‘an *occasional* relationship of *appropriation*’ (*ibid.*), where the subject ‘uses’ something transiently. But it is the pattern of the subject/object relationship that, on closer inspection, is misleading and inadequate. At this point, the element that helps the scholar most is the fact that *chrēsthai* is a middle voice verb (*media tantum*) as opposed to an active one.

Redard, quoting an article by the supervisor of his research, refers to the great linguist Émile Benveniste. Benveniste, in his book, recalls that the active verbs ‘denote a process that starts from the subject and goes outside it’, whereas in the middle voice, ‘the verb indicates a process that takes place in the subject: the subject is internal to the process’.¹⁷ The subject, therefore, in the middle voice, ‘*effectue en s’affectant*’: it does something, but, at the same time, it is affected by its own operation. As Agamben points out,

¹⁷ Émile Benveniste, *Actif et moyen dans le verbe* (1950), quoted in Georges Redard, *Recherches sur χρή, χρῆσθαι. Étude sémantique* (Paris: Champion, 1953), 44; see UB, 24–30.

On the one hand, the subject who achieves the action, by the very fact of achieving it, does not act transitively on an object but first of all implies and affects himself in the process; on the other hand, precisely for this reason, the process presupposes a singular topology, in which the subject does not stand over the action but is himself the place of its occurring. (UB, 28)

It is only at this point that Agamben attempts to define ‘use’ by investigating the complexity of the verb *chrēsthai*: ‘it expresses the relationship one has with oneself, the affection one receives as it is in relationship with a given entity’ (*ibid.*). It is now easier to understand why Agamben claims that there is a connection between the meaning of *chrēsthai* and *oikeiōsis*, between ‘use’ and ‘appropriation’. *Oikeiōsis* is nothing more than *the appropriate use of oneself*, the name that denotes the fact that the living being, knowing the sensation of its limbs, knows *how to use them*. There is thus a semantic overlap between *chrēsthai* and *oikeiōsis*. The living being is familiar with its body, because it knows the use – or the uses – that are imprinted in it.

Translated into Latin as ‘*conciliatio*’, the Stoic term *oikeiōsis* achieves, through the terminological and conceptual mediation of Seneca, a deeper meaning. In Agamben’s opinion, Seneca, in Letter 121 to Lucilius, takes a significant step in illustrating the following idea: the *conciliatio* that the living being has of itself is ‘prior to everything’, because it is what appropriates me to myself; but, at the same time, this *oikeiōsis* does not simply work as a fundamental, unconscious, and natural impulse; it must be thought of as something like a *use of itself*, as a process through which the living being, *using itself*, learns to get to know itself. Therefore, ‘*oikeiōsis* or *conciliatio* does not have as its ultimate object the constitution of the individual, which can change over time, but, by means of it, its very self’ (UB, 54). *Oikeiōsis*, in this sense, should not be thought of as a fundamental need unconsciously inscribed by nature in the living being – as it might seem from the notion of *oikeiōsis* as *prōtē hormē* in Zeno and Chrysippus – but rather as a *progressive* familiarisation of oneself with oneself, through the idea of *usus mei* and *cura mei*, so emblematically described by Seneca in the letter quoted by Agamben. According to this analysis, the self turns out to be an *aesthetic* and *relational effect* of *oikeiōsis*, rather than its cause: ‘this self – despite the fact that the Stoics seem at times to pre-constitute it in a nature or an innate knowledge – is therefore not something substantial or a preestablished end but coincides entirely with the use that the living being makes of it’ (*ibid.*). On closer inspection, therefore, the *oikeiōsis* names the process by which the living being *uses itself to appropriate itself*, knowing that, in the very process of familiarisation with itself, its own self is affected. The self is the ‘*oikeiōtic*’ effect that the familiarisation process has on itself. It is therefore the ‘use of oneself’ that always unfolds in a paradoxical ‘action’ denoted by a middle voice verb, *is affected by operating*, that produces its own ‘co-sensation’.

