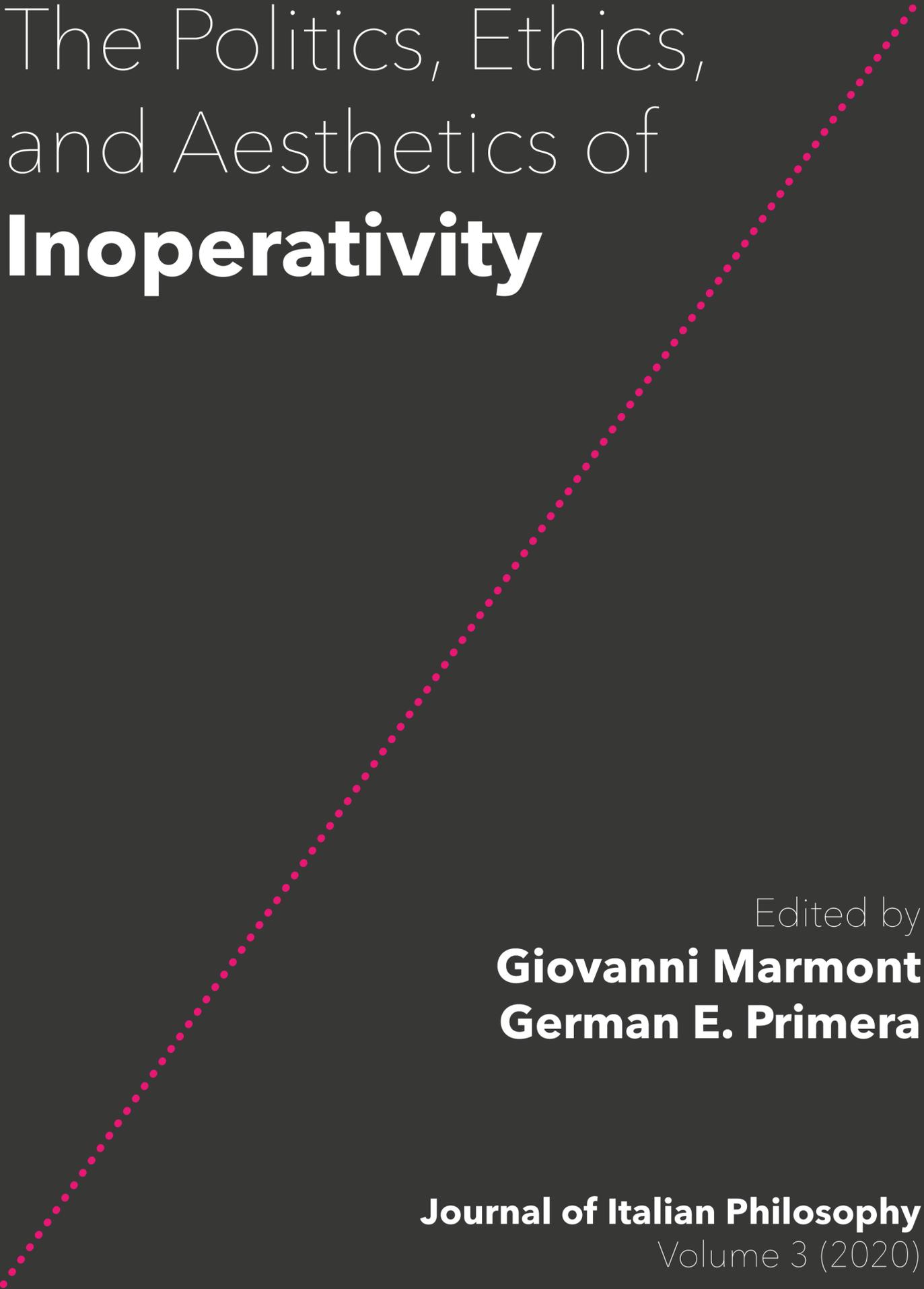


The Politics, Ethics,
and Aesthetics of
Inoperativity



Edited by
Giovanni Marmont
German E. Primera

Journal of Italian Philosophy
Volume 3 (2020)

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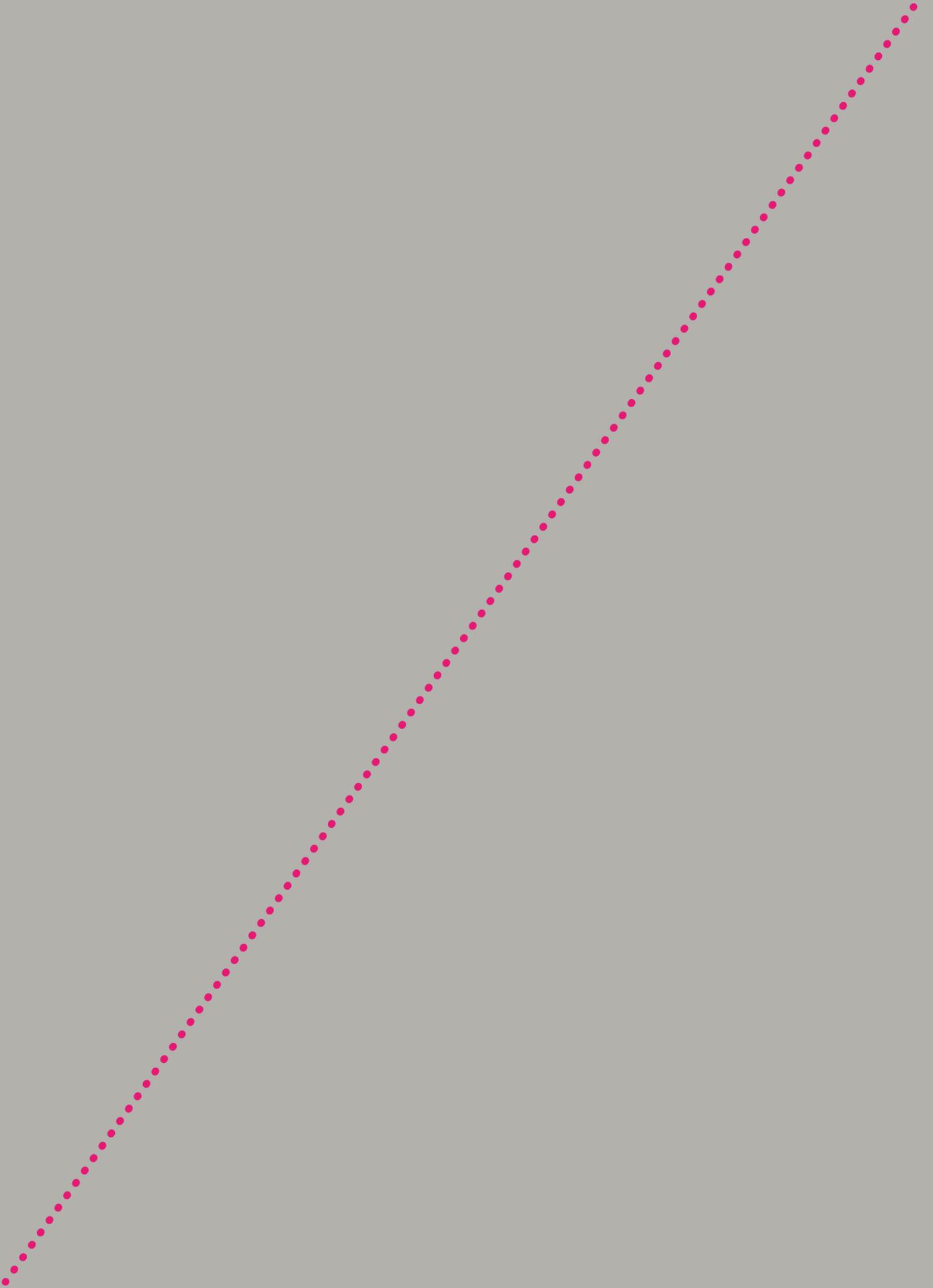
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Propositions for Inoperative Life

Giovanni Marmont

German E. Primera

Abstract

The concept of inoperativity, making its first appearance in the work of Alexandre Kojève, gets fully thematised across the writings of Maurice Blanchot and Jan-Luc Nancy before being taken up and further developed by Giorgio Agamben. Although already present in the very first volume of his *Homo Sacer* series, Agamben's formulation of *inoperosità* has gained increasing centrality within the rich and intricate theoretical universe constructed by the Italian philosopher over the years. However, this concept has frequently been misinterpreted or dismissed as indicating mere inactivity: a passive and complete absence of all work. This simplistic interpretation falls short of grasping what truly is at stake in the complex notion of inoperativity: namely, a much more radical and sophisticated suspension of potentiality, which Agamben seeks to rescue from the mechanisms of actualisation that have plagued much of Western thought. With this edited volume, to our knowledge the first entirely dedicated to the study of inoperativity, our primary concern is not so much that of correcting superficial appreciations of this concept for the sake of accuracy. Rather, we are here introducing a number of perspectives on, and putting forth a set of deliberately unresolved propositions for, inoperativity that may open this notion to new uses.

Keywords: inoperative life, potentiality, productivity, realisation, opening, Agamben



The theme of *inoperativity*, already mentioned in the very first volume of the *Homo Sacer* series (Agamben, 1998: 61–2) albeit only briefly, has increasingly claimed centre stage within Giorgio Agamben's rich and intricate philosophical universe. Initially discussed in terms of “unworking” or “worklessness”, as *désœuvrement*, by a small coterie of French intellectuals — Alexandre Kojève, Maurice Blanchot, and Jean-Luc Nancy, as well as Georges Bataille — Agamben has since developed his own original take on this concept. The Italian philosopher's formulation of *inoperosità*, however, has been frequently misconstrued, and at times outright dismissed, as indicating simple inactivity, as a form of passivity and utter absence of all labour, likened to an absolute Bataillean negativity. In fact, this simplistic interpretation does not begin to do justice to what is really at stake in the complex

notion of inoperativity. It is perhaps in the *Postilla* (postscript) to the 2001 edition of *La comunità che viene*, titled *Tiqqun de la noche*, that we can find the author's most incisive, pithy elaboration on the concept. Agamben writes:

The crucial question is not “what to do?”, but “how to do?”, and Being is less important than the “*like-so*”. Inoperativity does not mean inertia, but *katargesis* — that is to say, an operation in which the *how* completely substitutes the *what*, in which the life without form and the forms without life coincide in a *form of life*. (2001: 93, our translation)

The passage above suggests that what the Italian philosopher calls inoperativity is an attempt to rethink acting in terms that could neutralise the productive force routinely governing it — the necessary exhaustion and “passing into actuality” of potentiality, as he puts it (e.g., Agamben, 1999: 180). Production, in this case, is to be taken in the broadest possible sense as the attainment of results, the achievement of an end, the successful completion of a process: a *realisation*, so to speak, or, we may even say, a *closure*. In other words, what inoperativity indicates is a subversion of the established relations between means and ends, the radicality of which has far-reaching implications for debates in politics, ethics, and aesthetics.

And yet, this subversion of means and ends, undertaken by the notion of inoperativity, also implies a “subversion” at the level of ontology: it defines “man” as *argos*, that is, as lacking an essence, a being-at-work proper to him. As Agamben points out in *The Coming Community*, ‘the fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize’ (1993: 39). In this sense, Agamben does not only propose to render all human works inoperative, ‘opening them to a new possible use’ (Agamben, 2014: 69), but he also lays the groundwork for the deactivation of the ontological apparatus that sustains the biopolitical violence he has forcefully denounced. Being, therefore, appears in Agamben not as a given entity that precedes its modes but rather as no other than its own “how”, that is to say, being is nothing other than its modifications. This modal ontology, as Agamben calls it, that both underpins and arises out of *inoperativity*, defines a human life ‘in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilities* of life, always and above all power’ (Agamben, 2000: 4). As Sergei Prozorov suggests, ‘[r]ather than attempt to devise a “proper” form of life, Agamben seeks to free life from the gravity of all tasks or vocations imposed on it by privileged forms’ (2020:

235). In this sense, underscoring the significance of Agamben's notion of *inoperativity* for the understanding of politics, ethics, and aesthetics, implies paying critical attention to its double tonality: the insurrection at level of ontology that the category entails, and the radical openness of all human works archived through the deactivation of the productive force that governs all human endeavours. Hence Agamben's claim that inoperativity and use have come to replace production and praxis as the 'fundamental concepts of politics' (2014: 67).

Nevertheless, it is precisely this critical attention to inoperativity and use that is lacking in the attempts to derive the politics of Agamben from his biopolitical critique of our current predicament. Therefore, straying from readings of Agamben that posit the figure of the *homo sacer* as the earthly "hero" of his politics (Chiesa, 2009: 105) and as the messianic man that for Badiou remains as the 'one who has nothing left' (2009: 560), but from those readings that interpret Agamben's politics as a form of accelerationism (Whyte, 2013), as pure political nihilism (Laclau, 2017) or as being 'singularly unproductive' (Negri, 2007: 121), this Special Issue devotes attention to form-of-life, to use, and to inoperativity. In so doing, it contributes to the discussion on the strategic resources to conceive Agamben's politics as the emergency brake of the train of history that Benjamin had in mind:

While the modern State pretends through the state of exception to include within itself the anarchic and anomic element it cannot do without, it is rather a question of displaying its radical heterogeneity in order to let it act as a purely destituent potential. (Agamben, 2015: 279)

Needless to say, the terrain to which this special issue contributes, has already been irrigated by others who have put a stoplight on the notion of inoperativity as a central category for the study of Agamben's coming politics: certainly William Watkin (2014) and Tyson E. Lewis (2018), with whom we have been fortunate enough to collaborate in this issue, but also Sergei Prozorov (2014), Greg Bird (2016), Mathew Abbott (2016) and many others. We join them in thinking about inoperativity not as normative narrative of emancipation that responds to the everlasting concern of revolutionary theory, "what is to be done?", but rather as a set of openings that dislocate constituent power from the central place given to it by the revolutionary tradition.

With this in mind, editing a volume on the theme of inoperativity comes with its perils and opportunities — some rather evident, others more subtle. An obvious quandary, barely needing mention, is represented by the fact that

academic publishing appears to be, by nature and intention, an irredeemably “operative” machine. It is, after all and irrespective of any commercial vocations, structurally invested in — perhaps even condemned to — the capture and packaging of intellectual labour into ostensibly finished products, as *opere*. Furthermore, isn’t much academic writing, particularly when performed under the arrogantly correctional rubric of critique or critical theory, one of the most egregious forms of constituent power, hence antithetical to an inoperative ethos? Now, although we may be tempted to claim that this volume is aiming to be performatively inoperative, that would be both false and disingenuous. However, what we do hope is that, in the curation of this collection, enough priority has been given to the “how to do?” over the “what to do?”. Which is to say, in the writing of this introduction but even more so as editors of this Special Issue, it was our intention to address the question of — as well as the questioning around — inoperativity not as a means of providing a blueprint of sorts, not to create a map to more confidently navigate, and ultimately extricate oneself from, Agamben’s maze. Rather, the point here was to add some depth and nuance to a labyrinth that, as Lewis reminds us in this same volume, ‘renders inoperative the very notion of progress or regress’. Or, to put it differently: despite the inevitable, apparent concluded-ness of this publication, it is our greatest hope that what an edited collection (more so than a monograph) can afford is a series of openings to new uses of the notion of inoperativity itself. A *conjunctive* exercise, rather than a corrective one: “and...and...and...”, to say it with Deleuze and Guattari. Which is also to say that our preoccupation was not exclusively with upholding, rejecting, or refining something like an Agambenian tradition, but also to see how Agamben’s writing on inoperativity could be handled and mishandled, allowing it to radiate outwards and, hopefully, into new territories.

It is by working in this spirit that we are here seeking to approach inoperativity in three complementary ways. First, we are of course invested in deepening and enlarging our understanding of this concept, whether by returning to Agamben’s own early engagement with Bataille, thanks to Michael Krimper’s translation, or by exploring how inoperativity relates to other key categories in the Italian philosopher’s thought, as is the case for William Watkin’s methodological reflections on category theory, Kieran Aarons’ assessment of messianic time and destituent power, and Valeria Bonacci’s essay on use and form-of-life. Second, we are particularly interested in tracing possible intersections — whether explicit or not — between Agamben’s articulation of inoperativity and other kindred conceptualisations of political, ethical, and aesthetic practice, as found in other authors and intellectual traditions. What this

means is essentially to engage in a combinatory effort, staging imaginary, sometimes even unlikely dialogues that may alter, contaminate, and possibly enliven otherwise disconnected philosophical *œuvres* and lineages. Examples of this can be found throughout the Special Issue, as Agamben's thought is taken up *vis-à-vis* that of novelist Luciano Bianciardi, pataphysician Alfred Jarry, and theorist Fred Moten in contributions by Angelo Nizza, Tyson E. Lewis, and Elliot C. Mason respectively, as well as that of usual suspect Michel Foucault, in the case of Carlo Crosato's piece. Third, we are also committed to taking inoperativity as an observable *tonality* that can be spotted around us, in processes and phenomena of various kinds, whenever we are attentive enough to notice it, thus using this concept as something of an analytic lens. Framing inoperativity this way, striving to see the inoperative gesture in existing practices, we are reminded of an invaluable admonition by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, which we are here appropriating and adapting: not unlike their notion of "study", we want to argue that inoperativity is 'important precisely because it is *not* special' (Harney and Moten, 2020). It is perhaps in keeping with this approach that one should read Malte Fabian Rauch's archaeologies of contemporary art, also nested in this volume.

Clearly, it may sound like we established a rather broad, ambitious, hence hardly achievable set of goals for this collection. It may be that, in the end, what we are talking about here is a direction to take more so than a route having been travelled. Yet, is this not precisely what we can learn from inoperativity, namely, invoking the anonymous 2003 pamphlet *Appel*, 'never letting the search for results become more important than the attention to the process' (Anonymous, 2003: 68)? This is why we want to kickstart this volume by offering a number of "propositions" for inoperative life. Deliberately presented in the guise of questions — some addressed by the articles in this collection, as noted above, others not — we hope that the following prompts will serve to tease out the possible as well as actual relevance of inoperativity across a number of fields, theories, and practices.

On method and philosophical archaeology

A reflection on method, writes Agamben in the preface to *The Signature of All Things*, 'usually follows practical application, rather than preceding it. It is a matter then, of ultimate and penultimate thoughts' (2009: 7). In Agamben's case, these "ultimate thoughts", as set out in this very book, give explicit contours to his own approach to Philosophical Archaeology. The underlying question from

which his inquiry departs is: how to understand the notion of the *archē* to which *archē*-ology regresses? The overall aim of his philosophical method is to render inoperative the signatures that control the intelligibility of Western politics and culture by tracing the *archē* of discursive formations through the use of paradigms. In this sense, archaeology, for Agamben, is a form of metaphysical critique that aims to go beyond negation (Primera, 2018: 35). In one of the most compelling studies of Agamben's method, William Watkin (2014) focuses on the systems of intelligibility that regulate and sanction what can be said, and the moments when discursive formations become operative, in order to discuss the political possibilities of the suspension of this dialectic, which he captures through the notion of *indifference*. If the arts, poetry and other human practices have a political significance it is because they have the *archaeological capacity* of rendering inoperative the biopolitical machine and the works of life, language, economy, and society, as argued by Agamben in *The Use of Bodies*. The question that remains open, then, is how to understand the nature of the relation between inoperativity and philosophical archaeology?

On inoperativity in/and practice

One of the central criticisms levelled against Agamben's inoperativity — and indeed his whole *œuvre* — is a perceived lack of concrete and contemporary examples of how this particular notion either translates into or can be codified as actual, material practices, beyond the scant paradigmatic figures he does mention, such as Hermann Melville's *Bartleby* or the Franciscan order. That is to say, in Prozorov's words (2014: 1–2): '[w]ith a few exceptions Agamben's works rarely address concrete contemporary or historical events and when they do, it is usually in an abstruse historico-philosophical context that is apparently devoid of immediate political significance'. If some may find such vagueness frustrating, Gavin Rae has perceptively suggested that Agamben's account '*must be vague so as to prevent him from creating a political program to be realized, one that would reconstitute the means-end logic to be overcome*' (2018: 981–82, emphasis added). In other words, it can be argued that it is precisely thanks to this conscious strategy that Agamben avoids falling himself prey to the constituent prescriptiveness that inoperativity seeks to neutralise — hence maintaining his focus squarely on the "how" rather than on the "what". Further complicating things, we have of course Agamben's insistence on messianism and a politics "to come": a politics that, as Prozorov puts it, 'is not yet practiced, let alone encapsulated in a fixed regime or system, but rather remains entirely to be

invented’ (2014: 2). But as we are here unapologetically *not* in the business of pledging allegiance, a perhaps misguided sense of urgency compels us to ask (in spite of Agamben): how may an elaboration of inoperativity be inspired by *existing* social practices, artworks, or interventions and, conversely, what actual examples of contemporary social practices, artworks, or interventions may embody, manifest, or capture the spirit of inoperativity particularly well?

On the collective dimension of inoperativity

The inoperative community that Agamben has in mind is nothing like the Aristotelian *polis*, in which autarchy has the strategic function to define ‘the measure of population and “life” that permits one to pass from a mere *koinonia zoes* or a purely ethnic community to a political community’ (Agamben, 2015: 198). The fact that this passage from a community of living to a political community is necessary implies the existence in the West of a life that is *not* political in itself and which, therefore, has had to become autarchic in order to be a part of the polis. Autarchy, for Agamben, is nothing other than ‘*a biopolitical operator, which allows or negates the passage from the community of life to the political community, from simple zoè to politically qualified life*’ (2015: 198, emphasis in original). Against “autarchic life”, that is, against this bio-political filter that safeguards the political community, Agamben develops throughout his works the notion of *form-of-life*, which is central to the study of inoperativity. But, we ask, how can we rethink the collective dimension of form-of-life — its ‘being singular plural’ (Nancy, 2000), as it were — if we were to suspend the biopolitical apparatus of autarchy through a politics of inoperativity? Moreover, attacking this question from yet a different angle, how can the ‘politics in the middle voice’ (Marmont, 2019: 193) that Agamben’s use unlocks serve to more convincingly foreground a sociality of inoperativity?

On inoperativity and anarchism

References not only to anarchy but also to anarchism, more or less explicit, can be found dotted throughout Agamben’s writings. However, as Simone Bignall has rightly observed (2016: 49), such references are almost never directly connected to the various figures and strands composing what we may call the “anarchist philosophical tradition”. Often pointing to Rainer Schürmann’s atypical reading of Heidegger, Agamben indeed seems much more preoccupied with exploring the very concept of anarchy as an ontological category (also see Lamb, 2019) than

he is with contributing to past and present debates on anarchist praxis. This is perhaps why some scholars of anarchism have taken issue with Agamben's alleged vagueness when it comes to theorising concretely insurrectionary action (e.g., Newman, 2017). Furthermore, as Daniel McLoughlin has noted, Agamben's writing appears to be more directly indebted to, and engaging with, 'a range of thinkers who actively identify with the Marxian tradition including Guy Debord, Walter Benjamin, Antonio Negri, Theodor Adorno, Alain Badiou and Marx himself' (2016: 5–6), rather than avowedly anarchist authors. On the other hand, many of Agamben's ideas have also proven to be highly influential within circles that are certainly closer, in spirit and intentions, to anarchism than to any other breed of radical anti-capitalist politics, such as *operaismo* and autonomous Marxism — as in the case of the “post-situationist” Tiqqun-Comité Invisible milieu. This is not only true for Agamben's critique of property and the law but, we argue echoing Lorenzo Fabbri (2011) and contra Bingall (2016: 51), for his elaboration of inoperativity, too. Hence our question: how does inoperativity, as something of an “expression” of destituent potential, fits within and contributes to the anarchist tradition's conceptual trajectory, particularly in relation to themes of ungovernability and insurrection?

On inoperativity and the refusal of work

As mentioned, Agamben's notion of inoperativity is not only underpinned by a modal ontology but also by a form of human potentiality that does not exhaust itself in actuality. Here Agamben comes close to an anti-productivist reading of Marx, for which ‘the refusal of work, as both activism and analysis, does not simply pose itself against the present organization of work; it should also be understood as a creative practice, one that seeks to reappropriate and reconfigure existing forms of production and reproduction’ (Weeks, 2011: 99, in Abbott, 2016: 42). Yet, it is also clear that inoperativity is not just the cessation of all activity but a suspension that cannot be reabsorbed by the figures of negation and identity, nor can it be reincorporated into a politics of constituent power. This is also where Agamben's thought diverges, for instance, from the “anti-work” espoused by other intellectuals linked to the Italian *Autonomia*, such as Antonio Negri, Franco Bifo Berardi, and Mario Tronti. Rather than depicting a passive suspension of labour, in Agamben inoperativity suspends the very coordinates within which “suspension” as a political mechanism itself takes place. In so doing, it calls into question the strategies of interruption that take the form of constituent power. How can we start thinking about inoperative practices that go beyond

anti-work politics and prepare us for something of “a suspension of the suspension” — as Agamben suggests in *The Open* (2004)?

On play, profanation, and inoperative use

There is a particularly important yet complex relation linking the concept of inoperativity and Agamben’s radicalisation of use. Indeed, both terms ultimately point to the neutralisation and undoing of what Agamben calls ‘the false alternative between means and ends’ (2000: 57), which paves the way for something like a “gestural” politics of pure means. This bond is clearly expressed when Agamben affirms that ‘[t]he creation of a new use is possible only by deactivating an old use, rendering it inoperative’ (2007: 86). Furthermore, in the essay *In Praise of Profanation*, Agamben discusses a strikingly similar dynamic this time connecting profanation and play, also suggesting that ‘[t]here seems to be a peculiar relationship between “using” and “profaning” that we must clarify’ (2007: 74). If we are to assume that these terms — inoperativity and use, profanation and play — are for Agamben not mere synonyms, how are we to fully understand the processual and procedural synergy that exists between them, as well as what each illuminates about the other? Or, approaching this issue from another angle, how can the categories not only of use, but also of play and profanation advance the study of inoperativity? And finally, as the radical openness of play gets routinely recuperated within, “gamified” by, and rendered productive as key to, an economy of creativity and the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005), what is required for playful use to instead remain inoperative?

On inoperativity beyond the Western tradition

Save for his recent foray into Buddhist philosophy in *Karman* (2017), it is arguably uncontroversial to note that Agamben’s archive is firmly rooted in the same history of Western intellectualism that his work critiques, if not more drastically Eurocentric. This is not to say that the Italian thinker is not eclectic in his choice of source material. Quite the contrary, Agamben draws from a vast cast not only of philosophers but also of poets, artists, novelists, and linguists, as partly captured by Adam Kotsko and Carlo Salzani’s volume *Agamben’s Philosophical Lineage* (2017). Nor, on the other hand, should we ignore the ways in which Agamben’s work has been productively taken up in that of authors not exclusively concerned with the Western canon (a good example being Warren, 2017). And yet, it has been

repeatedly pointed out that — such eclecticism notwithstanding — Agamben has so far completely refused to engage with other traditions that would, in fact, have much to say about some of the themes so dear to him, first and foremost the Black radical tradition (but also, we argue, Indigenous Studies). Fred Moten (2008), J. Kameron Carter (2013), Alexander Weheliye (2014), Stefano Harney (2018), and Sara Ahmed (2019) are but some of those who have identified this disregard, the repercussions of which, they all clarify, are not merely citational. In keeping with the conjunctive and compositional spirit mentioned above — which in our mind comes with an indifference towards exegetic purity — we ask: what non-Western traditions, epistemologies, and philosophical lineages might be particularly apt to expand, contaminate, or indeed profanate Agamben's inoperativity, and how could they allow us to think this category anew?



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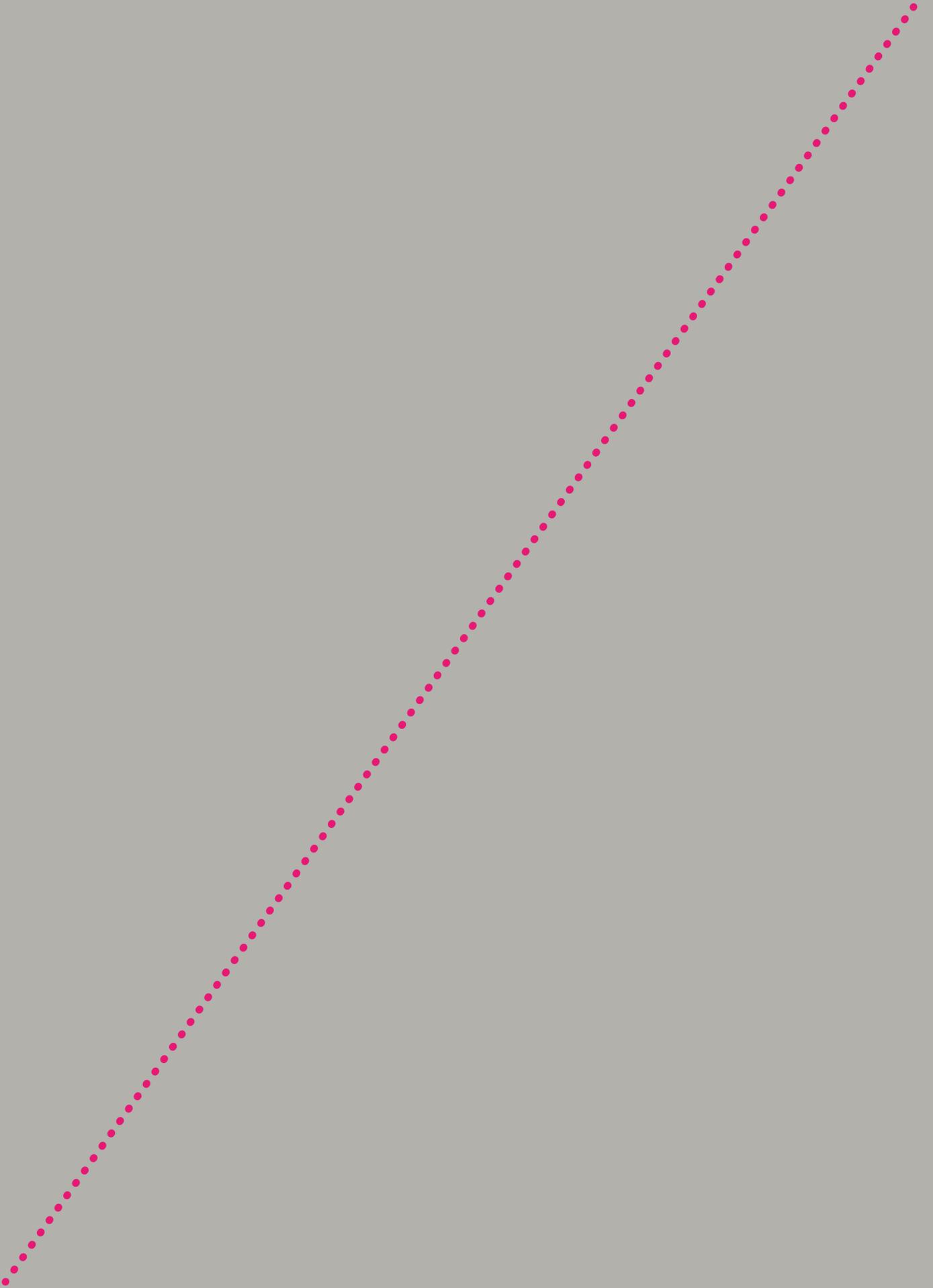
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Inoperativity as Category: Mathematising the Analogous, Habitual, Useful Life in Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Glory*, *The Signature of All Things* and *The Use of Bodies*

William Watkin

Abstract

This paper investigates the frontiers of contemporary thought by considering inoperativity in the later volumes of Agamben's *Homo Sacer* sequence in relation to Badiou's work on category theory. Specifically, it suggests that elements of Agamben's method, for example analogy and signatures, can be mapped onto Badiou's philosophical category theory. It then moves to suggest that some of the paradoxes that concern Agamben can be resolved by categories, before arguing that a post-differential philosophy of habitual use-of-bodies can best be broached through a reconsideration of habitual use in terms of categorical functions.

Keywords: inoperativity, habitual use, form-of-life, use of bodies, category, function, Agamben, Badiou



Gorgio Agamben's first sustained engagement with inoperativity is to be found in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, *Homo Sacer* II, 2 (Agamben, 2007). My own initial reading of the text was concerned primarily with the relation of the signature, Kingdom and its economy, Glory, to the signature Sovereign and its economy of Bare Life, accepting the significant realisation that *Homo Sacer* is an incomplete political statement without an archaeology of Governance and Glory.¹ At the same time, in my reading of the book in the tenth chapter of *Agamben and Indifference*, I was grappling with the conception of Glory in relation to a highly sophisticated critical archaeology of political theology that included two triune modes of theology, a concomitant double conception of redemption, and the mapping of this complex economy of salvation and glorification onto a secularisation of this structure via our modern political economy in a manner that,

¹ When I am using terms as examples of signatures, paradigms or economies I capitalise them, as Agamben often does, to indicate their specific usage in this context.

however, disallowed any kind of chronology or clear causality thanks to the philosophical archaeological method. That said, in that my chapter is subtitled ‘The Articulated Inoperativity of Power’, my mind was always focused on the term “inoperativity”, in particular its relation to the indifferential suspensive modality that I argued typified all of Agamben’s mature work. The conclusion of my analysis centred on the closing chapter of *The Kingdom and the Glory*, called simply ‘The Archaeology of Glory’, which includes a difficult and detailed consideration of inoperativity that Agamben himself draws our attention to in subsequent work on the term (Agamben, 2016: 93), so I will begin by summarising this conclusion on glory as inoperativity, before moving on to the real purpose of this paper, a sustained analysis of what it means to live after inoperativity as dictated by the conclusion of the entire Homo Sacer series in *The Use of Bodies*, specifically by considering the constructive potential of analogical reasoning, and how this reasoning can be extensively mapped onto the philosophical category theory developed in Alain Badiou’s *Logics of Worlds* (Badiou, 2009) and my own *Badiou and Communicable Worlds* (Watkin, 2021).

Inoperativity and of the Economy of Glory

Agamben summarises the thesis of *The Kingdom and the Glory* towards the beginning of the final chapter. Theology is composed, it appears, of a double signatory economy pertaining to the two trinities, economic trinity, which is ‘God in his praxis of salvation in which he reveals himself to men’ and immanent trinity which ‘instead refers to God as he is in himself’ (Agamben, 2011: 207). The opposition between these two trinities is articulated into an economic fracture or non-logical dialectic between praxis and politics, to be found in the model of salvation, on the one hand, and ontology and theology, to be found in the model of God’s immanence, on the other. The book itself is mostly concerned with the political theology of governance and in particular *oikonomia*. *Oikonomia* is sometimes presented as a signature, and at other times is part of a paradigmatic pairing, but our reading of it is concerned the fact that it is a function of operativity that stands between two dialectically opposed paradigms as the basis of the continued efficacy of a specific signature. We can see immediately how all this fits together when Agamben says: ‘Our investigation has tried to reconstruct the way in which these original polarities have, at different levels, developed into the polarities of transcendent order and immanent order, Kingdom and Government, general providence and special providence, which define the

operation of the machine of the divine government of the world' (Agamben, 2011: 207).

Uniquely, I believe, the two signatures in play here, Kingdom and Government, are further articulated into a larger-scale signature, Divine Governance or, if you prefer, Power. So that while we have two book-length studies of the two signatures, *Homo Sacer* for Sovereign power and now *The Kingdom and the Glory* for Governmental power, the book suggests that these two signatures can be further articulated into an economy of common, transcendental power, Sovereignty, and proper immanent power, Governance, as two sides of a single paradigmatic economy of Power as such in the West since the Greeks. Essential to this double articulation is that they form the two parts of the "machine" of divine government so that while *oikonomia* is identified as a paradigmatic part of immanent power and praxis, it is also, of course, an element of every signatory function. We are now able to define the "operativity" of a signature, here the signature of Power as such, as the articulation of two paradigms by an economy that allows the signature which oversees them to persist in its historical and spatial consistency. Operativity refers to a situation in which all of the elements of the metaphysical machine are functioning; inoperativity refers, naturally, to when they are not.

What then of Glory? Agamben goes on to explain that:

Glory is the place where theology attempts to think the difficult conciliation between immanent trinity and economic trinity, *theologia* and *oikonomia*, being and praxis, God in himself and God for us [...]. In glory, economic trinity and immanent trinity, God's praxis of salvation and his being are conjoined and move through each other [...]. *The economy glorifies being, as being glorifies the economy*. And only in the mirror of glory do the two trinities appear to be reflected into one another; only in its splendour do being and economy, Kingdom and Government appear to coincide for an instant. (Agamben, 2011: 209)

The point Agamben is making is that God is glory, and yet humans and angels exist to glorify him. Without God there can be no glorification, and yet without subjects to perform the praxis of glorification, the glory of God would remain closed inside him and thus inoperative. Finally, glorification, and its secular equivalents such as acclamation or badges of office, are empty gestures. Glory and acclamation are speech acts which possess no content of their own, rather they activate or make operative the political and theological economy which

founds the Being of transcendence, God's glory before we were even created, and of the founded beings of salvation immanent to this world. Glory in this way is the theological economy which makes the dialectic of power operative, but in itself it contains nothing, it is empty, devoid of meaning or reference. Glory, like all economies, is a functional relation between the plenitude of signatory meaningfulness and paradigmatic meaningfulness, that is itself empty. It is the revelation and realisation of its emptiness that initiates the process of the inoperativity of the glorification machine.

I basically left it there in 2014 with *Agamben and Indifference*. Thanks to Agamben's philosophical archaeology, I broke the metaphysical machine with indifferent suspension and was satisfied. As to what came after, I was at a loss, at least from the perspective of Agamben's work, so I began to look for answers in other, diverse, sometimes contradictory methods, and left my Agamben books on the shelf, vowing never to return to them until I had fully expressed my ideas on indifference and communicability that were born out of reading Agamben's work, but which could not come to fruition through critical, philosophical archaeology alone.

Nonrelationality as a form of constructive inoperativity²

Since I began my work on inoperativity just under a decade ago, two significant publications have dramatically altered my approach to this question. The first is the appearance of the final volume of the entire Homo Sacer project in 2014, *The Use of Bodies*, the second is Alain Badiou's 2006 text *Logics of Worlds*. The significance of *The Use of Bodies* is that the role of inoperativity becomes reconfigured in such a manner as to move it away from metaphysical critique, the question of how to render the metaphysical machine inoperative, and to shift it towards post-metaphysical potential, or the question of how to live outside the dialectical and relational constraints of metaphysics. In the remarkable 'Epilogue: Toward a Theory of Destituent Potential' the mode of living as destituent potential which Agamben has for quite some time called form-of-life without real clarity as to what this would constitute, comes to be redefined in a way that sets it apart from the metaphysics of *being at work*, in place since the Greeks, to a *use of bodies*, initially negatively defined as a mode of enslavement by Aristotle, but

² By constructive I mean in an entirely non-technical sense of a mode of inoperativity that is not just a mode of metaphysical critique, but which is projective in the sense of suggesting inoperativity can create, construct, establish as well as undermine or suspend.

reconceived by Agamben as a positive means of living in light of inoperativity. As there is a sister piece to this essay that considers *The Use of Bodies* in this light, I will not belabour the definition of destituent impotentiality here except to say it is clear that inoperativity has a central role to play in it (Watkin, forthcoming). The question is, if every relational mode is captured by the dialectical *diairesis* of metaphysics, how can one live *in-relation* in a world where the apparatus of metaphysics has been rendered inoperative? This is a particularly pressing problem as one of the central results of *The Kingdom and the Glory* is that inoperativity has been captured by theology as regards the idea of redemption into a perpetual Sabbatism. In addition to which, inoperativity as empty signifier of power, being able to see the machine is both still and vacuous or, lacking internal essence together with efficacious and functional external relations, is a negative component of the inoperativity of power. So, one cannot live in a state of glorious inoperativity and escape the theology of power as Agamben wishes.

If suspensive inoperativity alone cannot free us from metaphysical signatures because, like difference, inaction is a constituent part of the functioning of the system, at the same time it is clear in *The Use of Bodies* that inoperativity also has a constructive role to play, especially when it comes to the discussion of the significance of nonrelational relationality in the book's final pages.³ For example, Agamben says:

Let us define relation as what constitutes its elements by presupposing them, together, as unrelated. Thus for example, in the couples living being/language, constituent power/constituted power, bare life/law, it is evident that the two elements are always mutually defined and constituted through their oppositional relation, and as such, they cannot pre-exist it; and yet the relation that unites them, presupposes them as unrelated. What we have defined in the course of this study as the ban is the link, at once attractive and repulsive, that links the two poles of sovereign exception. (Agamben, 2007: 272)

³ I use the term “nonrelational relationality” here because Agamben uses “nonrelation”, as does Badiou, and my own work excavates the notion that “relation” is a construct having multiple senses and considers this in connection with indifferential nonrelational relation. Particularly here, for Agamben, relation is a construct of metaphysics, but he concedes that “contact” is another mode of seeing what we would call “relation”. Insofar as relation is a widely used term in mathematics, logic and philosophy, where a much broader sense of the term obtains than that which one finds in the dialectic of identity and difference, I retain it and explain this using nonrelation.

The next paragraph continues with the theme of nonrelational contact in a manner that is profound, complex and seemingly paradoxical. Agamben proposes that, '[w]e call a potential destituent that is capable of always deposing ontological-political relations in order to cause a contact [...] to appear between their relations' (Agamben, 2007: 272). It may seem that a nonrelationality of this order cannot be termed a 'contact'. If one suspends relationality as such, not just the ontico-ontological or constituent-constituted relation but relation *qua* relation, surely one appears to be calling for a total lack of contact. Non-relationality of the void in Badiou for example is a situation such that relationality of any order cannot be established because the void is absolutely in-different, it is not part of the context called relational differentiation.⁴ Is Agamben arguing the same here? It appears not. Rather:

Where a relation is rendered destitute and interrupted, its elements are in this sense in contact, because the absence of every relation is exhibited between them. Thus, at the point where a destituent potential exhibits the nullity of the bond that pretended to hold them together, bare life and sovereign power, anomie and *nomos*, constituent power and constituted power are shown to be in contact without any relation [...]. Here the proximity between destituent potential and [...] 'inoperativity' appears clearly. In both, what is in question is the capacity to deactivate something and render it inoperative [...] without simply destroying it, but by liberating the potentials that have remained inactive in it in order to allow a different use of them. (Agamben, 2007: 272–3)

These are not only exceptionally important statements for any student of inoperativity, they come to define, for me at least, the future of Agamben studies and more widely 21st century philosophy as a whole. Let me, therefore, try to break these statements down a little for the reader. A human who lives out their life as a form-of-life is one that commits to a life of means without ends. To do so they have to be liberated from the mode of relation that captures and defines their

⁴ In my work, I differentiate between radical non-relationality, such as the void or the event, which does not even enter into the language of relation, and indifferential nonrelation, where the metaphysics of relation, say in terms of essence and properties, is suspended due to multiples being without essence and quality neutral. As you can see, I write them differently.

subjectivity in terms of their status as beings at work. We shall call this relationality ‘metaphysics’. An element of metaphysics is the intention to convince you that relation qua relation can only be determined as regards *diairesis*, and only ordered as regards a tripartite hierarchical and founded machine of operations. To live without relation means to live in an anarchic, anomic state which is, of course, part of metaphysics. The essential task of metaphysics is to construct a certain idea of relationality that determines the potential of the human as regards life as such and work, as always already divided, dialectical and predetermined. Meaning that in order to speak of a mode of relation as “together, as unrelated” becomes impossibly disordered.

Agamben then argues for another mode of relation which he calls “contact” here, “unrelation” elsewhere and which more generally is encompassed by the term ‘analogy’. Analogy means to think of one thing in terms of another in such a way that one is allowed to assign them a common function, which however has nothing to do with their essence or their quality. This is a functional relationality defined by Agamben as “contact without any relation” which would first allow one to think of anomie without any dialectical relation to *nomos*, and then to think of anomie, not on its own, but relationally with respect to any other object or term, determined by your liveability or means, without any predetermined ends. This is the aim of *Homo Sacer* in its entirety. You can see embedded in it my original thesis, to live as a body in relation to other bodies in a manner that indifferentially suspends the dialectical dictates of how we must live relationally thanks to those controlling signatures. This is the first function of inoperativity. But the nature of the second demand is less clear, the demand that we live a kind of constructive inoperativity, where we don’t just suspend relations, anomie without any relation, but resume a new logic of nonrelational relationality, anomie in relation to anything else, determined by the need of the subject to use those two bodies together. This second sense of inoperativity remains complex and obscure, so let’s return to Agamben’s comments and see how they allow us to understand the second kind of inoperativity with a degree of clarity. I will proceed schematically, breaking up the complex final couple of pages of the book, and the whole *Homo Sacer* project, into subsections that I will then gloss.

The Six Steps Towards Living the Form-of-life qua Nonrelational Inoperativity

All living beings are in a form of life, but not all are (or not all are always) form-of-life. At the point where form-of-life is constituted, it renders destitute and inoperative all singular forms of life. (Agamben, 2016: 277)

§1 A form-of-life is a means by which a subject lives in a nonrelational manner. Instead of acquiescing to the metaphysics of a Being at work, they live according to the use of bodies, starting with the use of their own body. When a subject uses her body, then the singular ideas of forms of life, or how we live now, become inoperative because the metaphysical, dialectical diairesis located within the hierarchical triumvirate of signature, paradigm and arche, is suspended. Agamben, throughout the text, first of all gives examples of the use of bodies, slavery being perhaps the most powerful, and then he calls for a habitual use of bodies or *hexis*, meaning that you begin in contemplation by making use of your body as an object of a thought that is not dialectical and then over time habitually use your body in this nonrelational manner, such that the metaphysics of being is permanently suspended.

It is only in living a life that it constitutes itself as a form-of-life, as the inoperativity immanent in every life. (Agamben, 2016: 277)

§2 Inoperativity overtakes potential in Agamben's work as a defining moment of anthropogenesis. Humans are not most fundamentally possessed of impotential, which would mean the possession of a capacity that they choose not to use, but rather of inoperativity, they use a body in a nonrelational manner that therefore escapes both biological and metaphysical determination. Life is then defined as the immanence of inoperativity, or the ability to live life in terms of its pure liveability, which implies the use of one's body in nondeterminate and yet consistent ways.

The constitution of a form-of-life coincides, that is to say, with the destitution of the social and biological conditions into which it finds itself thrown. (Agamben, 2016: 277)

§3 As we have just said, the human is able to act outside the dictates of its biological determination, but the development of culture meant that a much more powerful determining factor than evolution came to capture our actions: that of metaphysics. So the idea of human life qua potential or impotential was, tragically, co-opted by metaphysics as its founding modality of conceptual coercion. We were, it appears, liberated from our instinctual drives, only to be more effectively incarcerated by our human concepts. In this sense, inoperativity is the third age of the human: to live neither by the dictates of our genes nor by our dialectics means that true human potential is to live out a double non-determination, free from replication and free from relation.⁵

Inoperativity is not another work that suddenly arrives and works to deactivate and depose them: it coincides completely and constitutively with their destitution, with living a life. (Agamben, 2016: 277)

§4 For inoperativity to be constructive and not just suspensive, it needs to escape the circumlocution of the idea of the inoperativity of inoperativity or the indifference of indifference that I excavated with in *The Kingdom and the Glory* (Watkin, 2015: 232–7). This means that there are basically two forms of inoperativity. The first involves suspending the economy of metaphysical relation, while the second is an inoperative yet operational modality of relation defined by the use of bodies, rather than the being at work. Work then is reconstituted as functional use, in a manner that negates the metaphysics of work or praxis which has defined human ethics since the Greeks (Agamben, 2016: 3–23). Rather than a sovereign subject using material to produce works which define their subjective superiority to the point that another human, a slave, can be defined as a piece of equipment or part of the master’s body, the new subject simply uses bodies when needed, but in doing so is always first and foremost using their own body as object so as to depose themselves from the subjective sovereign position.

[F]orm-of-life, the properly human life is the one that, by rendering inoperative the specific works and functions of the living being, causes them to idle, so to speak, and in this way opens them up to possibility (Agamben, 2016: 277–8).

⁵ Dawkins famously notes in *The Selfish Gene* that genes are really only a biologically embodied form of a greater principle that both genes and cultural memes adhere to, namely the “replicator principle”.

§5 To idle suggests indifferential suspension, and also seems to draw us back to the theology of acedia, inaction, Sabbatism and so on. Here, however, what we see is that inoperative works are not suspended or idle, but rather render idle the economy of metaphysical works, for the express purpose of allowing us to explore a new kind of non-relational relationality between use and body. Only when metaphysics is suspended can a constructive inoperativity develop with inoperativity, like non-relation, meaning a mode of work that is not defined by metaphysical operativity and a mode of relation that is not determined by metaphysical relationality.

Contemplation and inoperativity are in this sense the metaphysical operators of anthropogenesis. (Agamben, 2016: 278)

§6 The true impotentiality of the human being is not to possess a capacity and not use it, but to actively and habitually pursue an activity that is self-related: how can I use my own body in a desubjectivated, non-metaphysical fashion and one that is outward. How can I then ethically extend this use of my body to encompass the manner in which my body utilises, but does not capture, dominate, litigate or indeed use up, other bodies?