At this point, it is useful to clarify an important conceptual aspect of this affair: if it is true that *oikeiōsis* denotes a process rather than a state, one should not think that it has a ‘teleological’ character. Agamben has already mentioned how the self, produced by an *oikeiotic* process of *usus sui*, should not be thought of as a substantial entity, nor as the manifestation of a specific *telos* (goal, end). Indeed, on closer inspection, *oikeiōsis* itself cannot have a teleological character, because it surely is something innate and originally written in the living being; at the same time, however, it functions as the *effect of a use*, as the effect of a relationship (or rather, as what guarantees this use-relationship). One might think that *oikeiōsis* is therefore an ongoing process, but its processual character should be thought of as non-teleological.

In every moment of this relationship, appropriation and disappropriation, familiarisation and estrangement are given: the *use* denoted by the concept of *oikeiōsis* is nothing but the oscillation between a feeling of coherence and a feeling of dispersion. The *oikeiōsis* names a process, not because it denotes a teleologically oriented path from an *archē* to a *telos*, but because it cannot be defined as something that holds in fullness. There is never a fulfillment of the appropriation process, nor *plērōma* of the *oikeiōsis*. At all times, *oikeiōsis* is the memory of an appropriate ‘origin’ and the transition to an appropriation’s *ideal*, but in the process itself, ‘familiarity’ and ‘estrangement’, ‘property’ and ‘estrangement’, ‘homeness’ and ‘*Unheimlichkeit*’, ‘*Heimat*’ and ‘colony’, ‘homeland’ and ‘exile’ always coexist. Appropriation is always inappropriate, compared to the need of appropriation it poses to itself.

5.

We can therefore ask ourselves if, given these considerations, the idea of *oikeiōsis* could not become a much wider paradigm than the one outlined by the Stoic conceptualisation. Agamben’s resumption of the concept of *oikeiōsis* seems to move precisely in this direction. If *oikeiōsis* denotes this suspensive processual space in which the living being, using itself, incessantly oscillates between ‘appropriation’ and ‘misappropriation’, it can be thought that this oscillation denotes the fundamental constitution of every ‘use’ relation, of everyone’s relation to themselves and/or with an entity, through which a progressive self-constitution is made possible. *Oikeiōsis* therefore names every space of appropriative oscillation, in which the self, entering into relation with itself and/or with an entity, is modified by this same relationship and is affected by its own use.

It is now clearer why Agamben’s work honours, starting from the title, the question of the body, in order to assess the validity of this interpretation, or – better said – one’s ‘proper’ body. Prolonging – but also contesting – a deep-rooted phenomenological tradition (from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty and beyond), Agamben points out that the fundamental marker to denote the relationship that the subject holds with the body is that of ‘property’. The subject ‘owns’ a body,

‘possesses’ it by virtue of an act of ‘property’, but this property represents a paradoxical *status*, it represents an odd relation. The ‘proper’ body is certainly *my* body, the body which is the object of an ‘appropriative’ relation; at the same time, however, it cannot be thought of as an ‘objective’ entity (like an external ‘tool’, nor *used* as a tool) tied to the alleged subject through a mere relation of ‘possession’. Phenomenologically understood, I *am* a *Leib*: I don’t *own* a *Körper*. It is certainly misleading to think that the self *owns* its body by virtue of a ‘proprietary’ relationship. I *have* a body, but I *am* also a body: the self that I am is the *subject* of a body, which should paradoxically be constituted as the object of a property.

How, then, should the body be thought of, if it oscillates between *being* and *having*, between appropriation and estrangement, between an inappropriate subjectivity and a missed objectivity? What is the ‘proper’ body, that body that the phenomenological tradition has not ceased to investigate without being able to solve the problem of its ‘property’ and its ‘use’? According to Agamben, one could say that one’s ‘proper’ body constitutes that paradoxical space in which the subject/the body coincides with, and, at the same time, does not coincide with itself. The body is therefore a paradoxical entity, because it is the object and subject of a property, but, at the same time, it escapes any proprietary determination. The body – it is now clear – is the *spacing* of *oikeiōsis*, the place where the impossible process of appropriation takes place.