What this form of unique reasoning results in is a modality of politics and art, with poetry being Agamben's principal example of inoperativity both here and in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, (Agamben, 2016: 245–8) defined not as tasks, and certainly not as works, but rather as the dimension in which the metaphysics of works, conceived as the production of beings at work, 'are deactivated and contemplated as such in order to liberate the inoperative that has remained imprisoned in them' (Agamben, 2016: 278). This then is the purpose of Homo Sacer as a whole: first to render inoperative the various signatures of our control — Sovereignty, Life, Time, Poverty, Office, Language, Government, Body, Power — in order then to propose a means by which we can constructively proceed into an indifferentiated and inoperative form-of-life that is not inactive, but which acts in a manner that exceeds the economic operativity of the metaphysical machine, or is never even captured by it. With this promise now in hand, it is with excitement and anticipation that you turn the page to see what the details of this new form of lived inoperativity would resemble, only to find, crushingly, an extensive bibliography. Not only is the book at an end, but the entire project is concluded, and the reader is no closer to an understanding of how to live their life as a mode of contemplative, habitual, inoperative destituent

potential, beyond living as a classical slave or a mediaeval monk, which are neither particularly attractive nor indeed feasible options.

Analogy qua Category

At a certain point in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben notes what appear to be two contradictory conceptions of the function of the *oikonomia*. This leads him to infer that *oikonomia* has two contradictory meanings for Christian theology — a clear indicator, he says, of the presence of a signature. First, economy is the organisation of God’s unity in relation to the trinity, and secondly, economy signifies “the historical dispensation of salvation”. In truth, the signature *oikonomia* does not have two meanings, but rather represents ‘the attempt to articulate in a single semantic sphere [...] a series of levels whose reconciliation appeared problematic: non-involvement in the world and government of the world; unity in being and plurality of actions; ontology and history’ (Agamben, 2007: 51). The role of the economy here is to resolve the specific theological aporia of God as both one and many, founding and founded. That Agamben says that the signature in play here is marked by two contradictory meanings is important in that every signature, meaningless in itself, all the same composes two meanings, encased in paradigms which are meaningful, which it places together so that one can found and the other be founded. Thus contradiction is the mark of the signature and the cause of its collapse, but only if a signature is described using classical or syllogistic logic.

It is not that signatures have two meanings that contradict each other, but rather that they possess a single referential semantic function or sphere, here economy, which allows them to put together opposing terms such that the impossibility of the system of one *and* many, transcendental *and* immanent, identity *and* difference, power *and* governmentality, is made possible by the economy looking to solve the problem found on one side by means of a solution located on the other side and vice versa. The result is that solution A not only contradicts solution B, but when this contradiction occurs, problem A looks for the solution to this contradiction in B. Finding solution A in problem B, however, puts problem B in contradiction with itself, and it searches for solution B in problem A. B finds its solution in A, only at the expense of making A return to contradiction and so on, seemingly endlessly. Instead of this being a contradiction indicative of the modality of traditional logic however, what we learn in *The Kingdom and the Glory* is that the two elements in play operate according to a

paradigmatic ana-logic, such that the two levels ‘do not contradict themselves, but they are correlated and become fully intelligible only in their functional relation. That is to say, they constitute the two sides of a single divine *oikonomia*, in which ontology and pragmatics [...] refer back to each other for the solution of their aporias’ (Agamben, 2007: 51). Which is another way of saying that the circular illogicality of the structure is itself what makes it intelligible, operative, communicable, and effective, thanks not to traditional logic but to analogical reasoning.

Earlier in the text, for example, speaking of how a signature like *oikonomia* can transform itself through time, space and culture and yet retain consistency, Agamben says that with *oikonomia*, in its various different manifestations in different discursive formations, there is not a transformation of the sense of the word, ‘but rather a gradual analogical extension of its denotation’ (Agamben, 2007: 20), and further that it is the relative stability of the sense of the word that allows for its extension into these new areas of denotation. The modality of extension here cannot be semantico-epistemic, as in the extensional-intensional pairing you find in Frege for example, because the two fields in question have nothing in common and signatures are content neutral. Thus the normative analytical mode of the extension of a concept over truth objects in the world cannot be applied. This is because the movement of knowledge is not transmitted in terms of content, but as regards the analogical structuration of source and target, which suggests that what we are looking at here is a modality where the analogical reach of a term extends into worlds (semantic spheres), and in so doing also transforms these worlds in such a way as to conform to its truth values. It is, in this sense, something akin to a coercive extensionalism, which I believe is a good definition of the operativity of signatures through paradigms.

Ana-logic is referenced several times in the book and has been a core component of Agamben’s thought for decades, especially in its suggestion of a mode of thinking something that stands to one side. This is exemplified in, among other places, his comments on the quality of the halo (Agamben, 1993: 53–8). It reaches full expression, however, when he engages properly with his most immediate source for analogical reasoning, Melandri’s *La linea e il circolo*, in *The Signature of All Things*, in particular in those crucial early pages where he explains the para-digm. Agamben begins his discourse on analogy by summarising Melandri’s definition:

Against the drastic alternative ‘A or B’, which excludes the third, analogy imposes its *tertium datur*, its stubborn ‘neither A nor B’. In other

words, analogy intervenes in the dichotomies of logic (particular/universal; form/content; lawfulness/exemplarity; and so on) not to take them up into a higher synthesis but to transform them into a force field traversed by polar tensions, where [...] their substantial identities evaporate. (Agamben, 2009: 20)

Throughout *The Kingdom and the Glory* and *The Use of Bodies* Agamben occasionally, but pointedly, suggests that analogy is a mode of co-relational reasoning wherein the dialectic of relation, part and whole, or inside and outside is deactivated so that one can arrive at a nonrelational relation. This nonrelational relation is a mode of relationality that escapes the hierarchical dialectic of common and proper that determines how paradigms function as part of the economy of the signature. While Agamben looks to Melandri's philosophy of analogy in this instance, we would argue that there is a much more accessible, consistent, communicable, and widely transmissible form of analogical reasoning to hand which better defines analogy, and prepares it for constructive inoperativity. I am referring to the mathematics of functional relation called category theory, explained in great depth by Alain Badiou in *Logics of Worlds* and *Mathematics of the Transcendental*, and further developed in my own *Badiou and Communicable Worlds*, a theory which is constructed consistently as a mode of nonrelational relationality. Leaving Melandri literally to one side here, then, for the rest of this paper we are going to speak of his analogical reasoning as an example of the wider language of philosophical category theory.

According to Badiou categories are nothing other than the topological mapping of the consistency of the function of relation. In category theory, the basic relation is determined by mapping a function from a source to a target. The function between source and target is what relates the two objects by simply saying A is related to B because A performs this function on B, or better A and B form a functional pairing due to this function. This relation of function that runs between A and B is generally called an 'analogy'. In terms of categorical functions, the relation between A and B due to function f amounts to the two objects' being related not as a result of elements which they share in common but because something that A does is the same as something that B does. In the classic example of analogical reasoning, wink:eye = smile:mouth, one can say that eye as A and smile as B are related due to the function [expression] or f .

According to Melandri, analogy means negating the dialectical reasoning intrinsic in the A or B contradictory pairing, which is an ideal proposition for the indifferential suspension of oppositional, contradictory logic. But it does not seem

to take us any further than suspension. In contrast, with categories one never enters into the classical logic of contradiction, not least because, as Badiou's work shows, categories are logics in the plural. Specifically, they utilise some classical logic, and some intuitionist logic.

In intuitionist logic, the either A or B relational coupling is suspended by the refusal to accept the excluded middle, for example. In intuitionist logic, not-A cannot be negated such that not-not-A = A, unless you can visually show this using topological diagrams. What this does is to break the co-dependency of the A—B relation, such that $A \neq B$ is not the same as saying A is true and B is false, or that B is the contradiction of A. For example, the nonrelationality of A and B can, in category theory, be a form of relationality where both relate to C, the categorical world, but never to each other. These are called POSets.

More significantly, the relation between A and B is rarely contradictory but a degree of relation such that A is not the same as B but A relates to B, and thus shares similarity with B, *to some degree*. Categories, then, are also examples of modal logics. Thus, instead of $A = B$ or $A \neq B$, in category theory you would write $B \bullet A$ or B is affected functionally by A. On this reading, after Melandri, categorical analogy, which maps a functional analogy from A to B, does not have to conform to the contradictory relation; indeed, for nearly every relation, it is instead defined by an intuitionist degree of relation. If A is negated, its negation is not falsity, which means that, if you negate its falsity, you do not get back to truth. Indeed, categories have their own unique kind of negation as a result of this, called the 'reverse'. There is, therefore, no fundamental link between A and B, or truth and falsehood. Rather, A has a functional relation to B of degree, not of absolute relation, such that the functional relation between two objects can be suspended, without the whole edifice of contradiction collapsing: indeed, categories still make extensive use of classical logic in terms of their foundation on basic axioms of set theory. This being the case, category rather than analogy appears the more fruitful potential of a constructive inoperativity.

I appreciate that this is a rather bold proposition. Therefore, in order to justify it, I propose systematically to map Agamben's comments on analogy onto category theory. Before I do that however, it may be useful to define categories and their basic operations.

A category is nothing other than the mathematics of meta-structural relations between objects. These objects can be conceptual constructions. The central philosophical question we glean from categories is not to think of one thing in terms of another as regards properties they share in common in relation to a

being which does not share this property, but rather to think of one thing in terms of how it acts on another, and how this functional relation defines worlds such as they are and differentiates beings not in terms of *what* they are, but in terms of what they do to each other.

Categories then formalise the basic existential function of all beings in all worlds, a function which we shall call “relation”, but which could also be termed the “use of bodies”. Categories therefore concern the fundamental motivation for all kinds of thought: the means by which units are bound together into a larger unit in which all participate, and other units with which they share little or nothing in common, but which have something in common with that shared-in-common larger unit. All considered from the perspective of how one unit is tied to another not in terms of what they are or what they are like, but what one does to another, without recourse to the architecture of dialectical metaphysics. On the surface this might sound like another way of describing sets, but sets allow us to know what things are, by breaking them apart to see what they are composed of, whereas categories allow us to know what things do, by looking at the relations between them, leaving the object as such untouched, fully composed, devoid of analysis.

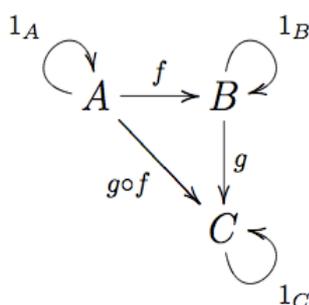
A “category” is a transcendental function located in the least-largest position above all of its components. As we shall see later, they are another form of signature. These smaller components are called “diagrams”. As we shall see later, diagrams are a kind of paradigmatic pairing. The transcendentially located category oversees the degrees of relationality between the objects in its line of sight, given to it by its position of slight superiority. A category is defined solely by being the transcendental least-largest position from which all diagrams of a world can be related to by at least two objects: the object in relation to itself and the category the object is included in.

Being visible is a function, the fundamental function: Badiou calls it universal exposition. If you can be “seen” in a world, this asserts that you are held in a functional relation with at least one other object, such that this larger object acts on you with a basic existential operation: as a being, you exist, to some degree of intensity, in this world, relationally speaking. A category structures relations, between the diagrams it oversees, and between itself and all its diagrams. It organises relation by showing it in diagrams of visibility. What a thing actually is, and how it acts on another thing, without changing its own “essence” or that of the thing it is dominating, while being able to register that the existence of these two so-called “things” is entirely dependent on what a thing does, not what it is, is the quintessence of the philosophy of categories and, I contend, of analogy.

Most definitions of a category are a disappointment insofar as they comprise simply listing or drawing what a category consists of, and Badiou's definition in *Mathematics of the Transcendental* is similarly descriptive and minimal:

A category consists of objects and arrows, provided that, given two arrows: there always exists the composite of these two arrows; this composition is associative; and for every object we have an identity arrow, which is neutral in any composition in which it operates. (Badiou, 2014: 20)

If categories are hard to define, but easier to simply describe, this at least means that they benefit from being a mode of visually mapping functions across different domains, so if you wish you can see an actual picture of a category when you struggle to picture it in your head. Here, for example, is the classic diagram of a commutative triangle, a central function in nearly all categorical worlds:



We can map this diagram onto Badiou's rather bland definition. We have our objects, A , B and C , and the arrows that travel between them: $A \rightarrow B$, $B \rightarrow C$, and $A \rightarrow C$. These are commonly called "morphisms". We also have a composite arrow. The arrow from A to C is functionally the same as the combined arrows from A to B and B to C making the arrow combination A to B to C a composite or composable. It is composed of more than one function, here written f and g , and this composition of functions is, functionally, the same as the function that runs directly from A to C , called $g \bullet f$. In category theory notation you read from right to left. Thus, we can say that the line between A and C is composed of the two functions that exist between A and B and B and C , so that the two directional choices are functionally the same. This is called a 'commutative diagram', commutative meaning that you can swap the two sides of an equation and get the same result. For example, $A \rightarrow C = A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C$, or here $C \bullet B \bullet A = C \bullet A$.

Thinking some more about Badiou's definition we can also say of this composite of functions that it is associative, which means that the directionality

from A through B to C has to be preserved, in that order, although you have no need to consider this particular composite function in any specific order. For example, you can look at the composite function A to B to C first and then look at A to C , or look at A to C first if you wish. But when you choose to look at A through B to C , then that local order has to be maintained. This is important as the function A to C is not the same as the function C to A , if such a function exists. If two sets of functions can be said to be the same and are thus placed on either side of an equation, then one can replace the other but only if the direction and order of the functions is preserved. Categorical functions are asymmetric in their composition — direction matters.

Given the dynamic between the symmetry of commutation, each side of the equation being the same, and the associative asymmetry of the side in question, the order in which you move through its functions matters, and motivates a certain philosophical conception of categories. Commutation captures the symmetry of relation between two objects, and that which they share in common is equivalent, irrespective of whether you compare A to C or A to B to C . Association captures the associative asymmetry of functions ‘within’ the relative compositions of A and B . This is important because commutation conforms to classical, contradictory logic, while association treats the category by being intuitive. For example, while classically we might say $C \bullet B \bullet A = C \bullet A$ in our triangle, we cannot say that $\neg\neg(C \bullet B \bullet A) = C \bullet A$, because while the two sides are functionally the same, they are not functionally equivalent: for example, $C \bullet B \bullet A$ has twice the number of functional relations as $C \bullet A$. You can make them equivalent, but you cannot assume equivalence.

Looking at the diagram again, we can say that each of the objects here has to have a functional relation with itself represented by the self-enclosed or reflexive arrow attached to each object. This gives us the basic sense of the duality of all relational functions in a world. Each object in the world has to relate to itself: it exists in a world to a certain degree of intensity, and it has to relate to the categorical world itself. The first relation is ontological, in the sense that it relates to the question as to why there is something rather than nothing; while the second is categorical, in the sense that if there is something, it exists in this world by relating to at least one other thing: the world itself.

An important stipulation in Badiou’s work states that when a multiple appears in a categorical world as an object, the existence of the object is determined by the degree of relation of a multiple to itself: for example, how intensely an anarchist appears *qua* anarchist in a demonstration, and to other

appearing multiples. Thus, no multiple appears in full in categories. A second stipulation lays down that, if two multiples appear with identical relations with identical objects of identical intensity, then they are the same object, at the level of appearance, even if they differ ontologically. What this means is that their diagrams of analogy are identical. Finally, just because two objects are bound together by a functional relation, does not mean that they cannot also share other kinds of relations with other objects. Each of these relations is a new functional arrow or morphism. These relations can be contradictory in a classical sense, as long as they can be mapped functionally in a categorical sense.

Let us recap. Categories are analogical because they map objects across two objects, A and C here, in such a way that the structural composition of the two objects remains untouched. Categories never break objects open. They are non-ontological and thus non-dialectical, because they are not concerned with what two objects are, but with analogies between them due to a single functional mapping of one onto another: wink is to eye as smile is to mouth according to the function of expression. Any object can be mapped functionally onto another if they share some fundamentals of structure in common, poetry being a prime example of this. “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day” means “shall I map the common functions between the lover and a summer’s day, loveliness and temperateness, onto a degree of relation, the lover being superior or “more”. If two objects are mapped functionally in an identical fashion, in terms of how they appear in this world, they are identical. Again, this breaks with ontology in that essence is irrelevant because what the object is does not pertain to the functional praxology of categories. The effect of commutative symmetry therefore is to remove objects from essence and property, and define them entirely by how they are being used here in this analogical relation.

That said, as we saw, categories also have an element of associative asymmetry. Just because wink is to eye as smile is to mouth, it is not the case that mouth is to smile as eye is to wink. The first analogy was of [expression], the second, which would need a new diagram, is [host of expression]. This is why if I define wink as A, and not-A as smile, then first we can see that not-A does not negate A, it just isn’t A, and not-not-A does not return us to wink. What this shows is that categories are not linear pairings in a dialectical zone of tension, but tabular groupings, and if you want to negate something then you do not go back to the opposite, the oscillating dynamic of the *oikonomia*, but forward and up, to a new set of diagrammatical relations. Now we can see that a difference in categories may not be equated analogically with opposition or indeed relation. Two different objects can be said to be identical if they share the same function, while their

difference can be preserved in the composable and associative divergence between A to C and A to C via B. Showing us that as regards relational identity and difference, identity is not ontological but functional, and functional difference is defined by the composable asymmetry of associative symmetries. Whatever else one needs to say here, which would potentially comprise an immense study, two facts are clear. First, categories are a fully worked-out system of analogy that exceeds Melandri's work, and second, categorical relation does not succumb to the problems of dialectics or contradiction. This means that our argument remains robust: categories are the formalisation of the analogical mode of reasoning that in some way 'succeeds' the metaphysics of opposition that occurs after its inoperativity.

Analogous Functional Mapping of Category Theory onto Agamben via Melandri: (A•M•C)

Having given a thumb-nail sketch of categories let's try to map them analogically onto Agamben's conception of analogy drawn in part from Melandri. His first reading of analogy involved the assertion that the ordered pair in question is not then synthesised into a single unit. What this does is to intervene in logic at the dichotomous level. It implies that it is not the pairing that is at issue when it comes to metaphysics, but the nature of their ordering and the logical assumption of Aristotelian syllogism means that the two parts can be fused together or held permanently apart. What Agamben's suspension is looking for are states of contact where separation is maintained, but wherein the contact is neither synthetic/dialectic nor analytic. According to him, such states form a force-field of provocative irresolution which, in essence, can render metaphysics inoperative. His specific concern is the means by which the substance of the two terms is removed. I am taking this to be a standard philosophical sense of the term as unchanging substrata or being as substance. He is correct that the analogical mode, what we will call the "categorical mode", is able to relate two objects together irrespective of their substance, their ontological multiplicity, meaning in this sense that all such objects of analogy are substance-indifferent. What seems to be of particular concern here is not so much what the objects "are" in an ontological sense, but how the relation between two elements determines the function of metaphysics in such areas as part/whole, inside/outside...

Following on from this, Agamben notes: 'The analogical third is attested here above all through the disidentification and neutralisation of the first two,

which now become indiscernible. The third is this indiscernibility' (Agamben, 2009, p.23). Analogy, categorisation, has to be pitted against the conception of the two that is presented in Western thought. Thus, the first function of analogy is disidentification. What this proposes is that two terms can be placed in relational contact without any mode of identity. Their relationality is their being in relation: it is in this sense a matter of topology. Two objects are placed in relation according to a space.

Agamben assumes in his work that this relation has to be a mode of contact, but I think he misconstrues the various modes of relation that do not depend on contact and its implication of touching. For example, when speaking of a category, the two things related can be seen from the same position, but this does not imply that they 'touch' each other in any way. The second function is neutralisation. They are rendered content-indifferent. The third term is the indiscernibility between the two. Thus, indiscernibility is here read as the nonrelational analogy between two units. On our reading the category would be this indiscernibility.

Agamben now develops his ideas on analogy in relation to Plato's work on recollection as a paradigm for knowledge, where the sensible is placed in nonsensible relation with itself. He goes on to conclude that,

the paradigm is not a matter of corroborating a certain sensible likeness but of producing it by means of an operation. For this reason, the paradigm is never already given, but is generated and produced [...] by 'placing alongside'. (Agamben, 2009: 23)

Let us dwell on the functions he ascribes to the paradigm here. The first is that the paradigm cannot be captured by the terms of our tradition because it is a functional relation and not an actual thing with properties. Paradigm on this reading is functional relation. The second issue is that a paradigm is a derived element. Paradigms are the result of the process of relational functions: they are indeed relational functions. Paradigms are content-neutral. They are functions, not beings in the traditional sense. Bare life is not a state, but a modality of functional relation within the conceptual signature "Life". The final point is more confusing. The para- here is not alongside but rather between. A paradigm is a function between two objects. The para- element however is retained in the commutative triangle of association. Here then para- means one of two ways to travel functionally from A to C, directly, in which case the functions are synthesised; or indirectly, in which case they are analysed. This means that the

para-/ana- pairing in Agamben is captured by perhaps the most philosophically challenging and fruitful aspect of categorical relation: the oscillation between symmetrical commutation and asymmetric association, a result I would argue of profound significance for future study.

Agamben closes his all-too-brief engagement with analogy by explaining:

The paradigmatic relation does not merely occur between sensible objects or between these objects and a general rule; it occurs instead between a singularity (which thus becomes a paradigm) and its exposition (its intelligibility). (Agamben, 2009: 23)

If we take a paradigm as a functional relation between a singularity and its exposition, we can see here in the choice of words alone that paradigm is just another name for any functional relation between two objects of a category. Here, however, Agamben is speaking of a paradigm's capacity for being both exemplary, singular and categorical, and exposed. This is perhaps the most pertinent of all the examples for this describes perfectly the standard function of the internal stability of relations between all objects in a world, or under the auspices of a very large category or signature. In category theory, every object is both exposed, which is to say, seen by the transcendently placed category, and exemplary, by being allowed to occupy a local position of exposition with respect to the other objects it relates to with a greater degree of intensity. This function is called the "envelope" and explains how larger objects capture smaller ones due to relational degrees of intensity of relation to a third. Envelopes are, basically, localised mini-categories meaning that at any time, any object can be exposed by an exemplary object above, and expose an exemplary object below. This is best described by the relation of dependency. If B is bigger than A, then it is said that B has all of A in it plus one element. As such, B depends on A, it takes all of A on trust, and just adds one to it. This explains precisely what to Agamben appears a contradiction: that a member of a set can also furnish the name of the set. From the perspective of classical logic, metaphysics, and analytical logic, it cannot be, as demonstrated by Russell's paradox and Gödel's incompleteness theorems, but from within category theory, it can, thanks to envelopes and dependency relations.

If we summarise the components of the paradigm, remarkably we see that they map perfectly onto the relationally ordered pairs of categories.

Agamben says the following in respect of paradigms:

1. They form a tertiary relation that exceeds the either/or dichotomy of classical logic and contradiction.
2. Hierarchy of relation is replaced by a force field of relation.
3. This force field negates substantial identity.
4. The analogical third = the indiscernibility of the relational pairing due to a process of disidentification.
5. A paradigm is never presented but always produced.
6. This production is determined by a topology and not by substance.
7. As such when a paradigm is produced, it is granted its singularity qua appearance due to its being exposed, a seeming paradox.

Let us now take the same seven operations and present them in terms of category theory:

1. Categories concern a tertiary functional relation between an ordered-pair of objects which is not determined by classical interdictions on contradiction: \geq
2. The force field of relation is the function: $B \bullet A$
3. The function replaces the essence of a being appearing due to qualities: essence is now function.
4. The relation between two objects is disidentified: it is not captured by the metaphysical dialectic of identity and difference.
5. A categorical relation is the result of the product of a function: relation is a function.
6. A categorical relation is determined by the topology of relation represented by the commutative triangle: relations are tabular, symmetrical, composable, and associative.
7. A paradigmatic object stands in for, is exemplary of, all the objects it envelops which depend on it: enveloping and dependency.

What we have performed here is in fact a categorical functional mapping between Melandri's analogy, Agamben's paradigm, and Badiou's presentation of category theory. We have mapped the three dissimilar discursive objects onto each other by only focusing on their functional analogies. This mode of mapping different languages onto each other at a meta-functional level is, in fact, the main purpose of category theory, which is able to map differing modes of mathematics onto the same functional language. It is also, remarkably, the single purpose of Agamben's conception of signatures.

Philosophical Archaeology as Category Theory

What we are arguing is that inoperativity is category theory. This argument is based on three pieces of evidence, the first being that the post-contradictory logic of destituent potential is one of nonrelational relationality that Agamben calls “analogy” and which we are proposing is another way of saying “category”. Categories map functional relations between objects that exceed the dialectical, hierarchical and disputative reasoning of metaphysics. Our second piece of evidence is that Agamben’s philosophical archaeology is clearly categorical. As we saw, a category is composed of commutative triangles of relation. At the apex sits the category itself, which has a transcendental function but which has no content, merely the function of universal exposition: it can see everything else to such a degree that we can say that all the objects in this world commute — they can be seen by at least the category. This is called the “maximal” in category theory, the “transcendental functor” in Badiou, and is clearly what Agamben intends by the idea of the content-neutral, communicable, transcendental position he calls the “signature”. A signature is, in other words, a historicised category.

Below the category is an ordered pair defined with regard to the relationality of the things paired, not in respect of their essence or qualities. This relationality in metaphysics is dialectical, but in categories it is simply functional. Thus, the economy of dialectical pairs is replaced by an inoperativity of nonrelationality or the means by which two objects are related under the auspices of a transcendental functor due to a function outside the metaphysics of relation that has been in place since the Greeks. Finally, the *arche* is represented in any world as a halting point called, in category theory, the “minimum” (we will leave this to one side here as the *arche* is not our main concern).

What is astonishing about category theory is that it maps perfectly onto analogy, as the mathematisation of analogical relations, and then maps perfectly onto philosophical archaeology, in a manner that solves the aporias that the signatory method ultimately collapses under. The signature’s false transcendentalism is replaced by a transcendental in the sense of the position of universal exposition for any collection of ordered pairs of relation. The paradigmatic economy is rendered inoperative so that a much simpler analogical operation of mapping a function between two bodies can be developed. Even the oddities of paradigms are covered by categories: specifically, the way a paradigm can be exemplary and summative at the same time. Finally, the retroactive fictive problematics of the *arche* are rendered inoperative in favour of the fact that every

world is in possession of a functioning halting point, called the minimum, vouchsafed by the founding of categories on sets, meaning that all categories can rely on the set-theoretical mainstays of the empty set and the Axiom of Foundation. A minimum is not the empty set, but is stable thanks to the empty set. When a world became the world that it is, it immediately established a non-contradictory minimum as halting point such that we can say that every world is well-founded.

Inoperativity is Category: The Three Proofs

Category theory is a developed and consistent theory for a world based entirely on relations which, however, do not depend in any way on the problematics of the metaphysics of relation. Categorical worlds are nothing but relations, and in this sense then are the means by which one can live constructively in a nonrelational manner. In other words, if one wants to know how to live nonrelationally in a modality of constructive inoperativity that depends on a logic of analogy rather than contradiction, then the answer is simple: you live according to categories. What this then allows us to propose, quite remarkably I think, is that *The Use of Bodies* is in reality a liberating and historicised theory of categories in that the use of bodies can simply be re-described as functions between bodies. With this result in hand, our third proof, let us look once more at the elements of a post-metaphysical world hinted at in those last few pages of *Homo Sacer*.

First one needs to render the metaphysics of relation inoperative using indifferent suspension. Then one needs to reconsider the being at work as the body of use. In category theory, as Badiou explains, the difference between ontology and categories is that the ontology of multiples concerns the composition of beings, what they collect, while categories leave objects closed in on themselves, concerned as it is with the functional relation between objects. Sets, he notes, are intrinsic, categories extrinsic (Badiou, 2014: 13). This is especially important as the sustained early example of the use of bodies is the status of slaves in Greek society as bodies with no interiority. In categories, all bodies operate qua slave bodies: they remain radically closed so that the classic ontological aporias of foundation, the one qua essence, and multiplicity, the relation between ones due to their properties, are never engaged. As a result, Aristotle's theory of classes is irrelevant. Yes, you can solve classes with sets, but in the case of categories, you don't need to. So, instead of a being at work or an essence possessed of some properties, you have a body of use, or the functional relation between two bodies

whose entire definition is that these are two bodies that have been used in tandem. This use does not alter their ontology, even if they are used together in a contradictory mode, because existence is not determined by the composition of the body but the relation of one body to another due to use.

Now we need a theory of nonrelation. As we saw, nonrelation actually means nonrelational relationality or a mode of relation that renders inoperative the dialectics, metaphysics, theology, and politics of relationality that signatures, paradigms, economies and *arche* keep in play. Categories formalise an entirely immanent system of nondialectical relationality wherein hierarchy is simply functional topology. Hierarchy is a certain use of bodies for the period of the function, not a permanent, empowered, theological or sovereign position. Given sufficient space, one could also demonstrate that dialectics can be mapped onto categories like any other kind of reasoning.

Our thesis, thanks to our three proofs, is therefore as follows: categories are analogical; philosophical archaeology is historicised category theory; and use of bodies means functional relations between objects. The first mode of inoperativity was as I described it in *Agamben and Indifference*, that of indifferential suspension. However in *The Use of Bodies* a second inoperativity is proposed as a mode of destituent potential or the ability of a subject to use itself and other objects as bodies outside of the dictates of metaphysics. In this sense, inoperativity means use that is not captured by the metaphysics of work due to being, Aristotle's formula, in the same way as nonrelation means a mode of relationality that is not a dialectic between common and proper overseen by a transcendental concept and founded on an originary moment. **The name for such an inoperativity is 'category'**. This inoperativity is basically the idea of function as expressed in category theory. It is analogical, as Agamben has it. It is triangular as philosophical archaeology requires, but in each instance it renders inoperative the metaphysics of dialectical or transcendental synthesis in favour of the logic of exposition.

This reveals that above all else, inoperativity is a process. To render inoperative the *oikonomia*, you need to actually render the signature as transcendently inoperative, the pairing of your paradigms dialectically inoperative, and the foundational moment of the *arche*, temporally inoperative. Finally, when you have achieved this, you can say that the use of bodies has replaced the being at work, and have at your disposal an entire language of thought — category theory — which immediately tells you how you can live in a state where the machine of metaphysics and power is rendered permanently idle.

In answer to the question of how one should live, now that the machine of metaphysics is inoperative thanks to indifference, we live as if objects are held in functional relations with other objects, which can and must include ourselves, under the auspices of a categorical world-order which is neither determined by our genetics nor our cultural inheritance. A wonderful, life-changing and life-affirming result, if it were not for the fact that it directly contradicts Badiou's own sense of categories as not the solution to the problem of signatures, but the very source of their power and unassailable stability.

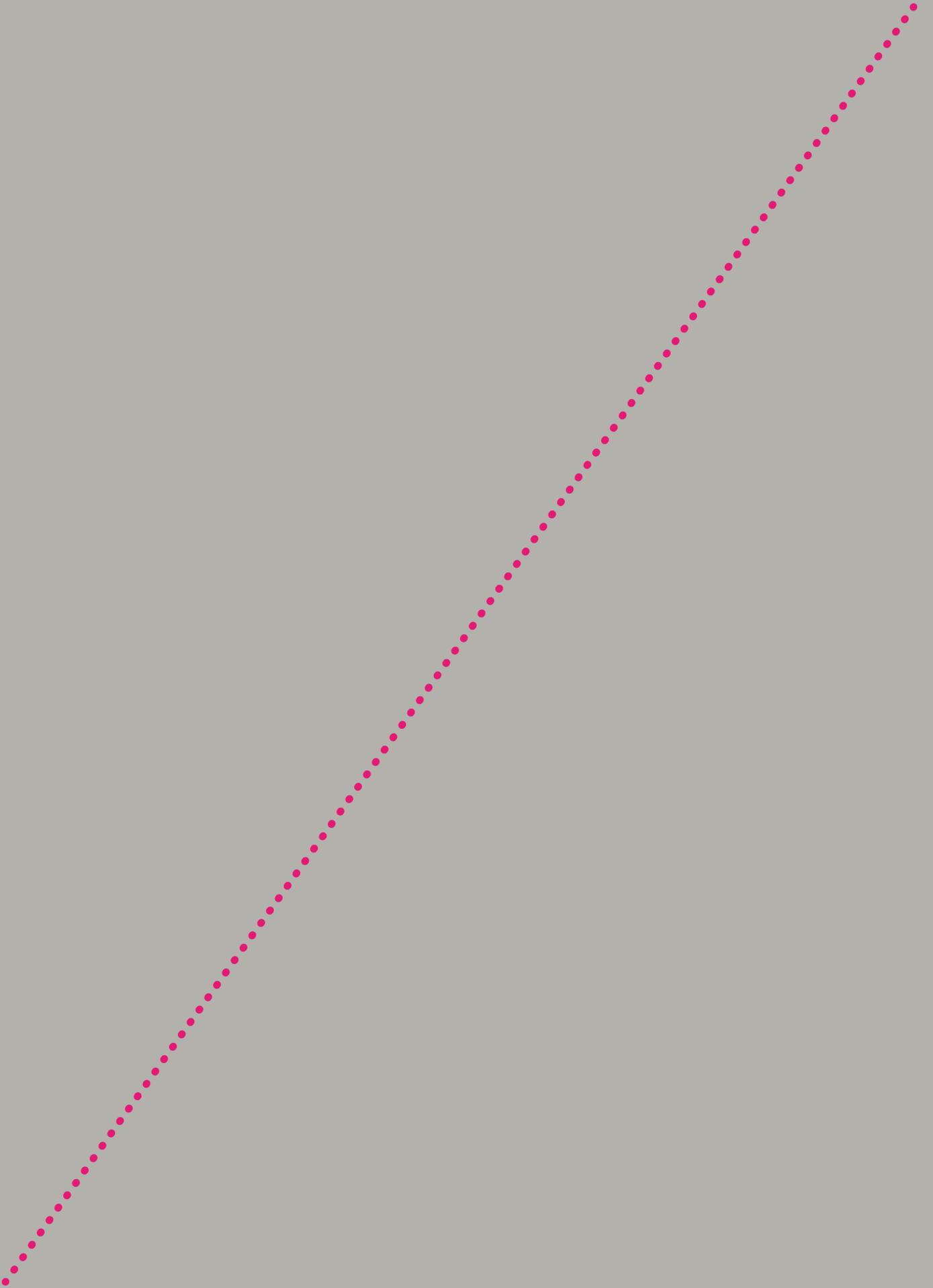
We are left then with a powerful potential for future thought, the overlap or analogical mapping of Agamben's theory of signatures and Badiou's application of categories. I believe this locates us on the very cusp of a full, consistent and potentially liberating description of why things are the way they are, to put it bluntly, at least in terms of how signatures and categories underpin and legitimate power and its dispositifs. Alone this is an exceptionally powerful philosophical and political tool. Yet if it can be shown that such a fruitful analogy exists, a conclusion that has wider implications for an entente between archaeological and mathematical strands of contemporary thought more broadly, the fact remains that the conceptions of radical change in the state of affairs in Agamben and Badiou are fundamentally — one might say, permanently — at odds. How can it be that Agamben's idea of habitual uses of bodies in any way finds analogical parity with Badiou's radically intermittent, disruptive and singular event? That is a question I must leave hanging for now with just one comment: could it be that both thinkers, lodged as their work is in a firmly 20th century continental sense that radical change constitutes real politics, have misconstrued the true import of inoperativity as category, not as a mode of disruption, but as the portal to a new thought of radical indifference?



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Destitution and Creation: Agamben's Messianic Gesture

Kieran Aarons

Abstract

This article offers an account of the basic movement of Giorgio Agamben's ethical philosophy. The ethical gesture is stretched between two forms of messianism, a "paralysed messianism" associated with life under permanent state of exception, and the "perfected" nihilism of messianic fulfilment, which Agamben associates with the movement of revocation or "destitution". I argue that Agamben's concept of destitution cannot be accurately treated as a synonym for negation or destruction, as it envelops irreducibly creative elements. At the same time, the creation at issue here is of a peculiar sort, since it is modelled not on the act of production but rather on the restoration of a creative potential within sensibility. Special emphasis is here placed on Agamben's retrieval of the work of a relatively obscure French linguist, Gustav Guillaume, whose theory of "operative time" allows his messianism to subvert the extrinsic opposition between the suspended time of revolt's divine violence and the historical time of everyday life.

Keywords: Giorgio Agamben, Gustave Guillaume, Messianism, Destituent Power, Ethics



The aim of this article is to describe, in a provisional and restricted manner, the movement of messianic destitution as an ethical and gnoseological strategy for neutralizing the mutilating "ban relation" that permeates lived experience under the current reigning order, without resubstantialising political subjectivity. Agamben's theory of destitution is neither nihilistic, nor can it be accurately summarized as a synonym for negation or destruction; in fact, the irreducibly creative movement it envelops is motivated precisely by an effort to overcome the paralyzing nihilism of our time. At the most general level, the wager of destituent ethics lies not in a search for new social or hegemonic grounds with which to reinvigorate or replace the withering political subjectivities of the 20th century, but rather in the effort to leverage and "fulfil" the an-archic, desubjectifying, and anonymous dimensions of contemporary life by converting them into new premises for experiencing and collectively inhabiting shared sensible worlds oriented around non-economic ideas of happiness. In this, Agamben's work

contributes a new philosophical starting point for thinking communism in the 21st century. Obstacles to this process — the myriad mechanisms of capture, separation, and articulation Agamben groups together under the logic of the ban — issue not only from within the political and economic theology that underpin today's dominant order, but also permeate much of the 20th century revolutionary and avant-garde traditions that sought to jettison it.¹ As a result, while his political commitments are unwaveringly aligned with the revolutionary currents of his time, Agamben's effort, beginning roughly in 1999, to develop a positive concept of destituent power is motivated by an urgent search for new schemas of transformative creation, a new "image of thought" as Deleuze might have said, which is always also a schema for seizing upon lived experience and its unthought historical potentialities. Such an image will be modelled neither on the act of production, wherein an extant capacity for action is realized in an end or product, nor on managerial democratic paradigms that reinforce the metaphysical fiction of a *sui generis* subject of consent, but on the earthbound, vital, and sensible connection between perception, gesture, and time.

My argument unfolds in two main parts, moving from diagnosis to intervention. Part I outlines Agamben's reading of contemporary governance as a form of "imperfect nihilism", a term that encompasses both a post-political paradigm of rule as well as the characteristic form of desubjectivation that it engenders. Part II then shows how this nihilism assumes an inverse yet symmetrical expression in a "prophetic apparatus" into which the 20th century revolutionary project often sank. The critique of prophecy serves as the entry point into Agamben's theory of destitution, which, in my view, cannot easily be grasped apart from it. I argue that this theory gains its philosophical traction from the genetic conception of subjectivity in which it is anchored, allowing Agamben to re-situate the ethical tension within the hiatus between the fragmentary time of perception and the discursive representation of time. Special emphasis is placed on his retrieval of the work of a relatively obscure French linguist, Gustav Guillaume, whose importance for Agamben has, to my knowledge, remained largely overlooked. In spite of the former's undeniable influence upon every corner of his thought, in the final analysis it is neither Heidegger nor Benjamin who most directly enables Agamben to circumvent the limits encountered by the 20th century theory of the event. Rather, it is his mobilization of Guillaume's theory of "operative time", a time which subverts the extrinsic opposition between

¹ I address the presence of the ban structure within the logic of revolt in Aarons (2019: 1018–46).

the suspended time of revolt's divine violence and the historical time of everyday life.

I. Paralysed Messianism

Agamben's concept of messianism has two valences. Life under permanent state of exception is what he will refer to as a 'petrified or paralysed' messianism, the 'imperfect nihilism' of a ruling order that *cannot finish finishing*, which has nullified the law but 'maintains the Nothing in a perpetual and infinitely deferred state of validity' (1999: 171).² The "Nothing" at issue here is no obscure metaphysical element, but a mode of experiencing the world in which events 'happen without happening', a paradoxical relation of non-relation that causes time to slip from our grasp, and in which 'every gesture becomes unrealizable' (1999: 169, 174). Imperfect nihilism is the effect of a mode of governance that aims to ensure that (the) *Nothing* happens, *rather than the world*. Against such epochal paralysis, Agamben will oppose not the positivity of a non-alienated or integral form of subjectivity preserved from the destruction of experience, nor a retrieval of originary experience from the ruins of metaphysics, but the 'perfected' nihilism of messianic fulfilment, which achieves redemption by an 'overturning of the Nothing' of our time.³ However, since the latter is nothing other than the reduction of the former, i.e. a way of inhabiting and repopulating the fringe of desubjectivation it installs in our relation to the world, the interpretive challenge consists in understanding how destitution can 'create' a new relation simply by exhibiting and neutralizing an absence. What does it mean to fulfil the Nothing of our age, to return Nothing to nothing, by exhibiting its emptiness? In what sense can 'exhibition' alone constitute a mode of creation? What is the relation between messianic time and the Nothing that our age guards at its centre? In order to answer these questions, we must better grasp the petrified nihilism that constitutes our present.

The state of exception and the "days of the messiah"

In its religious connotation, the 'days of the Messiah' refer to the period after the resurrection, yet prior to the abolition of history. Although earthly law remains "in force", the messianic event has left it in a state of suspension: 'the time under

² All authorless in-text citations refer to Agamben's works.

³ On the impossibility of retrieving an "originary beginning", see Agamben, 2015b: 266.

the Law is over, and yet the Messiah has not yet come' (1999: 168). If Agamben sees in this an analogy to contemporary life under the permanent state of exception, this is because, from the moment that the juridical order 'grounds' itself directly in the emergency, not only does the law divest itself of any transcendent authority, but the very framework of prescription and proscription lose their meaning *tout court*. Like the 'original form of the Torah' in the Kabbalistic tradition, which is composed of a 'medley of letters without any order; that is, *without meaning*' — yet which, for the same reason, can be said to 'contain all possible meaning' — the self-derogation of law in the exception reduces the pronouncements of law to a senseless jumble of words, a 'commandment that commands nothing' (1999: 165–167; 1998: 52).

If life under the state of exception may be characterized as a "petrified" or "paralyzed" messianism, an "imperfect" nihilism, then this is first of all because, since the end of the First World War, Western societies have become constitutively incapable of even imagining, never mind actually working toward, a future that could look any different from the present. After its 'pure and simple relinquishment of all historical tasks', politics has been reduced to 'simple functions of internal or international policing in the name of the triumph of the economy', i.e., to the disordered and tautological administration of a social and economic order that has emptied itself of any positive reason for being, yet which continues an-archically to persist, 'without why' (2002a: 76).

Contrary to appearances, the depoliticization of law does not signal its disappearance but merely a shift in its way of exerting power over a subject. That it no longer speaks to us of prohibitions does not weaken, but in fact intensifies its hold over us. As Jessica Whyte observes, as soon as 'no act can be understood to be in accordance with the law', it follows that 'no space can safely be assumed to be outside its grasp' (Whyte 2013: 103). Once it has become *a priori* impossible to distinguish transgression from observance, the legality of an act becomes fundamentally undecidable. From the militarization of public space to the complete surveillance of the smallest minutia of private life, today everything conspires to remind us that the most innocent gesture can be criminalized at any moment, that inside the most harmless of citizens there lurks an anonymous potentiality for terroristic violence.⁴ As Agamben distils it, 'the unspoken principle which rules our society can be stated like this: every citizen is a potential

⁴ Agamben, 2009a: 22–23. See also 1998: 57: '[A] person who goes for a walk during the curfew is not transgressing the law any more than the soldier who kills him is executing it'.

terrorist’.⁵ In actual fact, this lawless potentiality projected by securitarian logic into the life of every citizen must be seen as the symmetrical image of that groundless violence to which the reigning order subjects us.⁶ To live under a permanent state of exception is to be perpetually “abandoned” to an unlocalizable authority whose jurisdiction is unlimited, yet whose demands are inscrutable (2005a: 38–39). Sovereign violence hovers like an indeterminate element over its subjects, a powerfully present absence that acts upon them no longer by means of delegation and interdiction but by *exposure*: to be governed today is to experience a graduated spectrum of vulnerability to a non-localizable potentiality for violence suspended over us, punishment becoming a mere afterthought, and perhaps even a relief, the confession of guilt having become the only way to bring our endless trial to its conclusion.

This petrified nihilism of our age generates a stalled or aporetic experience of time: a radical *futurelessness* in which all that is left to do is *wait*. However, unlike during the First World War, which, as Furio Jesi writes, for four years ‘suspended the usual rhythm of life’ by transforming ‘every hour [into] an hour of waiting — waiting for the next move (one’s own or the enemy’s)’, all of which ‘were instants in a greater wait, the wait for victory’, the current paradigm of global civil war waged through sovereign policing has no horizon of triumph or victory other than its own reproduction (Jesi, 2014: 46).⁷ In the absence of any such *telos* or justification, the holding pattern of historical time gathers itself only through the *deferral* of its own imminent dissolution. If our society can be said to resemble a world that, having deposed the law, now expends every effort to delay the arrival of the Kingdom, this is because, after abjuring all relation to transcendence, it can no longer imagine its end as the end of *a* world, but only as the end of “*the World*” per se. The temporality of such decadence assumes the form of an endless end, or, in the words of Günther Anders, an ‘apocalypse without kingdom’: a world that cannot imagine itself carrying on, and yet for this reason is all the more incapable of having done with anything.⁸

⁵ For a deeper elaboration of this point, see Agamben, 2016.

⁶ ‘We are not, and will never be terrorists; but what you seem to designate by the word “terrorist”, that we are’ (2009b).

⁷ On the terms ‘global civil war’ and ‘sovereign policing’, see Agamben (2015a: 1–3), and (1996: 103–107). As Agamben puts it, governance today ‘aims at nothing other than its own replication’ (2009a: 22).

⁸ ‘We are the first to expect not the kingdom of God after the end, but nothing at all’. See Anders (2019).

Desubjectivation and the administration of absence

In the Preface to his *De Cive*, Hobbes describes the ‘state of nature’ as an analytic principle that is revealed when the State is ‘considered as if it were dissolved’ (*ut tanquam dissoluta consideretur*) (Hobbes, 1998: 10).⁹ If Agamben often characterizes our contemporary situation as one of ‘global civil war’, this is because, in the state of exception, any formal “togetherness” that might once have been associated with the notions of civil society or the state is today lived *as if* dissolved (2015a: 24). By administering all relations between human beings *as if* our lives lacked any internal form, as if we were nothing but surviving machines — bundles of self-interest surrounded by a void of relation — economic governance presides over the reproduction of a ‘bare life that has been separated from its context’ (1998: 100). Only once beings have been wrenched from their worlds, stripped of all lived attachments, can the political task of re-assembling the atomized particles make sense. What economy separates, classical politics serves to re-gather, only *as separate*.

If contemporary governance can operate in the mode of a *katechōn*, working tirelessly to conceal and ‘delay the unveiling of the “mystery of [its own] lawlessness”’, by rendering its subjects’ ‘every gesture unrealizable’ (1999: 169; 2005b: 111), its day-to-day reproduction is only possible thanks to an immense administration of phenomenality intervening at every level of the subject’s entrance into the “Open”. Today, the entire surface through which subjects enter into contact with reality has been front-loaded with desubjectivizing apparatuses designed to attenuate ethical intensities, to suspend all decisive contact with the world, and to preempt any effort to desert the ‘colossal parody’ of our inert social tissue by capturing our ‘all-too-human desire for happiness’ and transporting it into a realm beyond our reach — e.g. the iPhone as a ‘sophisticated absence outfit’ (2009a: 16, 20-24; Invisible Committee, 2014: 31).

As Reinhart Koselleck’s work helps us to see, this flooding of our lives with apparatuses in fact only completes the long process of depoliticization in which

⁹ Translation modified to accord with that of Agamben (1998: 36).

the modern state found its point of departure.¹⁰ With its final passage, in the twentieth century, away from the rule of law and toward a ‘pure activity of governance’ came the neutralization of the great political antagonisms that shaped the first half of the 20th century (2009a: 22; cf. 2007a). The ‘real identities’ that once defined the field of political polarization (Workers, Bourgeoisie, Subaltern, Pan-African)¹¹ have all inwardly collapsed, ceding their place to that ‘docile and cowardly’ citizen of post-industrial democracy that *Tiqqun* and Agamben have dubbed the *Bloom* (2009a: 22–23).¹²

The peculiar mode of alienation to which the concept of the Bloom points is important, as it forms the “subjective” premise of Agamben’s destituent messianism. Bloom is the last man: the final outcome of capitalism’s vast

¹⁰ See Koselleck (1988: 1-40). There is an inner link between statecraft as a technique of ethical neutralization and the rise of *moralism*, the latter being understood as a sphere of “inner conscience” stripped in advance of any relation to external action. In its effort to immunize the space of the political from the local ethical hostilities of vernacular and spiritual life, Koselleck shows how the modern state introduces a “break” within the ethical subject that dissociates it from its lived worlds. In this, he allows us to understand the historical genesis of the contemporary liberal subject, the impotent indignation of the “engaged citizen”. If liberal moralism presupposes the neutralization of all ethical attachment, this is because in order to “denounce”, we must first *exempt* ourselves. Liberal “critique” is inseparable from a gesture of ethical self-parenthesis.

¹¹ “[T]he society of the Spectacle [...] [is] one in which all social identities have dissolved’ (Agamben, 1996: 87–88, 110). On the one hand, it is legitimate to be concerned about Agamben’s neglect of questions of race, gender, queer identity, and the variegated forms that suffering takes in the modern world. On the other hand, if he is right that the various social contradictions and oppressions that, in the mid-twentieth century, managed to harden into antagonistic points of political subjectivation can no longer crystalize into counter-subjectivations in the ways they once did, then what they primarily serve to mark off is the intensity and quality in which a generalized void of law expresses itself according to this or that social positionality. There are, we might say, many “imperfect nihilisms” depending on the complex grammar of negativity that structures different identities. However, since messianism begins *from where one already is*, and deposes social conditions without founding a new identity, it arguably does not need to *first* address this difference in order to offer a logical schema for undoing the Nothing, even if it remains the case that its implementation will look different across different experiences. This point is, admittedly, a sticky one. Some preliminary considerations of this problem — beginning from the side of critical race theory, and working backwards to Agamben — have been proposed in Aarons (2016).