In Agamben’s texts, *body*, like *language* or *landscape*, is a figure of the ‘inappropriable’, places where the process of *oikeiōsis* denotes an exigence of appropriation, but where – at the same time – it is impossible, where it is indefinitely deferred. The body, it could also be said, is the *embodiment of oikeiōsis*; it is the place where the self is perceived as a folding of its own ‘use’. The *chrēsis tou sōmatou* is the space of oscillation between *my* body and the body which I can never say to be *mine*. Why can my body never be mine? Why can it never be the object of a full appropriation? Why is such appropriation *impossible*? The body, as Agamben considers it, is ‘inappropriable’, because, despite being unquestionably *my* body, my proper body, it always escapes my proprietary grip. This appropriation is originally out of phase with itself. In a state of need, in sickness, in shame, when it feels a sense of inadequacy, my body alienates itself from itself: a process of *allotriōsis* forecloses the *oikeiōsis*. A sick body, a body that imposes its needs on the subject, is an *inappropriate* body, a body injured in its process of familiarisation with itself: it is an ‘estranged’ body. We can now better understand the sense in which *oikeiōsis* cannot be thought either as a *prōtē hormē* or as a *telos*. *Oikeiōsis* represents the transcendental field in which the possibility of appropriation opens up, in which the possibility of an absolute familiarisation is inscribed from the outset, but where such appropriation is also always missing and deferred. The *oikeiōsis* denotes every process of appropriation, every spacing in which the oscillation between appropriateness and appropriation, property and estrangement, *oikeiōsis* and *allotriōsis*, homeland and exile, is possible.

6.

In Agamben's conceptualisation, another typically 'inappropriable' dimension is represented by language. Just like the body, language is subject to the same 'appropriation' paradoxes as are inscribed in the relation between corporeality and subjectivity. My mother tongue, my native language, is certainly *my* language, the language that I *possess*, which I use with the skillfulness of an instinctual impulse. In the use of my mother tongue, the *chrēsis tou logou* seems to be constituted as an un-reflected *prōtē hormē*. Yet upon closer inspection, what can 'owning a language' really mean? What kind of 'property' can be given in the process of language appropriation? I can say that I 'own' a language, in the sense that I am in control of the appropriate uses of all its terms, but I certainly cannot understand myself as owning it, nor can it be conceived as an object of possession, nor as the effect of a *Vorhandensein*. My mother tongue is *my* language, because it determines my identity and my belonging, but it always escapes my grasp. The *oikeiōsis* process that would allow me fully to control language's possession is impossible and endless. In fact, our relationship with language also closely resembles the one which we entertain with our body. The same oscillation between property and inappropriateness governs our use of language. Just as the body's 'property' is by no means an obvious fact, so the same economy of appropriation and expropriation governs our relationship with language. In this sense, Agamben writes,

[t]here exists, from this perspective, a structural analogy between the body and language. Indeed, language also – in particular in the figure of the mother tongue – appears for each speaker as what is the most intimate and proper; and yet, speaking of an 'ownership' and of an 'intimacy' of language is certainly misleading, since language happens to the human being from the outside, through a process of transmission and learning that can be arduous and painful and is imposed on the infant rather than being willed by it. (UB, 86)

Our mother tongue seems to be what is most intimate and most 'proper' to us, what ratifies our 'cultural birth' (Hölderlin's '*das Eigene*'), our origin, what assigns us to a community, what is kept in our innermost familiarity, what is the most appropriate. But this familiarity, this habit, this use, this loyalty, is illusory: something, at the centre of our use of the language, is expropriated. 'And while the body seems particular to each individual, language is by definition shared by others and as such an object of common use' (*ibid.*). This oscillation between property and estrangement, between appropriation and inappropriateness, culminates in the concept of habit, of familiarisation. It is in this sense that Agamben uses, again in this context, the concept of *oikeiōsis*, drawing a parallel between the *sustasis/sunaisthēsis* of the living and the *chrēsis* of language:

Like the bodily constitution according to the Stoics, that is to say, language is something with which the living being must be familiarised in a more or less drawn-out *oikeiosis*, which seems natural and almost inborn; and yet – as *lapsus*, stuttering, unexpected forgetfulness, and aphasia testify – it has always remained to some degree external to the speaker. (*Ibid.*)

However, it is not only a question of a misappropriation marked by lapsus and aphasias. Each conscious speaker finds themselves within the infinite process of familiarisation that they enjoy with their own language. Just like the Stoic *suneidēsis*, the speaker believes themselves to be originally inscribed in their ‘proper’ language (which is rather *imposed* on them from the outside, endowed with a mysterious cogency and ‘objectivity’). The speaker speaks this language skillfully according to a *prōtē hormē*, but the more they reflect on this point and the more they feel that the language escapes them, the more they perceive it as an inappropriable, and an internal awareness of always speaking it in an ‘inappropriate way’ grows. Not only that, but the growing linguistic awareness coincides with the infinite need for an appropriation process, trying to use language in order to reveal its appropriateness and its misappropriations. According to Agamben, the kind of speaker who is most acutely aware of language’s oscillation between property and extraneousness, between homeland and exile, and between *Heimat* and colony, is the poet.

Agamben notes that poetic language is precisely what carries out this process of infinite appropriation. Poets are in fact those who address the notion of ‘living the language’ (which is to say, those who question its ‘use’). As inhabitants of a language (and culture) that is both one’s ‘own’ and ‘foreign’ at the same time, poets work for the estrangement of what is given (the language in its common use) in order to implement its possible appropriation:

This is all the more evident in those – the poets – whose trade is precisely that of mastering language and making it proper. They must for this reason first of all abandon conventions and common use and, so to speak, render foreign the language that they must dominate, inscribing it in a system of rules as arbitrary as they are inexorable. (UB, 86)

Agamben continues: ‘the appropriation of language that they pursue [...] is to the same extent an expropriation, in such a way that the poetic act appears as a bipolar gesture, which each time renders extraneous what must be unfailingly appropriate’ (*ibid.*, trans. mod.). Therefore, the poet (or the ideal figure of a conscious language speaker) is the one who, *using* the language, acutely perceives the oscillation between appropriation and misappropriation. Language too constitutes a spacing of the *oikeiōsis* – a place of impossible topology – which represents the field of the

appropriation process. Those who speak a language in a reflexive way feel that *every term of each language is inappropriate*, and only an infinite process of appropriation could bring the *logos* closer to that ideal target, which, once reached, could finally denote the meaning *appropriately*. In this sense, philosophy becomes the conceptual space of *oikeiōsis*, the space in which *all the terms of language*, although inappropriate, are in the process of reaching their appropriation, their property, their absolute appropriateness.

7.

The third dimension of the inappropriable that Agamben analyses is that of *landscape*. In what sense does the landscape, as well as the body and language, represent an ‘inappropriable’? Like body and language, landscape, in Agamben’s view, represents a paradoxical place in which our relationship with the world cannot take the form of an absolute appropriation, but where the sense of mutual ‘belonging’ and ‘appropriation’ is acutely felt. The landscape is therefore nothing more than the *phenomenon* of the world (and the world *as* phenomenon), viewed from ‘my’ perspective, from the point of view of a subject who is neither extraneous to, nor involved in, the very act of looking. The relationship between the mutual appropriation of the subject and the world is deactivated and suspended. The landscape is thus an inappropriable, because, oscillating between a human reality and a natural reality, it embodies its undecidable difference:

When we look at a landscape, we certainly see the open and contemplate the world, with all the elements that make it up (the ancient sources list among these the woods, the hills, the lakes, the villas, the headlands, springs, streams, canals, flocks and shepherds, people on foot or in a boat, those hunting or harvesting...); but these things, which are already no longer parts of an animal environment, are now, so to speak, deactivated one by one on the level of being and perceived as a whole in a new dimension. We see them as perfectly and clearly as ever, and yet we already do not see them, lost – happily, immemorially lost – in the landscape. Being, *en état de paysage*, is suspended and rendered inoperative, and the world, having become perfectly inappropriable, goes, so to speak, beyond being and nothing. No longer animal or human, to the one who contemplates the landscape is only landscape. That person no longer seeks to comprehend, only to look. If the world is the inoperativity of the animal environment, landscape is, so to speak, inoperativity of inoperativity, deactivated being. (UB, 91)

The landscape is therefore the *oikeiotic* state in which Being is suspended and made inoperative. By suspending the difference between animal and human, the

one who contemplates sinks into the landscape and the landscape sinks into her. If the suspensive and inappropriate dimension of the landscape abolishes the difference between human reality and natural reality, and deactivates Being, it still maintains an interesting conceptual connection with the problem of spatiality. The subject both belongs and does not belong to the landscape that surrounds them: oscillating between 'homeland' and 'exile', the 'using' of space's 'taking place', the subject experiences a world that is both appropriable and inappropriable. What the gaze faces is a space/landscape that is 'mine', yet always melancholically consigned to memory. The deactivation of Being is what is experienced when the subject faces the world as an inappropriable. We can therefore say that the landscape is the 'spatialisation' of the *oikeiōsis*; it is the effective determination of *oikeiōsis as spacing* and *as spatialisation*. In this sense, human beings are always entrusted to the impossible process of the appropriation of space and time, melancholically split between the certainty of absolute appropriation and the extraneous majesty of the inappropriable.

8.

Why is the question of *oikeiōsis*, and the 'use' that Agamben makes of it, so relevant to contemporary philosophical reflection? The relevance of this question unfolds in two dimensions, one of a historical order, the other conceptual. As we have seen, Agamben 'knows' that the philosophical tradition has been shipwrecked: in the contemporary world, 'doing philosophy' means doing philosophy 'after philosophy'. On a historical level, therefore, the question of *oikeiōsis* is related to the factual disappropriation of philosophy with respect to itself. The attempt to reactivate the 'ancient' *names* of philosophy (including the term '*oikeiōsis*') always clashes with the fact that they no longer seem usable, they seem to have lost all validity, abandoned to an incurable inappropriateness.

On a conceptual level, however, philosophy knows that its task is to seek the definitive appropriation of its names, otherwise the use it makes of them would be conceptually *inappropriate*. In this sense, *oikeiōsis* is the name we give to the *spacing of conceptual appropriation*, in which each word of a given language fluctuates. Whenever a philosophical name is 'given', the problem of its *oikeiōsis* arises, that is, the problem of the degree of its appropriateness. Each philosophical term lies between its unreflexive use, and its full appropriateness.

Although philosophy seems to belong to a past that no effort of appropriation can save, it lives in the awareness that the effort of appropriating its names is the enduring substance of its meaning. In this sense, the *oikeiotic* process is possible and impossible at the same time. It is possible because it is already at work. The life of language is nothing but this incessant *translation process* that takes leave of the inappropriate to reach the *firmissima tellus* of a 'perfect' appropriation. But this process, being always in place, is never concluded: strictly speaking, it never ends. It will never find peace, because it corresponds to the infinite task of the self-

appropriation of thought. Contemporary philosophy is nothing more than this awareness of doing philosophy ‘after philosophy’, as if the *oikeiōsis* of its own conceptual history were impossible. But, at the same time, it knows that it faces the task of an infinite appropriation, even though it knows that such a task is impossible. In our time, philosophy knows that philosophy is ‘impossible’, because it is consigned to an inappropriate past and to an inappropriate present. But, at the same time, it also knows that it has a future, since, perhaps, it has never begun.