¹² See also Tiqqun (2012), *passim*. On several occasions, Agamben has publicly acknowledged his involvement in both volumes of the journal, as well as in the revisions of the 2008 edition. See Agamben (2004: 120). As a matter of historical reference, it will be recalled that the second of the lecture series that became *The Time that Remains* was delivered at the University of Verona in the winter of 1998–99, while Volume 1 of *Tiqqun* was first published in Venice (an hour’s drive away) in January 1999. In the Luria Kabbala, the word *Tikkun* means “messianic restoration” or the “mending of the world”. See Agamben (2004: 120), and (2001, *passim*).

campaign of social violence directed against any immediately shareable experience of the world, the war of annihilation it waged against what Ivan Illich calls ‘vernacular communities’.¹³ He is the self-fulfilling prophecy of the modern state form, which, through four centuries of colonization, forced migration, slavery and exile, has finally managed to perfect in practice the atomization it always presupposed in theory, by stamping out all non-marketized forms of collective belonging. As such, Bloom is not an identity, but a way of giving a name to the paradigmatic *Stimmung* of the age of petrified nihilism: the experience of no longer coming from anywhere, of being a foreigner everywhere, ‘a guest in one’s own family’ (Invisible Committee, 2008: 29–43). In phenomenological terms, it describes the experience of inhabiting a body whose mutilated corporeal schema immunizes it from all meaningful attachments to the people, places, and beings around us. It signals less the absence of all taste or inclination, than a ‘taste for absence’, an *inclination* to nothingness, a way of abstracting or exempting ourselves from any decision on our lived situation (Tiqqun, 2010: 19). It is akin to what Arendt calls ‘the desert’: a habit of becoming spectators of our own experience, of relating to the world *as if* we did not belong to it, as if we were not *party* to it — ‘spectators who look at the time that flies by without any time left, continually missing themselves’ (2005b: 68).¹⁴ In this, Bloom sets the stakes for what messianic destitution must “fulfil”.

Agamben offers an important distillation of the concept, which simultaneously points in the direction of its overturning: Bloom, he writes, is the name for ‘the new anonymous subject, these “whatever singularities” that are emptied out, open for anything, which can diffuse themselves everywhere and yet remain ungraspable, without identity, but re-identifiable at each instant’ (2004: 120). It is decisive to note that the anonymity of this contemporary man without content is not defined by an absence of identity *per se*, but by the presence of a destabilizing *nothingness* that insinuates itself between the subject and each of its

¹³ From the sharing of traditional knowledges such as medicine, contraception and child-rearing, to collective forms of reproduction such as commoning and informal exchange, Ivan Illich shows how the emergence of capitalism implied a ruthless war on any material and linguistic complicity or cooperation that proved incompatible with the wage relation. This entailed a shattering of experience, a replacement of ‘sustenance derived from reciprocity patterns embedded in every aspect of life [with a] sustenance that comes [exclusively] from exchange or from vertical distribution’ (Illich 2013, Ch. 1). For Agamben’s remarks on Illich, see Agamben (2014: 73).

¹⁴ As Arendt observes, the true “political crisis” of our time lies in our inability to even *feel* the depoliticized desert to which we have been consigned, ‘the modern growth of worldlessness, the withering away of everything *between us*’ (Arendt 2005: 201–204).

factual-juridical predicates or qualities. This Nothing is not reducible to a biographical or sociological epiphenomenon, for it touches all who live in our time to greater or lesser degrees. It is the introjected mirror of the anarchic groundlessness of an age in which all the hegemonic fantasies that once stabilized the economy of presence have either withered or been systematically trampled-out. As Reiner Schürmann observes, ‘the rallying point of moderns, their home and focal point — the “I think” — undergoes displacements somewhat in the manner of [...] a childhood memory wandering off in a conversation, continuing, in the new site, but no longer going without saying’ (Schürmann, 2013: 562).¹⁵ The contemporary colonization of interiority by the Spectacle shatters the coherence of the “I” through its incessant proliferation of artificial and abstract (*viz.* uninhabitable) images of selfhood. The emptier these ascriptive socio-institutional predicates become, the more we are pressured to ‘identify’ with them, to the detriment of our own singular reading of the situation. However, at the same time as it empties identities of their historical substance, Bloom’s nothingness allows the subject to be *re*-identified at each moment. It is precisely because our dis-located interiority forces us to remain continually on the lookout for schemas of identification that we harbour the potential for a different mode of reattachment, a different mode of relation: new ways of sharing gestures, of moving together, new practices that would permit us to once again inhabit the spectral world into which we have been born. Bloom does not spell the end of identity *tout court*, but the opening up of a newly non-substantial and purely contextual-strategic relationship to it.

The question posed by contemporary desubjectivation is certainly not “how can we breathe new life into the great political subjectivities of yesteryear?” As Marcello Tari reminds us, ‘the exhaustion of the possibilities of this world also includes the forms of political action that accompanied it’ (Tari, 2016: 7–8, own translation). The sad Trotskyists hocking their century-old workerist newspapers outside Whole Foods offer a routine reminder that, ‘unless we wish to persist in the mode of the undead, as zombies, a political identity that (like this world) has exhausted every possibility can only be laid to rest’ (*ibid.*). Of the mask that revolutionary militancy once was, only fragments and ruins remain. While its courageous legacy is deserving of our respect and admiration, it is Agamben’s

¹⁵ On this point, see Stephanie Wakefield, ‘Reiner Schürmann’s Faultline Topology and the Anthropocene’, in Blumenfeld (2013), Ch. 10: ‘When the great sheet of constellations that fix things in constant presence folds up, closes in on itself, the principial reference still exists, we still have the sense of identity of self with self, but it is dislocated, plurified and decaying’.

view that its operative premises — its historical tasks, but also its image of life and happiness — can no longer be our own.

Our question must be different: how can we imagine a politics that would not be grounded in a pre-existing subject?¹⁶ As Agamben observes, ‘what is often lacking, also [in today’s] movements, is [...] the awareness that every time one takes on an identity one is also subjugated. Obviously this is also complicated by the fact that modern apparatuses not only entail the creation of a subjectivity but also and equally processes of desubjectivation’ (2007a). The real problem is how to *intervene* in this process so as to redirect it toward an increase in our power of thinking, sensing, and acting: ‘what, in the processes whereby a subject somehow becomes attached to a subjective identity, leads to a change, an increase or decrease of his/her power to act?’ (ibid). How, without resubstantialising the subject by means of yet another new-fangled mythologeme, can our anonymity make the ‘leap beyond itself’ that would allow it to be converted into a ‘zone of communal life’ that maintains its own non-coincidence with itself, abiding in the ‘no-man’s-land’ between identity and non-identity (2004: 120). How can the anonymous desubjectivation to which we have been reduced recover a common power that is nonetheless singularly its own? How, *without re-constituting subjectivity*, can we deactivate the fixed vocations to which our social situations consign us, opening them to an anonymous and common *use*? If messianic life describes the experience of a subjectivity ‘only within the framework of a strategy or tactic’, then what is this strategy, and on what gestures does it depend? (2004: 117)¹⁷

II. Against the end of the world

The coup d’état is a nothingness against which we must oppose our own nothingness.

Maurice Blanchot¹⁸

¹⁶ ‘Political theories were always built on the premise that there was a subject bearing some sort of meaning, with certain needs and certain desires connected to them. [Today] it seems very important to me to attempt to re-think political action without the anthropological reference to a subject’, Agamben (2009b). On this point, see also Agamben (2004: 116).

¹⁷ See also (Agamben, 2007a): [T]he outcome of conflicts depends on this: on the power to act and intervene upon processes of subjectivation, in order to reach that stage that I would call a point of ungovernability.’

¹⁸ *Autour du Groupe de la rue Saint-Benoît de 1942 à 1962*, cited in Blanchot (2010: 182 fn.28).

Winning the struggle between the time of the end and the end of time is *the* task allotted to us today and to all who come after us.

Günter Anders¹⁹

If the archaeological significance of messianism consists in its having brought to light for the first time the *arcanum imperii* of the law, its ethical significance lies in the response to it which it enables, the disposition by which it takes up its condition. The fulfilment that characterizes ‘perfected messianism’ has nothing to do with a theological-metaphysical conceit concerning the existence of the Divine.²⁰ Agamben is not a theological thinker. What is at stake, rather, is the search for an ethical and epistemological schema by which a deactivation of the sovereign exception can be enacted from *within* historical time. The Messiah is ‘the figure through which religion confronts the problem of the Law, decisively reckoning with it’ (1999: 163; 1998: 56). What Agamben is after is a non-dialectical schema for confronting and annulling the destructive “emptiness” of the state of exception, of which Bloom’s ethical nullity constitutes the subjective expression. At issue is not the foundation of a new law, but a *mode of relation* to the groundlessness of law under which we already live: messianism relates to the nullity of law through the lens of its “passing-away”. Against the managed disorder of the state of exception and its diffuse ethical paralysis, ‘fulfilled’ or destituent messianism responds by introducing a clarifying disposition that experiences its contact with the world as a call to *decision*.

Prophecy, eschatology, transition

From the earliest phase of his work, Agamben’s theorization of revolutionary violence has centred on the internal form through which it transforms the experience of time (1993: 91). Revolutionary violence, in his view, must not simply usher in but *coincide* with a new temporalization of experience. We should therefore not be surprised to see him claim that the essence of messianic community can only be grasped in terms of the ‘internal form of the time [that Paul] defines as *ho nym Kairos*’ or now-time, the latter being importantly understood as a ‘paradigm of *historical* time’ (2005b: 3).

¹⁹ Anders (2019).

²⁰ ‘I believe the messianic is always profane, never religious’ (2004, 120).

A false alternative has long organized the temporality of the revolutionary theory of action: do we intervene now and accelerate the coming collapse (activism, voluntarism), or must we refuse all separations between ourselves and “the working class” and wait for the masses to act on their own (objectivism, historicism)? Vanguardism, or mass movement? The Great Evening, or the process? Or else do we hedge our bets, by regarding our interventions here and now as positive or negative “prefigurations” of the ideals and practices that will shape the world we wish to see emerge “after” the collapse, in the hopes that our little oases of radical culture will function like seeds that germinate and generalize when the time is ripe, or at least leave us a little better prepared?²¹ At bottom, the debate is theological in origin: do we wait for the coming of the Messiah, and remain in the post God has assigned to us, or do we hasten the second coming, the *eschaton*?²² In either case, the arrival of the Kingdom is construed as an exceptional event; redemption coincides with a sudden and cataclysmic bisection of history by an intransitive and intransigent *other* time that either breaks it in half, or abolishes it.

The Pauline *klēsis* or “calling” responds by dividing this division. In contrast to the polarization of “normal time / suspended time” of the sort one finds not only in Furio Jesi’s *Spartakus*, but likewise in Agamben’s own early account of class violence published the same year, *The Time that Remains* seeks to show that there is another experience of historical time in which its linear or historio-graphical representation of life is, in a certain respect, already “suspended” (although this term will ultimately prove inadequate, as we shall see below).²³ Importantly, if it is already suspended, it is so not *extraneously*, as occurs when the quasi-eternity of revolt deactivates or “mutes” the progressive time of history, but rather *internally* at every moment. Historical time envelops a remainder, a ‘remnant’ that divides the opposition between chronology and “the end of time”, thereby allowing time to be seized upon and brought to an end. As I will argue, the decisive originality of *The Time that Remains* resides in the fact that the division between messianic time and historical time does not assume the exceptional character of a sudden

²¹ For a positive take on prefiguration, see Milstein (2010); on ‘negative prefiguration’, see Bernes (2012); for the hardline objectivist position, see Dupont (2009).

²² On this point, see *The Accused of Tarnac*, ‘Live Communism, Spread Anarchy’, in Blumenfeld (2013: 277).

²³ On Jesi’s theorization of the suspension of historical time, see Aarons (2019b). On Agamben’s early formulation of revolutionary class violence, written the same year as Jesi’s *Spartakus*, see Agamben (2009c).

interruption, nor is it a fact to be instigated or anticipated, but *already* has an existence. If the Kingdom is already here among us, then the apostolic calling is neither the projection of an event to come, nor the effort to instigate one by *fiat* (with the attendant dangers of “technicisation”), but assumes the character of a *response*.²⁴

To what is the calling a response? And what is the nature of this response, what is the messianic vocation?

In *The Courage of Truth*, Foucault reminds us that prophetic epistemology and temporality are marked by a double extraneity, affecting both their relation to speech and their temporal logic. Unable to speak in his or her own name, the prophet’s ‘mouth serves as intermediary for a voice which speaks from elsewhere. [...] He does not reveal without being obscure, and he does not disclose without enveloping what he says in the form of the riddle’ (Foucault, 2011: 15). On the one hand, the prophet announces a message that *originates* elsewhere (“thus speaks Yahweh”); on the other, the message itself *anticipates* an event located elsewhere, in the future, in a time still-to-come. Although he (or she) may insist on having an immediate relation to the spirit of God from whom the message arrives, the prophet ‘receives a word that does not belong to him’ (2002c: 1). Like Rimbaud, who declares in the ‘Drunken Boat’ that he has ‘*seen* what other men believe they have seen’, the prophet *evokes* a truth that cannot itself be presented.²⁵ Prophetic truth arrives in the mode of withdrawal: it is unrealizable in the present, suspended at a distance from us in an “other” world from which it descends. Prophetic time stretches us toward a “coming” time whose reality remains inaccessible, and which nothing in the actual situation could ever suffice to break open. The prophesized event will come *soon*, and we are invited to make use of historical time to prepare ourselves for it. Ultimately, though, what we must do is *wait*.

The “prophetic apparatus” is defined by the twofold condition of mythic “evocation” and temporal deferral. Not unlike the floating indeterminacy of the law’s being-in-force — which is likewise predicated on a ground it can only “evoke” but never present — the vital significance of prophecy lies in its power to position us in relation to a truth we cannot properly *assume*. It allows only two

²⁴ On the concept of ‘technicised myth’, see Aarons (2019a), and Andrea Cavalletti’s introduction to Jesi (2014). On the limitations of Jesi’s concept of revolt, see Aarons (2019b).

²⁵ ...*j’ai vu quelquefois ce que l’homme a cru voir!* ‘The Drunken Boat’, in Rimbaud (2001, 127). On the prophetic character of this formulation, and the mythological machine upon which it relies, see Jesi (2019).

questions in response: “has the prophet seen the truth?” (i.e. is the mythological machine full or empty?); and, if the prophet speaks the truth, “how long must we wait?” (2005: 2).

In the same lecture course, Foucault distinguishes the *prophet* — who speaks not in his own name, but in the name of an ulterior future — from the *parrhesiastes*, who has the courage to say what is true today in his own name (Foucault, 2011: 15). Whereas Foucault did not regard them as fundamentally separable figures, Agamben prisms them apart, identifying his own messianic politics exclusively with the latter (2004: 120).²⁶ The motivation for this separation is less ontological than historical, and serves to highlight a key political dimension of his messianism. There is, Agamben argues, an intimate link between the disappearance of the figure of the Prophet in our contemporary epoch and the exhaustion of a revolutionary politics premised on programmes (or ends) and the Party-form:

The figure of the prophet was that of the political leader until fifty years ago. It has completely disappeared. But, at the same time, it seems to me that *it is no longer possible to think a discourse addressing the future*. It’s the messianic actuality, the *kairos*, the now-time that must be thought. [...] Benjamin writes somewhere that Marx secularized messianic time in the classless society. This is completely true. But at the same time, with all the aporias this engenders — the transitions, etc. — it is a type of snag on which the Revolution failed. We don’t have a model of time available that permits us to think this. (2004: 120, my emphasis)

Agamben’s reading of Paul responds to this exhaustion of futurity by separating the messianic deposition of law from eschatological and transitional logic. The Pauline calling is neither a ‘perpetually deferred’ *eschaton* (the liberal interpretations of Scholem and Derrida, which only mirror the imperfect nihilism of our time) nor is it a ‘transitional time’ situated between two epochs, one from which it departs, the other it strives to fulfil (the “dictatorship” phase of Marxism-Leninism). In the end, both approaches lead to the same impasse: neither can *deliver* or seize hold of the actuality of the experience on which they are nevertheless premised. Either we perpetually delay the decisive moment, or we bend our idea of happiness toward an ‘end’ that seems designed to place it out of reach: ‘every transition tends to be prolonged into infinity and to render

²⁶ The claim that Foucault did not fully separate the two figures of the prophet and the parrhesiast is Agamben’s. While it is perhaps debatable, I will not enter into it here.

unreachable the end that it supposedly produces' (2005b: 70). There is no greater misunderstanding of messianism than to equate the time that "remains" with a waiting, an anticipation of what is to come at some *later* time (2005b: 62).²⁷

To refuse the schema of prophecy means that there is no *preliminary* to communism. Taken to its logical conclusions, this implies that whatever we mean by communism, it clearly cannot refer to a new institutional schema for the distribution of wealth, the organization of labour, or the representational management of society. Strictly speaking, it cannot be an ideal or ideology at all, since this too would have to await its realization in a state of things. A thorough refusal of preliminaries only leaves us with two options: either we renounce the communist project entirely, or else we understand it as an *ethical disposition*, a way of entering into contact with, and being affected by, a common potentiality that is communicated in what is taking place (2015b: 232, 237, 211).²⁸ For those who adopt the latter approach, the exigency to which the term 'communism' responds can only be situated within the occurring of the present, in the concrete situation in which we find ourselves. By contrast, if the time of "transition" leaves it suspended and unreachable, this is because it continues to be understood as a transition *toward* an end. For Agamben, the problem of communism has nothing to do with a future society; it names an ethical process that proceeds from sparks or fragmentary potentials already operative in the present. It is transitional, but not "toward" anything else — it is *pure transition*, the accomplishing of shared worlds in the process of their own construction, and never a *fait accompli*.

From apocalypticism to operative time

Paul is not a prophet, but an apostle. For him, the Messiah has already arrived; the age of the prophets is over. To live in the days of the Messiah, is to live *ho nyn kairos*, in the time of the now. Yet if the prophecy has been concluded, if the decisive event is now behind us, are we not at the end of history? Is time concluded? How can we distinguish the Pauline calling from the apocalyptic announcement of the eschaton?

To live in the apostolic calling is, Agamben tells us, to experience not the 'end of time, but the time of the end' (2002c: 2; 2005b: 62–64). It is 'not the instant in which time ends, but the time that contracts itself and begins to end [...] [i.e.]

²⁷ In spite of its many merits, this is the mistake that frequently unravels Jessica Whyte's otherwise insightful study of Agamben. See Whyte (2013).

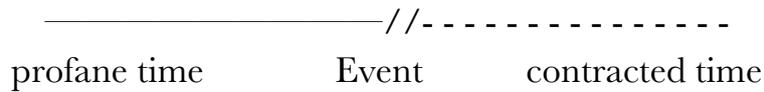
²⁸ See also footnote 56 below.

the time that remains between time and its end' (2005b: 62). What does it mean for time to have *not yet* concluded, but to have *already* “begun to end”?

Messianic time is not a time anticipated, but one that is “seized” and “contracted”, grasped and rendered *habitable*. It is ‘a bit of time taken from the profane that, all of a sudden, is transformed’ (2005b: 120). Since revolutionary violence is bound up for Agamben with the transformation of time, quite a lot rides on the difference between the eschatological concept of the “end” and the messianic “event”. Moreover, the Pauline *hōs mē* (deactivation, revocation) offers the most fleshed-out positive example of destituent power in the ‘Epilogue’ to *The Use of Bodies*. Hence, if ‘it is because messianic *klēsis* caught up in operational time that it can take on the form of the *as not*, the constant revocation of every vocation’, then it is no exaggeration to say that Agamben’s entire conception of destitution hangs on this distinction (2005b: 68). In what follows, I will therefore attempt to work through the argument in detail, before drawing some provisional conclusions in the final section.

As Bergson highlighted already a century ago, the attempt to think time often involves a troublesome reliance on spatial schemata: time is figured as a line, one end of which is represented by the past, the other by the future, with the present forming a caesura down the middle [p—— /_{pr}——f]. If we rely on such a schema, the messianic event will be forced to appear either as one punctual occurrence or “point” among others in the chronological sequence of historical time, or else as the abstract contemplation of the *last* day (the day of Wrath) on which the series is finally abolished (the “end of the line”, as it were). As Agamben observes, this appears to be the alternative presented by the apocalyptic Jewish rabbinic tradition, which associates the distinction of two worlds (*olamin*) with that of two temporal orders (*aiones*). On the one hand, there is the *olam hazzeh*, the chronological time extending from the creation of the world to its conclusion (*aion touto, ho kosmos outos*: this world, this time); on the other, the *olam habba*, the next world to come, the *eschaton* that abolishes the series (*ho aion mellon*) (2005b: 62; 2002c: 2–3). While both *olamin* appear in Paul’s writings, Agamben is insistent that the time to which the apostolic calling responds is neither that of a point on a sequential line, nor that of a world subsequent to history’s conclusion. In neither case could the event, strictly speaking, be *experienced*. The deeper meaning of messianic time is precisely to call into question ‘the very possibility of drawing a clear distinction between the two *olamin*’ (2002c: 3). If it cannot be represented either as a line, point, or “end” of time, this is because the time of the remnant, holds itself out *between* the two.

Still, even if it is neither a point nor an end-point, the “betweenness” of Messianic time would, at face value anyway, still appear to imply a progressive development. For example, in its religious connotation, the idea of “arrival” can easily lend itself to a tripartite division: (t¹) the profane time of *chronos* extends in linear fashion until the event of the resurrection, whereupon (t²) time ‘contracts itself and begins to finish’; henceforth, it “remains” in the *ho nyn kairos* until the *parousia* (t³), or the full presence of the Messiah at the end of time. To represent this schema on a line, we would present a straight line which, broken by a caesura, continues in contracted form until it breaks off:



Given this schema, messianic time could be conceived of as the contracted space “between” the broken points. The *ho nyn kairos* would here refer not simply to the transitional chronological span that falls “after” the resurrection and “before” the *parousia*, but to the mutation of chronological time itself that the event introduces. There is a sense in which Agamben accepts this schema; or rather, he thinks it gets at something essential, namely, that messianic time is ‘not exterior to chronological time’ but is a *portion of secular time* that undergoes a ‘transformative contraction’ (2002c: 3; 2005b: 64). The trouble is that, since this figuration of time remains spatial, it is impossible to appreciate the *vital* significance of this contraction without relating it to the course of the line, which would fall back once again into a form of futural “anticipation”. What can never be grasped in the spatial schema is the reality of its lived experience. Yet the lived experience of transformed time is the core of the revolutionary problematic for Agamben. Another approach must therefore be found.

Agamben turns to the work of linguist Gustave Guillaume for a solution, and in particular to the two studies collected in his book *Temps et verbe* (1929, 1945), which offer the first worked-out theory of what Guillaume calls ‘operative’ or ‘chronogenetic’ time, a time interior to chronological time, on which the latter relies without being able to encompass it representationally in a time-image. While a fuller account of Guillaume’s important influence on Agamben’s work must be reserved for another occasion, I will attempt to outline the essentials here, which concern the presence — within thought and perception — of an *evaluative* and preindividual genetic dimension of experience wherein time has not yet settled into the constituted tense relations that characterize discursive speech and the spatial paradigms of time reliant upon it.

According to Guillaume, traditional linguistics tended to consider language only from the point of view of the meaning-effects that appear at the level of its actuality in speech, by systematizing the formal rules that obtain at the level of its signifying effects in discourse. This overlooks ‘the true reality of a form’ that is not located in the ‘multiple and fleeting effects of meaning that result from its employment [*emploi*]’ but in the ‘operation of thought [...] that presides over its definition in the mind’ (Guillaume, 1968: 132–133).²⁹ The ‘multiplicity of consequences’ that the linguistic sign generates in real speech must be referred back to the ‘secret operations’ in ‘the virtuality of *langue*’ [*la langue virtuelle*] (Guillaume, 1968: 133). These cannot be studied by directly consulting phenomena, but are accessible only by analysis: if the ‘direct observation of sensible phenomena can offer linguistics only “meaning effects” of form’, this is because ‘it only becomes possible at the moment where form has been incorporated into thought [*la forme à pris corps dans la pensée*], which is to say, after its mental expression’. What the direct observation of the actuality of discourse misses is the ‘*preparation of form* [...], the operations of thought that create them’ (ibid, emphasis added). The latter ‘necessarily elude the speaking subject studied by traditional linguistics’, since ‘once we attempt to become aware of these operations, they have already taken place and disappeared’, without leaving any memory of them (Guillaume, 1968: 133). The true domain of temporal form in language is therefore not that of ‘*pensée pensée*’ in which things present themselves already formed and conceived, but what Guillaume describes as the ‘deeper and to some extent pre-existent one of *pensée pensante*’, wherein things — still in their genesis — are not yet sufficiently incorporated to ‘leave an imprint on our memory’ (ibid).

As with Benveniste’s distinction between the *semiotic* and the *semantic* — which forms the basis of Agamben’s conception of ‘infancy’, or the human being’s thrownness into language, and which internally separates us from our own speaking being — for Guillaume the two domains are separated by ‘language itself, which creates, so to speak, the wall between them’ (1993: 51-56; Guillaume 1968: 134). As soon as language is expressed, what we have before us is *pensée pensée*, whereas the *pensée pensante* that gave rise to it is closed and dead. The

²⁹ See also Guillaume (1984). The latter is a collection composed of excerpts from Guillaume’s seminars, and includes several valuable discussions of operative time, especially Part IV, ‘The Act of Language’, and Part IV, ‘Thought and Language’. In an effort to distinguish Guillaume’s conception of *langue* from that of Saussure, editors Hirtle and Hewson render Guillaume’s use of the term as ‘tongue’ (see p.xx-xxi). Finding this unhelpful, I have opted to retain the French term throughout.

constituted actuality of discourse everywhere depends on an ideal systematic plane, the properties and laws of which linguistic analysis must discover. Guillaume therefore proposes to study the existence of expressive forms in their genetic phase, prior to their actualization in speech.³⁰ For this, we must seek, now on the side of thought, the ‘morphology of the inside’ that serves as both the cause and the integrating mechanism of the system’s diachronic transformations.

The spatially-flattened or ‘panoramic’ time-image that we encountered above, and which we represent with the line/point schema, is an image of time in its already-constructed state. What it misses is the experience of time as it is ‘still being constructed in thought’, as well as the various states it must pass through along the way. As Agamben observes, what Guillaume adds to the chronological representation of time is a ‘a projection in which the process of forming the time image is cast back onto the time image itself’:

In so doing, he comes up with a new representation of time, that of chronogenetic time, which is no longer linear but three-dimensional. The schema of chronogenesis thus allows us to grasp the time-image in its pure state of potentiality (time *in posse*), in its very process of formation (time *in fieri*), and, finally, in the state of having been constructed (time *in esse*). (2005b: 66)

Not only speech, but the very experience of action and thought have their genesis in the three-dimensional or triphasic zone of pure praxis or operativity. On the basis of this pre-thetic field composed of virtual or potential problems, there issue *pure acts of chronothesis* or time-positing ‘within which the human mind establishes itself’ (Guillaume, 1984: 7). What is at issue in chronothesis is not a voluntary act carried out by a pre-existing subject, but an act that itself delineates the perceptual coordinates on which the conscious subject relies: in order consciously to construct a representational or linguistic schema of time, chronothesis must

³⁰ To the two “faces” of the phenomenon of language, external and internal, corresponds a methodological distinction between “mechanistic” and “psychological” explications. On the one hand, signs can be grouped into formal systems by virtue of their respective base oppositions and parts of speech. These formal traits can be traced historically or diachronically by attending to the ‘phonetic accidents’ and variations that allow this or that form to become ascendant at a given moment, either within or between languages. However, according to Guillaume, although such a study has its relative scientific validity, it fails to explain the divergences and resistances that give rise to this variation itself. See Guillaume (1968: 1–6).

intercept the field of chronogenesis though what Guillaume calls a ‘prehension’ or ‘cross-cut’:

Chronogenesis is the genesis of the potential to construct time, and chronothesis is the exploitation of this potential as it is being acquired. Every time such potential is exploited, the process of acquiring it is intercepted at a characteristic point and a cross-section taken. Each cross-section thus obtained constitutes a mood. (Guillaume, 1984: 7)

A first decisive consequence of Guillaume’s theory now comes into view: there is no one “synthetic” time in which the mind inheres, but only partial operations of sectioning, interrupting, and cordoning-off. The genesis of the subject is positioned within the ‘transitional operation’ between chronogenetic time and the chronothetic construction of time-images that issue from it, an operation that takes place through our impersonal contact with the problematic potentialities of the situation in which thought finds itself embedded. Chronogenetic time is never itself representable, since the time-images that we produce by *means* of it cannot themselves “say” the time of their own construction.³¹ Consequently, there is, as Agamben puts it, a ‘disjointedness and delay [...] in the very foundation of subjectivity and consciousness’, a ‘lapse’ (2005b: 66–67). If the thought of time and its representation never actually coincide, this is because there is an ‘act of thought’ within us that moves along another time, a ‘time within time — not ulterior but interior — which measures my disconnection with regard to [chronology], my being out of synch and in non-coincidence’ with it (2005b: 67). This delay is not necessarily a sign of a powerlessness on the part of subjectivity, but points instead to an *impersonal activity of evaluation* enveloped within every instance of discourse, representation, and perception, one which is capable — when affirmed — of rendering the experience of the results of action, language, and bodies inoperative. In fact, Agamben will turn things around: it is *only* because operative time is out of synch with chronology, that time can be ‘taken hold of and ‘achieved’ (ibid).

In fact, Guillaume’s thesis is even more radical than we have let on. The concept of chronogenesis refers to a field of tensions out of which issue acts that, prior to speech or representation, *evaluate* the pure potentialities of our situation,

³¹ As Guillaume reminds us, that operative time has no representation does ‘not mean that it has no existence in human thought, but that it exists in thought only as our experience does’. Guillaume (1984: 6).

that seize them and construct sense out of them. At this level, time is not yet unified into a coherent whole or “panorama”, but merges with the very procedure of evaluation itself. Operative time itself *is* an evaluation that coincides completely with the experience of time at its deepest level. This means that, prior to their being posited, neither time nor sense are formally unified or systematized, but are bound up in a partial process or “operation” that synthesizes and constructs germinal forms out of meaning-potentials, gathering shards of time. It is for this reason that — in an extremely bold assertion — Guillaume later follows his own argument to its logical conclusion: ‘the representation of time differs only because the representation of space differs’ (Guillaume, 1984: 7). In other words, the shape of the time-images inscribed in our language depend upon the regional and historical shape of our lived *world*, whose meaning-potentials they respond to.

There is a common *World* only at the level of representation; at the level of experience, there are *worlds*, and the time-images that proceed on their basis tacitly testify to the genetic plurality that they simultaneously efface in their actuality. At this point, we must draw the unavoidable conclusion: the time that is seized, the time of evaluation from which all overt external action proceeds, is never a unified time, but is irreducibly *fragmentary*, modulated in accordance with the encounter between thought and its lived situation (it will be recalled that what Agamben calls a “remnant” is neither general nor particular, but the division of this difference — a fragment).

Restoration through fragmentation

Fragmented time is ‘the only real time, the only time we have’ (2005b: 68). It is the time by means of which we construct the meaning of the situation in which we find ourselves, on the basis of the ‘meaning potentials’ of sense that it envelops at a virtual level. If ethics for Agamben has a “visionary” component, this is because what is in question here is the fluctuating genesis of our *attention* to our lived situation, an attention on the basis of which we first of all come to be able to speak and act. In what Guillaume refers to as the ‘viewing universe’ of lived time, what we “see” are not the constituted forms that we eventually become conscious of, but the preparation of form itself; not possibility as the abstract and

probabilistic mirror of the factual given, but *possibilities of life*.³² If operative time is tri-phasic, the order of its genesis refers,

- (1) to an evaluation of the *liveable*, the *thinkable*, and the *sayable*;
- (2) to the ‘exploitation’ of this potential that is *expressed* as possibilities of life, shards or fragments of ‘living form’ in the process of being assembled and evaluated (life *becoming-form*, or “assembled evaluations”);³³ and finally:
- (3) to their actualization in this or that act, statement, gesture, or representation.

At the level of operative time, it is not yet possible to detach the form of time from the time of thought’s own lived operation, since the formal division between *quid facti?* and *quid juris?* has not yet been accomplished — it will be so only at the moment of its interruption or ‘sectioning’ by chronothetic prehension (Guillaume, 1984: 6). We might say, following David Lapoujade’s felicitous formulation that, in its first two phases, operative time dramatizes a different question: *quid vitae?* (Lapoujade, 2017: 32–38). This question receives its answer not, first of all, through the explicit representational time-image that eventually results from it, but is already dramatized by our mode of attending to the *liveable*, the *thinkable*, and the *sayable*. This dramatization, which affects our body like a *clinamen*, is the living soil of messianic ethics:

If every body is affected by its form-of-life as by a *clinamen* or a taste, the ethical subject is that subject which constitutes-itself in relation to this *clinamen*, the subject who bears witness to its tastes, takes responsibility for the mode in which it is affected by its inclinations.

³² For a usage of this term that resonates with our present reading, see Zourabichvili (2017: 156-157): ‘[A] possibility of life expresses a mode of existence. [...] It is never a signification or a collection of significations. It is an evaluation: not simply the evaluation of the possibilities of life, once we have already apprehended them as such; but the possibility of life itself as evaluation, a singular manner of evaluating or apportioning the good and the bad, the distribution of affects. A possibility of life is always a difference. The invention of new possibilities of life therefore presupposes a new way of being affected. [...] Politics is therefore first of all an affair of perception.’

³³ This corresponds to what Guillaume calls ‘acts of expression’ (1984: 6).

Modal ontology, the ontology of the how, coincides with an ethics (2015b: 232).³⁴

There is no “attention in general”, only this or that way in which we are led to seize upon, and are seized by, the potentialities of the pre-individual milieu from which thought and gesture draw their power, in this or that factual situation. Every lived perception envelops a selection and distribution of the interesting/uninteresting, alluring/repugnant, a sensitivity to this or that set of signs, a characteristic way of being affected by our contact with the world, etc. Between the virtual potentiality of chronogenesis and the constituted actuality of representation, there is the expression of *possibilities of life*, the larval forms dramatized by our pre-individual attention to our situation, which draw together shards of time edge-to-edge, fragment-to-fragment. It is within the frame or coordinates opened up by these expressive forms that representational time-images are in each case inscribed; they draw up the logical-existential plane or zone within which the human mind establishes itself. As Agamben observes, all attention ‘brushes up against an impersonal power, something both surpassing us and giving us life’ (2004: 124).³⁵ It is at this level — always singular, always situational — that what we have in common must be sought.

How does this impersonal activity of evaluation bear upon the messianic calling in its difference from the prophetic apparatus? How does the concept of chronogenesis allow us to complicate the time-image of politics?

As Agamben argues, to live in the apostolic calling is to experience not the ‘end of time, but the time of the end’; it is ‘not the instant in which time ends, but

³⁴ The chief disagreement between *Tiqqun* and Agamben concerns whether the singular ethical “assumption” of this *clinamen* across asymmetrical forms-of-life can be adequately grasped by the grammar of war. Whereas *Tiqqun* identifies the perspective of the political with civil war understood as ‘the free play of forms-of-life [...], the principle of their coexistence’ (Tiqqun 2010: 32), for Agamben *stasis* remains but one threshold of politicization among others, but does not exhaust the field of politics. At the same time, and while it is beyond the scope of this article to pursue this question thoroughly, it seems to me equally certain that the relation between forms-of-life cannot be reduced to a problem of “democratic” tolerance. For this reason, I cannot agree with Sergei Prozorov’s recent claim that ‘the political meaning of the concept of form-of-life consists in the reconstruction of democracy in terms of affirmative biopolitics’ (Prozorov 2017: 154).

³⁵ Among clearest statements of how Agamben understands this pre-individual ‘zone of non-consciousness’ may be found in his essay ‘Genius’ (2007b: 9-18). His concept of this ‘impersonal’ or ‘opaque’ zone draws upon Deleuze’s concept of a plane of immanence (1999: 220-240), Simondon’s theory of individuation (2007b: 8-19) and Furio Jesi’s practice of ‘constitutive esotericism’ (2019b; 2002a: 89-92; 2007b: 113-114).

the time that contracts itself and begins to end'. The meaning of this contracted remnant may now be specified: it is operative time that insinuates itself in chronological time, 'working and transforming it from within' (2002c: 2). This time exhibits a 'uni-dual structure [...] comprised of two heterogeneous times, one *kairos* and the other *chronos* [...], coextensive, but which cannot be added together' (2005b: 62–64). The prefix "uni-" should not mislead us: messianic time is not unified in itself but refers to an individuating temporal form (a shard, fragment, or 'remnant') that has *not yet divorced and detached itself* from lived experience. If the Pauline calling is not a 'third aeon' situated between two *olamin*, but rather fractures or 'divides' the representational division between the present and the "end", thereby causing chronological time to 'begin to end', the destituent ethical gesture that affirms it refers to a specific sort of comportment in which we seize upon our representation of chronology and 'take it for a remnant', thereby *restoring form* to its internal fragmentation (2005b: 83).³⁶ If messianic *kairos* is nothing other than 'seized *chronos*', that is because it refers to a gesture that restores our lived experience of time to the partiality of a form-under-construction, and which has the effect of destituting the illusion of a unitary historical World. *To inhabit messianic time coincides with the gesture of fragmenting time*. It is to strip representational time of its power to generate the illusion of a *single* common world, the mask of totality that allows it to conceal, in plain sight, the evaluative asymmetries that continuously clash within it. Messianism is neither "another time" that would signal the total effacement of chronology, nor "just another day homogenous with the others", but a way of seizing upon the operative time that presses upon chronology from within it, its 'internal pulsation', in order to fragment it (2005b: 72).

Agamben reproaches the revolutionary tradition with failing to distinguish between messianic and apocalyptic time. The vital significance of apocalypticism lies in its capacity to 'generate a kind of time, in which we dwell, that in itself prevents us from experiencing it'.³⁷ Once the discrepancy between the experience of time and its representation is taken into account, the eschatological notions of "progress", "development", and the "end of history" are all shown to stem from a common amputation or impotence. Under the guise of optimism or "hope", they work to maintain us in a condition of passivity.

³⁶ In spite of many other agreements, I therefore cannot follow Roberto Mosciati in his recent characterization of Agamben's ethics as reliant on an ontology of 'amorphousness'. (Mosciati 2019: 50).

³⁷ The quotation is from Giorgio Manganelli. Cited in Agamben (2005b: 70).

For instance, reflecting on the recent climate strike movement headed by Greta Thunberg, Agamben criticizes not the movement itself, but the blind faith that certain of its participants appear to have in the power of scientific prediction, which allows the latter to assume a markedly prophetic and eschatological posture:

Like any religion, even the religion of science could not do without an eschatology, that is, an apparatus that, by keeping the faithful in fear, strengthens their faith and, at the same time, ensures the dominion of the priestly class. Apparitions like those of Greta are, in this sense, symptomatic: Greta blindly believes in what scientists prophesy and expects the end of the world in 2030, just as millenarians in the Middle Ages believed in the imminent return of the Messiah to judge the world. (2019a)

If apocalypticism traps us within a form of ethical paralysis, this is not only because it asks us to wait on what is still-to-come, but because to orient ourselves around the “end of time” is already to begin *too late*. It offers us only a knowledge of time in its already-constructed state — a knowledge that, in this case, is then outsourced to professional prophets through a thinly-veiled secularization of the priestly function — and which therefore cannot possibly be *experienced*.³⁸ By substituting a time-*image* for our experience of time, apocalypticism directs action toward an uninhabitable abstraction, distancing us from the potentialities of our own lived situation, which alone can be seized-upon. Since *there is no* experience of the “end of time”, the horizon of action is always infinitely postponed. In short, there is only an “end” of time provided that time has first of all been conceived of as a homogeneous, spatialized panorama. It is the same with the forced choice between “activism/mass movement”, “voluntarism/objectivism”. In both cases, it is first necessary to imagine the locus of action as a homogeneous temporal field, which will either develop sequentially of its own internal accord (the unfolding of the historical contradiction) or else must be subjected to a shocking interruption aimed at “hastening the end”. Like all time-images, their alleged self-sufficiency has in reality the status of a mutilated idea, an illusion premised on the effacement

³⁸ For this reason, Kelly Oliver’s recent claim that Agamben has ‘replace[d] the opposition between man and animal with the opposition between religion and science’ (i.e. that he champions a religious discourse against science) misses the essential, namely, their common participation in the prophetic apparatus. See Oliver (2009: 239). For a critique of Oliver’s argument, see Mosciati (2017: 574–575).

of their own genetic conditions of emergence. Too often, once we restore the vital significance of the evaluation that attended their genesis we find the same ethical impotence of a need to “believe” in another world, the believer having at some point or another become incapable of *assuming* this one.

In fact, the problem should be reversed: when we consider the genesis of time-images in experience, it is not operative or messianic time that interrupts chronology; rather, it is chronological time that interrupts, sections-off, and detaches itself from the immanent multiplicity of operational time that constructs it. Only once we have detached ourselves from the affirmative evaluations of operative time *that we are*, only once we have placed our own becoming in parentheses, does it then become necessary to imagine political possibility through the schema of a cataclysmic rupture of chronology. In reality, such a rupture can never truly be lived, but can only assume the status of an abstract article of faith. Both activism and historicism therefore betray a common reliance on the hypothesis of a global or encompassing chronological time, yet the latter is, in reality, merely a conclusion divorced from its premises.

Just as Guillaume’s methodology proceeds by converting ‘the observed result back into [...] a genetic process’, Agamben’s messianism decomposes the unity of homogeneous time, not by breaking it in half or suspending it through a prophetic or mythic epiphany arriving from elsewhere, but by exhibiting the nullity of the unity of representational time, thereby allowing time once again to be seized upon and fulfilled (2005b: 70). It is therefore precisely because chronological time is defined by an amputation of its internal multiplicity that messianic destitution can take the form of a *restoration through fragmentation*.

It has been a perennial mistake of the far-Left to believe that the beginning of politics lies in posing the “correct” question, of extracting ourselves from the corruption of the world by initiating an epistemological break that will free our thought from ideology. In fact, such ideological beginnings always begin too late, and only re-entrench an abstract and disembodied conception of politics that deprives us in advance of the very tissue of what is shareable between us. In the long run, this mistake is only the latest symptom of the amputated image of political life on which the Western tradition is founded. The West construed politics as ‘the assembly that [...] gathers all human beings *in abstraction from their respective worlds*’, disconnected from ‘the network of things, habits, words, fetishes, affects, places, solidarities that make up their world, their sensible world, and that

gives them their specific substance'.³⁹ It was in keeping with this image that Hobbes began his *Elements of Law* by first asking us to annihilate the world, in order to then proceed to its nominalist reorganization at the level of images and concepts alone (Hobbes 2008: I, Ch. 1, 8). The problem of community, of the *common*, must begin by reversing this Hobbesian gesture. This implies that we learn how to disentangle the experience of a collective *attachment* (loyalty, reciprocity, trust, credence, a shared experience of power and possibility, as well as mutual defence and protection) from its juridical entanglements in the *arcanum imperii* of sovereignty (2005b: 115–117).

The problem is not merely archaeological, but bears immediately on how we approach ethical questions and conflicts in everyday life. Every question we explicitly pose is already a response to a *way of seeing* what lies before us — the dramatization of a regime of attention. If we were to take this messianic insight seriously, then what matters is not the identities that power has ascribed to us, nor who subscribes to the same “radical” or ideological discourse, for neither tells us anything decisive about how that person in fact perceives the lines of force arrayed before us here and now. What really matters is, within a substantive situation, who *sees* the same lines of force, whose attention is drawn to the same potentialities as ours is? Whose gestures respond to a problem in a way that resonates with our own? Whose dispositions testify to the presence of an impersonal demand that places us on a common plane? Only substantive situations, with their worldly entanglements, can tell us this — provided we learn how to look within them correctly. And, often enough, it will not be those whom we might have expected.

Critics often accuse Agamben of being vague or abstract when he proposes we redefine politics as the site in which ‘the event of anthropogenesis — the becoming human of the human being — is still happening’ (2015: 208). In fact, there is nothing more concrete: it means not only that politics is exhaustively situational, but that our situation does not have the finality or coherence we often attribute to it. What messianism “achieves” is not a magical transfiguration of this world into another one, but a change in our mode of *contact* with this one. Agamben’s message is this: stop waiting for another world, learn how to *look* within your situation for the potentialities that allow you to *hold a world in common*, and respond to their call by seizing upon them. In this way, he directs us to where we already are, and tells us something simple: the world is *ours*, but only ‘for *use as not-ours*’ (Hurley, 2018: 5). What there is of communism will be worked-out here

³⁹ Anonymous, “The Call” (2003). The text is a collectively-authored manifesto written in Rennes, France, in 2003, the title of which consciously indicates its messianic intention.

and now, in our capacity to *perceive* a common world and to engage our concrete situation on the basis of this shared perception through a common use without ownership.

All perception envelops lived forms. It is the imperfect nihilism of our time that, by rendering all gestures ‘unrealizable’, by making all futurity unthinkable, maintains us, suspended, apart from them. If revolutionary violence must enact and coincide with a transformation of time, and if the theory of destituent potential constitutes Agamben’s contribution to such a theory, it is because the general movement of a destituent ethics consists in subjecting the unity of chronology to a movement of decomposition, a positive fragmentation of *the World* (singular) that exhibits its fictitious unity, returning the Nothing to nothing. The asymmetry of operative time with respect to chronology provides the transcendental condition for a destituent elaboration of *common sensible worlds* (plural). Yet, what is still needed is a gesture through which to *assume* this time, to restore contact with the *preparation of form* that our attention to the world, our lived experience, already envelops within it. This is precisely the significance of the Pauline *hōs mē*, which functions like a ‘perceptual machine’, a regime of attention designed to dislocate our ascriptive historical vocations and identities (e.g. our impoverished conception of happiness as “self-interest”) and to restore our contact with the operational time of a world-in-construction.⁴⁰

The destituent gesture

Let us return to what Agamben regards as “our question,” which we posed at the end of Part I: given the desubjectivation to which Bloom attests, can we think a politics that would not depend on a resubstantialisation of the subject? What would political polarization look like if we were to destitute both the identity of the insurgent *and* the resubjectivising pole of the “enemy”? Can we think a politics in which the subject is subject only of its own desubjectivation?

Paul says, ‘let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called [*en tē klēsei he eklēthē*]. Art thou called being a slave? care not for it: but if mayest be free, use it rather’ (1 Corinthians 7: 17–22 in Agamben, 2005b: 19). The elementary misunderstanding of this passage would be to see it as telling us to wait for the coming of the Messiah, to remain patient and docile, in the hope of a future redemption. On the contrary, the Pauline gesture consists precisely in *not sidestepping* the situation we find ourselves in. That there is no preliminary to

⁴⁰ On this usage of the term “perceptual machine,” see Moses Dubruška, “Preface,” in Rafanelli i Orta (2017: 18–20)

communism means that it is a potentiality in every situation, anywhere time takes form in a factual condition. This is the first point: “to remain” means to begin not from an ideal state of political action, the hallowed moment in which the time is “ripe”, but from right where we are, from the factual condition in which we find ourselves.

What does it mean to “begin” from the calling we are given? How should we relate to the roles, identities, and social determinations to which this world has consigned us?

Paul describes the messianic event as follows:

brethren, time contracted itself, the rest is, that even those having wives may be as not [*hōs mē*] having, and those weeping as not weeping, and those rejoicing as not rejoicing, and those buying as not possessing, and those using the world as not using it up. For passing away is the figure of this world. But I wish you to be without care. (1 Cor. 7: 29–32 in Agamben, 2005b: 23)

Messianic life lives its worldly vocations “as not”. The *hōs mē* does not oppose one referent, predicate or ideology with another (“anarchism” versus “capitalism”), nor does it ‘entail substituting a less authentic vocation with a truer vocation’ (2005b: 23). Nor, finally, does it refuse to speak, remaining in silent withdrawal from all reference to itself or to the world, as if in contemplation of an obscure God awaiting us at the end of history. Instead, it induces a movement which allows the subject to place its predicates in *contact* with the operative time of its lived experience of the situation, the time they take to be constructed. At issue is an ‘anaphoric gesture’ that induces an ‘immobile shifting’ in our relation to our own identities (2005b: 22–23).⁴¹ The term “immobility” should not mislead us: it signals not that nothing has occurred, but rather that what has occurred has not based itself on an ulterior or presupposed ground. If the *hōs mē* is immobile, this is because the messianic vocation has no external or particular content of its own. It does not construct a new political or mythic identity to replace the ones we are offered: it is ‘nothing but the repetition of those same factual or juridical conditions’ (2005b: 23).

The only way in which a ‘movement *sur place*’ can induce a change is if the situation in which it operates is already out-of-place, dis-located, outside of itself.

⁴¹ Cf. Agamben (2004: 121): It is a “question of thinking a flight that would imply no evasion, a movement on the spot, *in the situation itself*” (my emphasis).

As we have seen, since Bloom is nothing other than a dislocation of all identity, it is to this condition that the Pauline *hōs mē* responds. Through it, our vocation does not change; rather, a repetition takes place that introduces a difference in our relation to it, one that — by introducing a new perspective upon it, a *new evaluation* — ‘works it from within and hollows it out, nullifying it in the very gesture of maintaining and dwelling in it’ (2005b: 24). That a repetition is needed in order for this revocation to take place indicates the origin of the change: it is by re-attaching our factual condition to the singular evaluation of the meaning-potentials that pass between us and the world, that we succeed in *situating* the nothingness of our identities within the operative time of the world. It is by inhabiting our condition, by restoring (in thought) the operative time it takes to construct itself, that we ‘revoke [our] condition from top to bottom’ (ibid).

The *hōs mē* is the *becoming-situational*, the becoming-operative, the becoming-practice of the world. To ‘inhabit’ is not to negate our condition, but, first of all, to exhibit the always-partial and incomplete operations on which its power relies, and thereby to win a *point of entry* (a “small door”) into our historical epoch through which a strategic perspective can be taken up. If *kairos* is nothing other than “seized *chronos*”, its role cannot be to exhibit a deeper or “truer” meaning to us, but to allow our non-coincidence with our ascriptive identities to be *felt* and affirmed. By allowing us to “dwell” in our condition, the *hōs mē* enacts a peculiar sort of relation, one which *distances* us from time-images of ourselves, by *de-distancing* us from the time of their construction.

While Agamben turns to medieval grammar for an explanation (2005b: 24), Marcello Tarì offers a fruitful example of this tensor in the context of the revolutionary tradition. On the one hand, militant revolutionary subjectivity will certainly not return the way it left — the exhaustion of the possibilities of our world also brings with it the exhaustion of the subject that struggled within this framework. However, as what Guattari called the ‘winter years’ of the 1980’s and ’90’s demonstrated, such exhaustion can lead to the dangerous temptation to discard the problem of revolution *tout court*, to throw the baby out with the bathwater, ending up in a tacit apology for the status quo. Against this slippage toward reformism or quietism, Tarì points to the need simultaneously to assume *and* to nullify the identity of the revolutionary, to nullify it without distancing ourselves from it:

Let’s be careful to not pit ourselves *against* the militant, whose history deserves our respect. Instead, let us adopt the Pauline strategy of the “as not”: militants are *as not* militants [...]. In the first place, this would

mean freeing those who live in that form from the obligation of being *someone*, or, what amounts to the same thing, to live *as if* they were something they are not, something never really present but positioned ahead of them as an exterior end. To live “as not” means for the militant to dissolve the spell that invests him in an *infinite task* and an *absolute delegation*. Mask and face can no longer be superimposed and separated at will, at least if we do not wish to repeat the tragedy of the professional revolutionaries [...]. There is no need, therefore, to flee our vocation. Militancy, as the philosopher might say, can be “made use of”. It must be placed in tension with revolutionary temporality, deactivating its inclination to become a tyrannical identity, a form separate from life, the conducting thread of a moral substance from which one proceeds by means of gestures and behaviour so easily separable from the subject who performs them. (Tari, 2016: 8)

However, if an “exhibition” of the nullity of our identities were the only aim, deconstruction’s deferral of all presence would be a satisfying strategy. This is not Agamben’s view: the introduction of non-coincidence into chronological time through the restoration of its “contact” with operative time does not simply allow our factual identities to appear as the “masks” that they are; it also allows them to be seized upon, inhabited, and thereby *decided*. The messianic calling is not a perpetual deferral of decision, a distantiation of the subject from all identity.⁴² On the contrary, by introducing a non-coincidence into the ascription of predicates to our life (worker, queer, anarchist, “terrorist”, etc.), the *hōs mē* nullifies language’s allusion to its own pre-existing ground, transposing our relation to these determinations onto a field of ‘pure praxis’ (2005b: 28). Nor should the ‘revocation of every vocation’ that ‘nullifies the entire subject’ be understood, in the fashion of contemporary left-communism, as a process of ‘self-abolition’ (2005b: 41). Instead of abolishing the subject, messianism transforms the experience of identification into a *problem* to be broached exclusively from within a situational strategy. When Agamben writes that the ‘messianic vocation is not a right, nor does it furnish an identity’, we may understand him as saying that *identity is never wider than its deployment within a situation*, where every situation refers to a field of operations in which we are called, not to stake a “claim” to legitimacy, but to take up a *position* (2005b: 41).

⁴² On the “thwarted messianism” of Derrida, see Agamben (2005b: 103).

Conclusion

How, in the process of deserting one's own ascriptive identity and vocation, does Agamben imagine an experience of community emerging among others? How does one pass from the messianic ethical gesture to a destituent politics? By way of conclusion, I would like to sketch four provisional traits of such a politics:

(i) From the asymmetry of messianic time within history flows an *asymmetrical model of conflict*. Just as we must be “in but not beholden to” history, where it becomes necessary to fight, we must fight obliquely, rather than head-on, and with a different idea of the meaning and stakes of war itself. For this reason, destituent partisanship does not confront the state directly, but only from a perspective of intimate exteriority. Instead of defining the community of resistance negatively through its opposition to its enemy, it is a matter of seeking a genuinely autonomous premise for collective life, an asymmetry between incommensurable ideas of life, of happiness, and of the meaning of collective power, and of discovering the *gestures* that permit us to inhabit them (1996: 59, 114). As Fred Moten recently put it, we must ‘organize ourselves in relation to ourselves, before we organize ourselves in relation to them’ (Moten, 2018). However, even once we do, the aim cannot be to seize the offices of power and to replace an illegitimate totality with a legitimate one, but to affirm the autonomous and positive value of the fragment, and to expand it outwards.

(ii) *Zones of inhabitation*. The messianic *klēsis* or “calling” does not negate existing law and social institutions in order to constitute new ones a moment later, but ‘coincides completely and constitutively with their destitution’ (2015b: 277). At the same time, once the violence that deactivates bourgeois society ceases to be conceived as ‘maieutic’, i.e. as resulting in a product or ‘work’, it loses its strictly negative or destructive character and becomes a process that we immediately *inhabit*.⁴³ If destitution is not the prelude to a future order, but the very means through which a common idea of life becomes liveable, than the existence of the messianic community cannot have the status of a substantive: it cannot be a factual event or ‘state’ that occurs at a given moment or at which we have finally ‘arrived’, but names the experiential process through which time is actively seized

⁴³ On Agamben's earlier view of revolutionary violence as a destructive maieutic process of self-abolition, a perspective eclipsed and abandoned by the theory of destituent power, see Agamben (2009c). On the ethical significance of inhabiting and inhabitation, see Agamben (2019c): “To inhabit means to create, to conserve and intensify habits and customs, that is, ways of being” (my translation).

upon and constructed from fragment to fragment. Its modal exteriority vis-à-vis the reigning order is won not by abruptly suspending historical time but by *intensely* inhabiting it through non-coincidence, by moving along *another plane* of perception, informed by another idea of happiness and living.

(iii) *Shared perception*. As Agamben insists, if messianic communism cannot locate what is “common” between singular beings in an abstract ideological unity introduced from without, yet nor can it be premised on the ‘free association’ of a ‘union of egoists’ (thereby re-entrenching their separateness), the only alternative is to *displace the centrality of the subject altogether* (2005b: 32–33). It is not the individual’s egoic desires, nor their ideological agreements that form the basis of a common plane of perception, but the *world* to which their perception attends and around which it is oriented. At the centre of the communist project lies a *shared perception of the world* that outstrips individuals, yet which exists only in the crossing and recrossing of their mutual encounter with each other, *in situ*. This cannot assume the status of an ideal form of political organization or society that we then attempt to realize in practice, but has the character of a *response* to the experience of potentiality harboured by our encounter with our situation, and with one another. If there is no communism without the existence of ‘communes’, the latter must be understood not as a factual institution or a “collective” *oikos* but as an ethical process through which diverse individuals come together and make a decision to *face the world* together, come what may. A communist world is nothing other than the *attentive gathering* or “composition” of convergent processes of desertion that allows them to co-exist across their singular differences in a mode of communion that Agamben calls ‘exile’ (2015b: 234–39).⁴⁴

(iv). *Exile*. From a certain point of view, the concept of exile represents the pinnacle of the Homo Sacer series, since it explains how messianic community is able to reconcile the singular and the common. According to a first and more loose sense of the term, to *situate* politics is always to “exile” ourselves from the petrified nihilism of classical politics. For Agamben, such exile is not a renunciation of political life, but is in fact the point of departure for a new image of politics: ‘exile from politics cedes its place to a politics of exile’ (2015b: 326). However, in a more technical sense, exile names the process whereby the restoration of operative time at the individual level opens onto the plane of ethical composition with others. As we have seen, the messianic destitution of identity is the process through which we depose our historical vocations, press into our operative evaluations or “form of life”, and remain stuck to them. Toward the

⁴⁴ On the concept of ‘composition’ in territorial struggle, see Mauvaise Troupe (2018: Ch. 3).

end of *The Use of Bodies*, and following a neo-Platonic turn of phrase, Agamben will interpret this process as the “exile of one alone to one alone” [*phygè monou pros monon*], a process through which we become “inseparable from ourselves” (2015: 236).⁴⁵ The difficulty lies in understanding how becoming ‘inseparable’ from myself — i.e. from the impersonal evaluative *presence to the world* that configures the space of my consciousness — can form the basis of my cohesion with others. How does the messianic perceptual machine not collapse into a subjectivism or individualism? Here Agamben will engage in a delicate conceptual manoeuvre: on the one hand, he decomposes the notion of form-of-life into ‘singular’ points of entry (‘side doors’), yet he *immediately* (i.e. without any mediating representation) links them to one another through what he calls ‘contact’:

it is in a contact — that is, in a void of representation — and not in a relation that forms-of-life communicate. The ‘alone by oneself’ that defines the structure of every singular form-of-life also defines its community with the others. And it is this *thigein*, this contact that the juridical order and politics seek by all means to capture and represent in a relation. Western politics is, in this sense, constitutively ‘representative’, because it always already has to reformulate contact into the form of a relation. It will therefore be necessary to think politics as an intimacy unmediated by any articulation or representation: human beings, forms-of-life are in contact, but this is unrepresentable because it consists precisely in a representative void, that is, in the deactivation and inoperativity of every representation. To the ontology of non-relation and use there must correspond a non-representative politics.

‘Alone by oneself’ is an expression of intimacy. We are together and very close, but between us there is not an articulation or a relation that unites us. We are united to one another in the form of our being alone. (2015b: 237)

What we share always departs from what is most singular in us, and never from the encompassing unity of a homogeneous condition. It is from the moment that

⁴⁵ At an ‘individual’ level, this ethical movement of exile is characterized as an “intimacy without relation”, since, having overturned our separation from the operative time that *we are*, from the evaluation of the liveable and the tolerable that envelops and develops itself in our contact with the world, there is precisely no sense in which we can speak of a “relation” between our form of life and ourselves — ‘our’ life is inseparable from our form of life.

we refuse to be separated from our singular *form of life* that we pass through the side door that allows us to compose a *form-of-life* with others. It is precisely what is singular in us that most calls to be shared, since this is never what belongs to me “peculiarly”, but what ‘attaches me to the world, and which is therefore not reserved for me, [having] nothing to do with a private property nor with what is supposed to define an identity’ (Anonymous, 2003). At the limit, “what there is to be shared” is not a “what” at all, since it is not an “X” detached from us, but our *way* of entering into contact with the world. The commune in exile proceeds through the sharing of our own singular mode of coming-into-presence. It is only by assuming this singular “how” of our existence that we come into contact with the shared power of encounter with other beings, allowing a compositional matrix to unfold between us that will nonetheless be destroyed by any effort to “constitute” or represent it.

There is no integral communist life, nor was there ever: communism is the free play of forms-of-life, from the point at which the latter manage to take on a local and experimental *consistency without constituency*. What Agamben’s ethics offers us is not a new social order, but a side door by which we flee the disaster of the present course of the world. The result is not a ‘chronologically more originary unity, nor a new and superior unity, but something like a *way out*. [...]. [I]f one reaches it and holds oneself there in it, the machine can no longer function’ (2015b: 239).



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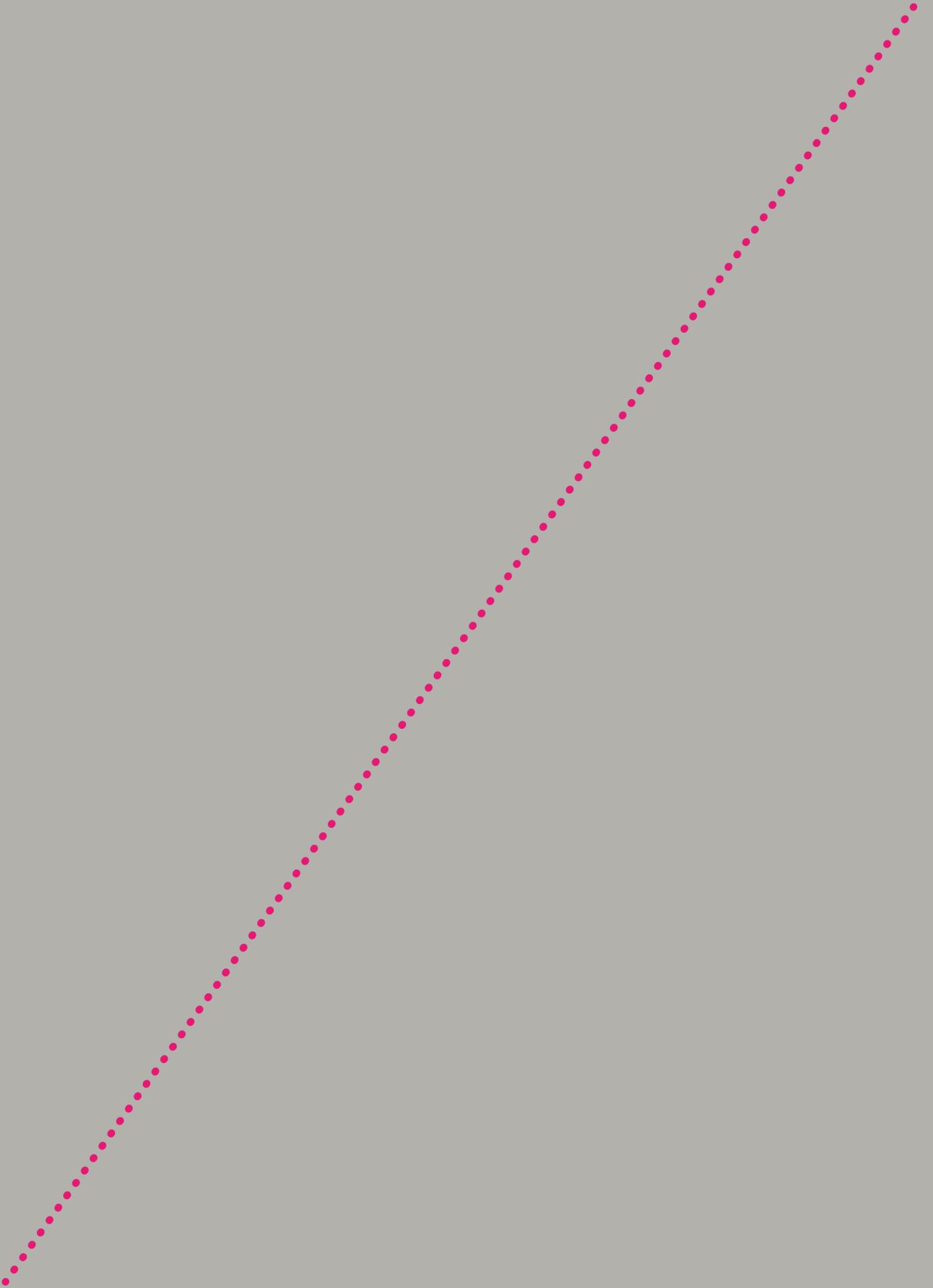
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Before Agamben: Towards a Critique of Inoperativity in Luciano Bianciardi's *La vita agra*

Angelo Nizza

Abstract

This article offers a critical interpretation of inoperativity by drawing a comparison between the work of Giorgio Agamben and that of Luciano Bianciardi. The methodological strategy adopted here is to blur the line between philosophy and literature in order to show the ambivalent character of the inoperative form-of-life. The aim of this article is twofold. On the one hand, I intend to demonstrate how Bianciardi's narrative anticipates some fundamental principles of Agamben's theory of inoperativity. On the other, my aim is to identify two contradictory meanings expressed by this notion: (1) inoperativity as a strategy to free humans from capitalism; (2) inoperativity as an epistemological tool to describe the transformation of labour in the age of linguistic capitalism. In order to do so, this article focuses on the *Homo Sacer* project and *La vita agra* (*It's a Hard Life*) as the points of references for a discussion of inoperativity in the works of Agamben and Bianciardi, respectively. The first part of the article is devoted to an examination of Bianciardi's novel, addressing both his *philosophy of work* and his *philosophy of inoperativity*. The second part presents an analysis of inoperativity in Agamben, beginning from its Aristotelian genesis. Finally, the last section posits the double meaning of inoperativity: its promise of freedom is accompanied by the actuality of domination and submission. The wager of this article is that it is through a *critique of inoperativity* that we can achieve new strategies for the emancipation of active life from capitalist society.

Keywords: Language, Work, Inoperative life, Active life, Capitalism



1. Introduction

In this article my purpose is to explain how the Italian writer Luciano Bianciardi (1922–1971) theorises *inoperativity* starting from a lucid and coherent diagnosis of the metamorphosis of labour in late capitalism. And, moreover, I intend to present his proposal on inoperative life as a theoretical project that anticipates some of the reasons contained in Giorgio Agamben's mature philosophy.

Contaminating philosophy with literature and thus broadening inoperativity, the aim is to propose a critical interpretation of this theme, which, in both authors and especially in Bianciardi, seems to show an ambivalent feature. On the one hand, inoperativity constitutes the key-concept for the construction of an anthropology finally freed from the market economy; on the other, it represents a valid epistemological criterion for describing the new strategies used by capital to subdue living labour.

The article is developed in three stages. The first aims to present Bianciardi's most important novel entitled *La vita agra* (1962, *It's a Hard Life*), highlighting the links between the *philosophy of work* and the *philosophy of inoperativity* (§ 2, 3, 4, 5). The second stage focuses on the notion of *argia*, which is the word used by Greek philosophy to describe inoperativity, and it is divided in two ways: Aristotle's way (§ 6) and Agamben's way (§ 7). Finally, the third stage focuses again on Bianciardi's novel in order to isolate and to oppose two meanings of the concept of inoperativity, which demonstrate the contradictory nature of this notion: its promise of freedom is overturned into domination and submission (§8).

2. A scandalous novel

In *La vita agra*, Bianciardi tells the autobiographical story of a provincial intellectual who moved to the big city in the mid-1950's. The main character, anonymous, decides to leave his home and his work to go to avenge the forty-three miners who died in the Ribolla massacre (4th May 1954, Grosseto, Tuscany). His plan is to hide a bomb under the "*torracchione*", the building that houses the management offices of the company which is believed to be responsible for the disaster. But the bombing project steadily evaporates as the protagonist is absorbed by the rhythms of Italian neo-capitalism *produci-consuma-crepa*¹ and he begins his personal struggle against labour, against commodity, against smog, against the crowd, against political parties. In this solitary battle, he is supported only by his alter-ego Anna, and with her he establishes an extramarital relationship. Fired from a publishing house for poor performance, he gets precarious jobs as a freelance translator. He says no to both provincial and city life, and withdraws into the dream of an anarcho-socialist community with an "anti-agitative and copulatory" foundation. His only escape is sleep.

¹ In English: *produce-consume-die*.

With *La vita agra* Bianciardi accomplishes the trilogy of anger, which began in 1957 with *Il lavoro culturale* (*Cultural Work*) and continued in 1959 with *L'integrazione* (*Integration*). Together they provide us with a pioneering anthropology of late capitalism. Neither apocalyptic nor integrated (Eco, 1964), the author describes the new *ethos* of metropolitan life in an age when capital was preparing to make linguistic work the pillar of the entire production process. Precisely because he looks on neither with optimism nor with resignation and suspicion at such transformations, he refuses to play a role in the Italic derby between Calvino and Pasolini and he produces a rather singular novel, which I propose to define as *scandalous*, according to the oldest meaning of this expression. The adjective derives from the Latin term '*scandalum*', which refers to the Greek word '*skandalon*'. According to the *Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell & Scott, 1843: 1604), the first meaning of '*skandalon*' is 'trap or snare laid for an enemy', usually for an animal; the second meaning, also used in Latin (Lewis-Short, 1879: 1639), indicates precisely a "stumbling-block", which causes the ruinous fall of those who are walking along the street. The scandal contained in *La vita agra* consists essentially of two elements: the first concerns the use of language, the second concerns the tale.

The use of language. '*La vita agra* is a translator's novel' (Varotti, 2017: 169) in the sense that it is a text which makes extensive use of metalanguage, filling itself with puns, false quotations, Latinisms and Tuscanisms, slang expressions, technicalities, stylistic contaminations. The linearity of writing is broken, the reader is bewildered and his is a living and tiring linguistic labour, as is that of the writer. An example of this scandalous language, which sets traps and involves pitfalls, is given by the famous incipit dedicated to the etymology of the term 'Brera', the name of the neighbourhood of Milan well known as a destination for intellectuals and artists:

On the whole I am inclined to agree with Adelung, because if we take as our point of departure a High German *Bretite*, the transition to *Braida* is plain sailing, as, indeed, is all the rest — the contraction of the diphthong into an open 'e' as well as the rhotacism of the intervocalic dental, which now, heaven be praised, is no longer a mystery to anyone. It occurs, for instance, in the speech of the American Middle West — there was the airman I knew at Manduria, for instance, whom I failed to understand when he showed me his middle finger covered with plaster and said *hospiral*. But there is no need to cross the Atlantic, because there was also that other member of the armed forces, on

Merola of headquarters company, who has born at Nocera Inferiore, and always said *maronna mia* instead of *madonna mia*. The other hypotheses, that is, that the name derives from a Low Latin *Braida* or a classical Latina *Praedium*, appeal to me less; and in any case there is general agreement about the meaning – *campus vel ager suburbanus in Gallia cisalpina*, or an open expanse adjoining the inhabited area, a green space *intra moenia*, the site of the cattle market and no doubt a haunt of prostitutes at night. As it was overlooked by some property belonging to one Adalgiso Guercio, it continued to be known as the Braida del Guercio. (Bianciardi, 1962: 7)

It is an *ex abrupto* beginning (Varotti, 2017: 160), where the colloquial tone of ‘on the whole’ is mixed with the typical digression of the philologist. Bianciardi recalls the work of the German linguist and polygraph Johann Christoph Adelung (1732–1806), known for having written the first dictionary of the German language and for having devoted himself to the comparative examination of hundreds of languages and dialects. Hence a succession of hypotheses and examples concerning the origin of the name ‘Brera’, with the author intent on showing off a hyperbolic, excessive erudition, which aims to mock and unravel every pre-constituted literary scheme and especially the monumental and classical ones. The beginning is already a stumbling-block, which tests the reader’s strength. In fact, the reader is engaged in facing and overcoming unusual linguistic games, now out of order, which are the prerogative of a few specialists and mostly represent a source of friction, an obstacle to run up against.

The tale. From beginning to end, the story is studded with stumbling-blocks because it consists of the hero’s obstacle course in the metropolis of the economic miracle. Every day the protagonist has to deal with the employers who demand so much and pay so little, with his unpleasant and careerist colleagues, with creditors, with the myths of the dawning society of the spectacle, including its selfishness, its false friendships and its flip-side of freedom. Here is a very significant extract, where Bianciardi imagines meeting an old friend, Tacconi Otello, animated by political fervour and revolutionary practice. According to him, he has no other choice than to confide his bitter defeat:

But, if I should now return to my native place and meet him, what should I say to him? I am certain that he would not say anything this time either, but I know already what I should see in his eyes. And what I should be able to answer? Look, Tacconi, I might say. Here they’ve

reduced me to a state in which I can hardly keep my head above water, if you fall here nobody helps you to your feet, my strength is barely sufficient to keep me afloat, and, if I manage to scrape through, believe me, life in this city is hard. (Bianciardi, 1962: 153)

But there is another passage where the character literally affirms that he lives in a world where he cannot walk, where he moves awkwardly, admitting that he is clumsy and, therefore, disposed to stumbling. For these reasons they arrest him, and dismiss him:

Those who say I'm clumsy and don't know to get around are perfectly right. It's perfectly true, I don't know how to walk even, and once I was arrested in the street for just this reason. In the end I lost my job for the same reason [...]. I was given sack for the same reason, because I dragged my feet, moved slowly, and kept looking all around when there was no actual need to. In our business you have to lift your feet smartly, plant them down again solidly, move briskly and raise the dust, if possible a cloud of it to hide behind. (*Ibid.*: 104–105)

The life of *La vita agra* is a scandalous form of life, an existence always on the verge of falling and being trampled upon, with no one ready to help. For Bianciardi, once the revolutionary hypothesis is excluded, there are two exit strategies: either to reply through the irreverent, ironic and mocking use of language, or to imagine a form of life based on inoperativity, where politics and work are devoid of any existential centrality. An inoperative life that deactivates and overcomes the ancient opposition between action (*praxis*) and production (*poiēsis*),² ushering in the post-capitalist age that is the same as the end of history.

3. Bianciardi philosopher of work

The age of linguistic capitalism (Mazzeo, 2019) it is the time to interpret Bianciardi as a philosopher of work. In *La vita agra*, the author gives us a portrait of the metamorphosis of the labour process that has 'unmistakable theoretical merit' (Virno, 2002: 57). His philosophical merit consists in understanding the

² '[A]ction and making are different kinds of thing [...]. For while making has an end other than itself, action cannot; for good action itself is its end' (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140b: 3–7).

logical sequence that explains the concept of work in the contemporary world.³ His model can be synthesized in the formula *work as language*, a notion which distinguishes itself from the much better-known expression *language as work* coined by the Italian Marxist semiotician Ferruccio Rossi-Landi (1968). The becoming-language (*praxis*) of work (*poiēsis*) is opposed to the becoming-work of language. Bianciardi connects language to work and thereby obtains a *poiēsis* replete with qualities and characteristics typical of *praxis*, beginning with the identity between action and product.

The linguistic becoming of work has an *uncanny* (*unheimlich*) effect (Freud, 1919), because something extraneous is here revealing an element of familiarity in its features: language, as the foreign-enemy of work, becomes a very familiar element for human *poiēsis*. The new alliance creates an ambivalent notion of work, a *poiēsis* that is also a *praxis* and, therefore, a *poiēsis* without any product: the dominant labour process produces fewer and fewer things and more and more words.

The *philosopher* Bianciardi must be inserted within a pattern of authors and concepts concerned with the notion of linguistic work. A provisional list would include: the notion of *praxis* as action without any product (Aristotle, Arendt); the opposition between productive and unproductive labour (Smith, Marx); the relationship between language and cultural industry (Adorno, Horkheimer); the connection between labour and spectacle (Debord). From a philosophical point of view, Bianciardi's account is interesting because he isolates the main characteristics that distinguish cultural industry from agriculture and from the Taylor-Fordist factory that characterised Milan in the years of the economic miracle. The author outlines the cultural labour that leaves no objects behind, a labour without any product: public relations workers, advertisers, journalists, editors, TV and radio workers, teachers, priests, etc. That is the kind of activity that for Smith (1776) and Marx (1864) was classifiable as slavish and unproductive, and that instead, for Bianciardi, becomes the new basis for surplus value. For the classical economy, cultural labour was insignificant and marginal compared to the category of productive labour; it was rather the factory workers who made the greatest contribution to an increase in invested capital. Bianciardi, instead, overcomes the opposition between productive and unproductive labour and shows how new labours of the tertiary sector — and of the “quaternary” —

³ There is a large bibliography on the transformation of labour, especially in the field of the social sciences. Two reference studies are Marazzi (1994) and Zarifian (1996). For a more recent study combining social sciences with the history of philosophy, see Bodei (2019).

which are characterized by the absence of a visible production of goods, become the new origin of the wealth of nations.

4. The becoming language of work

Bianciardi identifies the innovation of labours appearing in the 1960s not so much in the productive development of language, but in the exact opposite: in the ever-increasing inscription of political-linguistic features in labour activity. Bianciardi highlights how from a certain point onwards capital began to enhance the interweaving of communication and production, focusing on the becoming *praxis* of *poiesis*, on *work as language* and not, as Rossi-Landi teaches, on *language as work*. In this perspective, we read a passage where the writer illustrates with extreme lucidity the main lines of the phenomenon:

But the fact of the matter is that the peasant's is a primary job and the worker's a secondary one. The former produces something out of nothing, and the latter turns things into something else. In both cases it is easy to apply a yardstick, a quantitative one, the productivity of the factory or the profitability of the farm. But in business of our kind there is no quantitative yardstick. How can you calculate the value of the work done by a priest, an advertising man, a public relations officer? They neither produce something out of nothing nor turn one thing into another. Their jobs are neither primary nor secondary. In fact they are tertiary or, if Billa's husband did not object, I should call them quaternary. They are not instruments of production, or even conveyor belts. At best they are lubricants, or so much vaseline. How can one assess the value of a priest, advertising man or public relations officer, or calculate the amount of faith, acquisitiveness or good will that they succeed in stimulating? The only measuring rod that can be applied to them is the ability of each to remain afloat and rise higher, to become bishops, in fact. In other words, those who choose a tertiary or quaternary calling require gifts and attitudes of a political type [...]. In the tertiary and quaternary occupations, as there is no visible production of goods to serve as a yardstick, the criterion is the same. (Bianciardi, 1962: 105–106)

The theoretical purpose of this piece is moving *praxis* in the direction of *poiēsis* to the point that it is included within it. Bianciardi explains the effects produced by the transfer of acting to making when he states that labours with a high political attitude do not give rise to ‘any visible production of goods’, i.e. they are labours that do not end in a product. He therefore links the transition from *praxis* to *poiēsis* — not the contrary, not the becoming *poiēsis* of *praxis* — to the absence of an external end that survives the labour activity. The outcome is a very peculiar kind of human performativity that goes by the name of ‘ateleological activism’ (*Ibid.*: 62). Here there is an outline of the concept of “work without teleology”, which is the most suitable scheme to account for the changes in labour process in contemporary capitalism (Virno, 1986).

5. Vita agra, vita arga

Bianciardi is a lucid and unprejudiced pioneer in the diagnosis of contemporary labour, but he is unable to translate this socio-economic analysis into an affirmative political project. He remains irretrievably victim of a crisis of presence so powerful as to lead him, in the literary imagination, but even more so in real life, to the psycho-physical destruction and lastly to die. So, he yields to the temptation to escape from an *agra* life through a life as *arga*, that is, without *ergon* (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.7), devoid of a species-specific activity, an inoperative existence.

In the penultimate chapter of his novel, the writer proposes a manifesto of inoperativity by imagining an ‘anti-agitative and copulatory neo-Christianity’ (Bianciardi, 1962: 158). The author outlines an anarchist community, with a subsistence economy based on the gift and the products of the earth, where,

[p]eople must learn not to hurry, not to co-operate, not to produce, not to acquire new needs, but instead to give up their existing needs [...]. When paper and metal have been eliminated there will be no such thing as money, and with it the market economy will disappear and give way to an economy of a new type, based not on exchange but on giving [...]. All the quaternary occupations will disappear, and first of all typographers, public relations officers and demodoxologists. These will be followed into limbo by the tertiary occupations, and then the secondary ones. Work of the primary type, that is to say, cultivation of the soil, will gradually diminish, because we shall live chiefly on the

natural fruits of the earth. (*Ibid.*: 155–156)

Without labour and profit or private property, ‘men will cultivate noble passions, such as friendship and love. In the absence of the institution of the family, sexual relations will be free, indiscriminate, uninterrupted, frequent, or actually continuous’ (*ibid.*: 157).

Taking into account Bianciardi’s ‘stylistic extremism’ and his linguistic experimentalism’ (Varotti, 2017: 164–169), it seems right to propose to interpret the title of the novel as an anagram where the word ‘*agra*’, which in Italian refers to someone or something ‘of sour, acidic taste, denoting malevolence or malice, which reveals discomfort’ and which is translated into English as ‘hard’, changes into the italianised Greek expression, ‘*arga*’. According to the Greek-English Lexicon (Liddell & Scott, 1843: 236), the adjective, *argos*, apart from having the technical meaning of ‘not working the ground’ is equivalent to ‘idle, lazy’.⁴ The *arga* life gives content to the new post-capitalist anthropology imagined by Bianciardi after having found ‘that is not enough to get rid of the political, economic, social and entertainment management in Italy. The revolution must begin elsewhere, in interior of man’ (Bianciardi, 1962: 155). With a theoretical choice similar to Agamben’s fifty years later, the writer extends the ‘ateleological activism’ that distinguishes contemporary production to the whole of human performativity, thus trying to remove it from the domination of the market economy and the myths of the society of the spectacle. From no longer recognising the concept of work as *poiēsis*, but conceiving it as something equal to action without product, the author derives a utopia based on inoperativity, which deactivates any performance. It is not so much the absence of products, but the complete suspension of the activity driven towards ends, which is characteristic of humans. However, salvation is by no means a foregone conclusion. Parodying his ‘anti-agitative and copulatory neo-Christianity’, Bianciardi minimises (but does not deny): ‘Pending all this [...] I still have to struggle to keep my head above water and make a living’ (*Ibid.*: 158).

6. The notion of *argia* in Aristotle

A coherent way to give an account of the notion of *argia* is to place it within the context of the Aristotelian reflection on the proper function of man (*ergon*),

⁴ Also see Rocci (1939: 237): ‘inoperoso; inattivo; che non lavora la terra; pigro; sfaccendato; disoccupato; che non fa nulla, ozioso’.

contained in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (I.7). The well-known ‘function argument’⁵ is useful as the basis for the construction of an anthropology of happiness (*eudaimonia*) which conceives of the *eu zēn* as the excellent fulfilment of *ergon*. Aristotle’s reasoning produces at least two consequences that overturn the thesis of the function argument, giving rise to as many meanings of the concept of *argia*. The first, which is the one postulated by the philosopher of Stagira, represents the narrow meaning and coincides with sleep or death. The second, assumed by Agamben, represents the broad meaning and it corresponds to the reverse of the active life.

According to Aristotle’s function argument, there is an operation that is proper to man and it is conceived as an activity performed in accordance with language (*logos*).⁶ The topic is posed in the form of a rhetorical question, making a comparison between the human being in general and some particular human types (the flute-player, the sculptor, the carpenter, the shoemaker) and between the human organism in its entirety and some parts of it:

[...] we could first ascertain the function of man. For just as for a flute-player, a sculptor, or any artist, and, in general, for all things that have a function or activity, the good and the ‘well’ is thought to reside in the function, so would it seem to be for man, if he has a function. Have the carpenter, then, and the tanner certain functions or activities, and has man none? Is he naturally functionless? Or as eye, hand, foot, and in general each part evidently has a function, may one lay it down that man similarly has a function apart from all these? What then can this be? (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b: 25–32).

The affirmative answer, given a few lines later, is widely known and lies in connecting man’s *ergon* with the *logos*: ‘the function of man is an activity of soul in accordance with, or not without, *logos* (rational principle)’ (*Ibid.*, 1098a: 7–8). Perhaps less well-known is the negative answer that Aristotle gives at the end of Book I, and that Agamben himself never takes into account. The passage is the one where the author introduces the image of sleep (*hypnos*) as that state of experience which alternates with waking and is common to the biological cycles of all living organisms. Aristotle observes that in the case of human beings, during

⁵ See especially Baker (2015). For an overview see Warren and Sheffield (2014: 351–353).

⁶ Following Lo Piparo (2003: 5-6), I intended *logos* as *language* and not as ‘rational principle’ (see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a: 7-8).

sleep, the difference between happy and unhappy life lapses. In fact, in the sleeping person, the activity whose fulfilment determines the *eu zēn* is no longer in question because: ‘sleep is an inactivity (*argia*) of the soul in that respect in which it is called bad or good’ (*Ibid.*, 1102b: 7–8). A little later, Aristotle adds that the *argia* of the soul is precisely that of dreamless sleep: there is inactivity or inoperativity of the soul ‘unless perhaps to a small extent some of the movements actually penetrate, and in this respect the dreams of good men are better than those of ordinary people’ (*Ibid.*, 1102b: 9–11). Aristotle dedicates to sleep and dreams certain of his short treatises on the philosophy of nature: one of these works is known simply as *On Sleep*. Here, sleep is defined as ‘a privation of waking’ (Aristotle, *On Sleep*, 453a26) and as what makes the human body ‘unable to actualise its powers’ [μη δύνασθαι ἐνεργεῖν] (*ibid.*, 458a: 29). For Aristotle, therefore, sleep captures a narrow meaning of *argia*, because it is equivalent not so much to the potentiality not to pass into actuality, but to the negation of potentiality as such, that is, to the denial of the possibility of passing and/or *not* passing into actuality. One reason why Agamben, in his research on *argia*, does not take into consideration the Aristotelian response on sleep lies precisely in the fact that the inactivity of dreamless sleep is synonymous with death.⁷ For Agamben, engaged in the construction of a new anthropology and a new political community, such an overlap of meanings is not acceptable and, therefore, he intends to derive a broader theory of *argia*.

7. The notion of inoperativity in Agamben⁸

Agamben develops Aristotle’s function argument in several works.⁹ In the collection *The Fire and Tale*, published immediately after the release of the last chapter of the cycle *Homo sacer*, the author answers in a negative sense to the question posed in the *Ethics*:

Obviously, Aristotle soon leaves aside the hypothesis that man as an animal is essentially *argos*, inoperative, and that no work or vocation can

⁷ The paradigm of the equivalence between dreamless sleep and death is contained in Plato’s *Apology*: ‘Now if there is no consciousness but only a dreamless sleep, death must be a marvelous gain’ (40d). For a more recent reference, see Nancy (2007).

⁸ This section reworks themes contained in Nizza (2019; 2020).

⁹ See especially the essay entitled ‘The work of man’ (Agamben, 2004). In the *Homo sacer* project, see Agamben (2007; 2014a). For a more recent reference see Agamben (2017).

define him. For my part I would like to encourage you to take this hypothesis seriously and, consequently, to think man as a living being without work. (Agamben, 2014b: 52)

Through the concept of inoperativity Agamben intends to solve the ancient problem of overcoming the opposition between *praxis* and *poiēsis*. The main purpose of his theory lies in transforming the overcoming of this opposition into the direct nullification of the couple. If the borderline between action and production falls, then it makes no sense to keep the two notions. In this way, Agamben's inoperativity follows the broad meaning of *argia* and this sense it is equivalent to the unusual mode of an existence based on potentiality beyond actuality. An original conception of *dynamis*, which does not give rise to concrete realizations, which no longer distinguishes between actions and products and through which, therefore, human beings live the active life. In the Agambenian lexicon of inoperativity we can recognize three keys-words: use, potentiality and contemplation. Among these terms there is a family resemblance and real kinships, which is to say that there is a dense network of connections where the statement of one word immediately recalls that of the other two.

Use. According to Agamben, inoperativity does not simply mean the absence of products. The Western philosophical lexicon already has, in fact, the words to designate this particular kind of phenomenon: the Greek word *praxis* and its corresponding Latin term, *agere*. The author, instead, is interested in another meaning. He seems to move in two steps: in the first one, he extends the typical inoperative feature of *praxis* to the field of *poiēsis*, thus obtaining the deactivation of the finalism inherent in the activity that makes products. In the next step, thanks to an opposite movement, Agamben transfers the absence of teleology to action as well, obtaining the suspension of all ends, both the external ones, typical of *poiēsis*, and the internal ones, typical of *praxis*. The result of this complex operation consists in thinking inoperativity as a peculiar kind of human behaviour, to which the author gives the positive name of *use*:

Use is constitutively an inoperative praxis, which can happen only on the basis of a deactivation of the Aristotelian apparatus potential/act, which assigns to *energeia*, to being-at-work, primacy over potential. Use is, in this sense, a principle internal to potential, which prevents it from being simply consumed in the act and drives it to turn once more to itself, to make itself a potential of potential, to be capable of its own potential (and therefore its own impotential). (Agamben, 2014a: 1112)

Use and inoperativity are synonyms because, by placing themselves both beyond the sphere of actuality (*energeia*) and, therefore, not letting themselves be assimilated either to the alternation of potentiality and actuality, or to the articulation of experience in acting and making, they affirm the complete deactivation of both couples.

Potentiality. The notion of inoperativity appears for the first time in Kojève's review of Queneau's novels;¹⁰ later, it returned in the debate among Nancy, Blanchot and Bataille. For Agamben, inoperativity is equivalent neither to the simple absence of products (against the Kojève-Nancy-Blanchot account), nor to absolute negativity without content (against Bataille's account): 'The only coherent way to understand inoperativeness is to think of it as a generic mode of potentiality that is not exhausted (like individual action or collective action understood as the sum of individual actions) in a *transitus de potentia ad actum*' (Agamben, 1995: 53). In Agamben's account, to pass to actuality counts less and less and, on the contrary, it becomes more significant a concept of potentiality that is not teleologically oriented. That is, a potentiality that is not exhausted in an act, but that is preserved beyond actuality. In the inoperative life, the primacy belongs to *competence*, not to *performance*. More than the performative experience, what counts, if anything, is the training of the capabilities contained in a body, postponing each time the moment of their full realization. What the inoperative life is based on is the potentiality *not* to act and *not* to make anything: it is the potentiality not to pass to actuality. For Agamben, some representative models of inoperative forms of life are: the slave companion, Francis of Assisi, Bartleby the scrivener, prisoners in Nazi camps, stateless migrants.¹¹

¹⁰ See Kojève (1952). Queneau's novels are: *Pierrot mon ami* (1942), *Loin de Rueil* (1944), *Le dimanche de la vie* (1952).

¹¹ According to Agamben's account, it is the society of the spectacle that gives to us another example of inoperativity, through a video easily available on Youtube by typing the words 'Maradona live is life'. It is the film that shows perhaps the greatest? footballer of all time during warm-up exercises preceding the return semi-final of the UEFA Cup between Napoli and Bayern Munich, played on 19th April 1989. While the rest of the team performs warm-up exercises, Maradona dances with the ball, performing an innumerable series of dribbles and movements to the music of *Live is life* by Opus, transmitted at maximum volume from the loudspeakers of the Olympiastadion in Munich. If we watch the video with Agamben's eyes, Maradona appears as a champion of inoperativity because he breaks the chain that usually links means to ends in the behaviours and practices of the active life. His training is not match-oriented but consists in the free use of the body potentiality without any specific end. Maradona's gesture corresponds to the dance that 'undoes and disorganizes the economy of corporeal movements to then rediscover them, at once intact and transfigured, in the

Contemplation. The specific frame of inoperative life is neither *praxis* nor *poiēsis*, but contemplation (*theōria*):

Contemplation is the paradigm of use. Like use, contemplation does not have a subject, because in it the contemplator is completely lost and dissolved; like use, contemplation does not have an object, because in the work it contemplates only its (own) potential. Life, which contemplates in the work its (own) potential of acting or making, is rendered inoperative in all its works and lives only in use-of-itself, lives only (its) livability. (Agamben, 2014a: 1085)

By rejecting *praxis* and *poiēsis*, Agamben saves *theōria*, which, in the framework dating back to Aristotle, accomplishes the tripartition of experience. Thinking about the classic model, the Italian philosopher keeps the third term by placing it beyond action and production, though he interprets it as the impersonal potentiality for thought that inheres not in the individual man but in the multitude. In the *Homo sacer* project, the traditional solipsism of the *bios theoretikos* is replaced by the Averroist *multitudo* and is unfailingly connected with a thought that is never exhausted by any sum-total of single intellectual operations. Decisive for any understanding of the shape of this non-solitary thought, is the gesture through which Agamben distinguishes it from the Marxian *General Intellect* of the ‘Fragment on Machines’.¹² Where everything suggests a relationship between the potential thought of the multitude and the *General Intellect* of the social individual, the author writes: ‘The distinction between the simple, massive inscription of social knowledge in the productive processes, which characterizes the contemporary phase of capitalism, and thought as antagonistic potential and

choreography’ (Agamben 2009, 102). Dance, which from Agamben’s point of view is inscribed neither in the genre of making nor in that of acting, is precisely the gesture that highlights ‘the media character of corporal movements’ (Agamben 1996, 57). Its main characteristic lies in deactivating the alternation between means and ends, between potentiality and actuality. While dancing, Maradona belongs to the field of pure means, that is to say to the sphere ‘of the absolute and complete gesturality of human beings’ (*Ibid.*: 59), that same field where, according to Agamben’s philosophy, politics must be rethought. However, Maradona’s inoperativity, described above, is a state of exception inextricably linked to warm-up exercises (potentiality) separated from the match (actuality). Then, in fact, there is the landmark career of the Argentinean footballer. *El pibe de oro* played 491 games and scored 259 goals. With the Argentinian national team, he played 91 matches and scored 34 goals, winning the World Cup in 1986. With Napoli he was Italian champion in 1987 and 1990. In 1995, he won the Golden Ball Lifetime Achievement award (see <http://www.football-history.net>).

¹² See Marx (1857-1858).

form-of-life, passes through the experience of this cohesion and this inseparability' (*ibid.*: 1219). Agamben, rightly, understands in the entry of intellect into production the true novelty of contemporary capitalism, but he renounces a development of the contradiction inherent in putting social knowledge to work. He apparently fails to see here a way in which to elaborate a model of public thought that does not have its proper form of realization in the society of the spectacle and market economy. Instead, he transcends history and calls into question the potentiality of thought immanent to form-of-life, to life, that is, already placed beyond action and making, inoperative by definition.

8. One concept, two meanings

Before Agamben's philosophy, it was Bianciardi's narrative that grasped in inoperativity the reverse of the active life and connected the exit from capital with the complete deactivation of human praxis.¹³ In the novel *La vita agra*, the liberation from market economy and the society of the spectacle coincides with the birth of an anarchist, unpolitical and unproductive community, which has no longer any end to achieve. Its livelihood is provided by mother-nature or by fully automated machines. It is an un-actual form-of-life, not so much because it is 'not actual', that is obsolete and anachronistic, but because it gives primacy to potentiality and not to actuality, to the virtual and not the real, and therefore it lives outside of history, in a dimension of eternal present.

But the decisive aspect does not consist simply in the pioneering and anticipatory gesture concerning the future developments of Italian philosophy. More interesting is that, in Bianciardi, the promise of the inoperative life issues from a lucid description of the metamorphosis of labour. According to the writer, the philosophy of inoperativity and the philosophy of work go hand in hand. For a specific reason: because late capitalism and inoperativity or, to use the author's words, 'ateleological activism', respond to the same problem regarding the overcoming of opposition between *praxis* and *poiēsis*. Today, the market exploits labour-power without distinguishing between acting and making, but it requires an inextricable mix. You are professional and productive of surplus value only if you show communicative and relational skills, problem-solving abilities, and familiarity in handling alphanumeric symbols. The attitudes that traditionally

¹³ Obviously, many scholars mobilise this meaning of inoperativity, taking Agamben's account as their point of departure, in order to think about radical politics. See Prozorov (2014); Watkin (2014).

defined politics, that is, the domain of praxis, and which at the dawn of the society of the spectacle were absorbed by the culture industry, now qualify every sector of *poiēsis*. In Post-Fordism, labour is inoperative because it mixes *praxis* and *poiēsis* and turns into a performance that no longer has its end in the external product. Such metamorphosis gives the illusion of *not* making things with words: labour and its products disappear, the virtuality of labour-power takes to the stage.¹⁴ What then would a more appropriate alternative be? To seize the mixture of action and production, deducing the suspension of the active life? Or should we also consider the opposite hypothesis? And that is: given the mixing between *praxis* and *poiēsis*, to develop a mature theory of human performativity that, precisely because it is based on the unity of acting and making, writes a new chapter of the active life, going beyond capitalism and, indeed, even beyond inoperativity. The question, in other words, is the following: how can we respond to the old and new forms of alienation, exploitation and enslavement that lurk in contemporary work? With the criticism that captures the unprecedented overlap between acting and making and deduces the complete deactivation of any concrete act? Or with the criticism that explores contradictions inherent in the mixing between action and production in order to design a new age of human praxis, freed from capitalism?¹⁵ A new image of the world based on the unity of intellectual and manual work, organised according to different rules than those thanks to which, today, profits and myths of progress originate. Agamben explores the link between action and production, but fails to deal with the transformations of the labour process in the current phase of the capitalist system. In Bianciardi, however, inoperativity emerges as the other side of the description of contemporary work. And it is precisely in the novel of the Tuscan writer that the ambivalence of the concept of inoperativity shows its dual and none too reassuring face. In this perspective, the critical interpretation of the theses contained in *La vita agra* leads to an even clearer alternative. Or we could say that inoperativity concerns an ontology that gives an account of human being by consigning it to a messianic, cenobitic and poor life, extracted from institutions and lowered into the non-performing use of things in the world. Or else we could say that inoperativity is precisely that tool by which critical thought can understand the

¹⁴ Of course, it is the opposite that is true: the inoperativity of the labour process does not in any way nullify the execution of concrete actions. In the capital of the 21st century workers have to do performative acts, they have to perform linguistic behaviours doing things and producing value (see Chicchi and Simone, 2017).

¹⁵ See Virno (2015).

salient features of Post-Fordist labour and, from there, theorise realistic strategies of liberation for the active life.

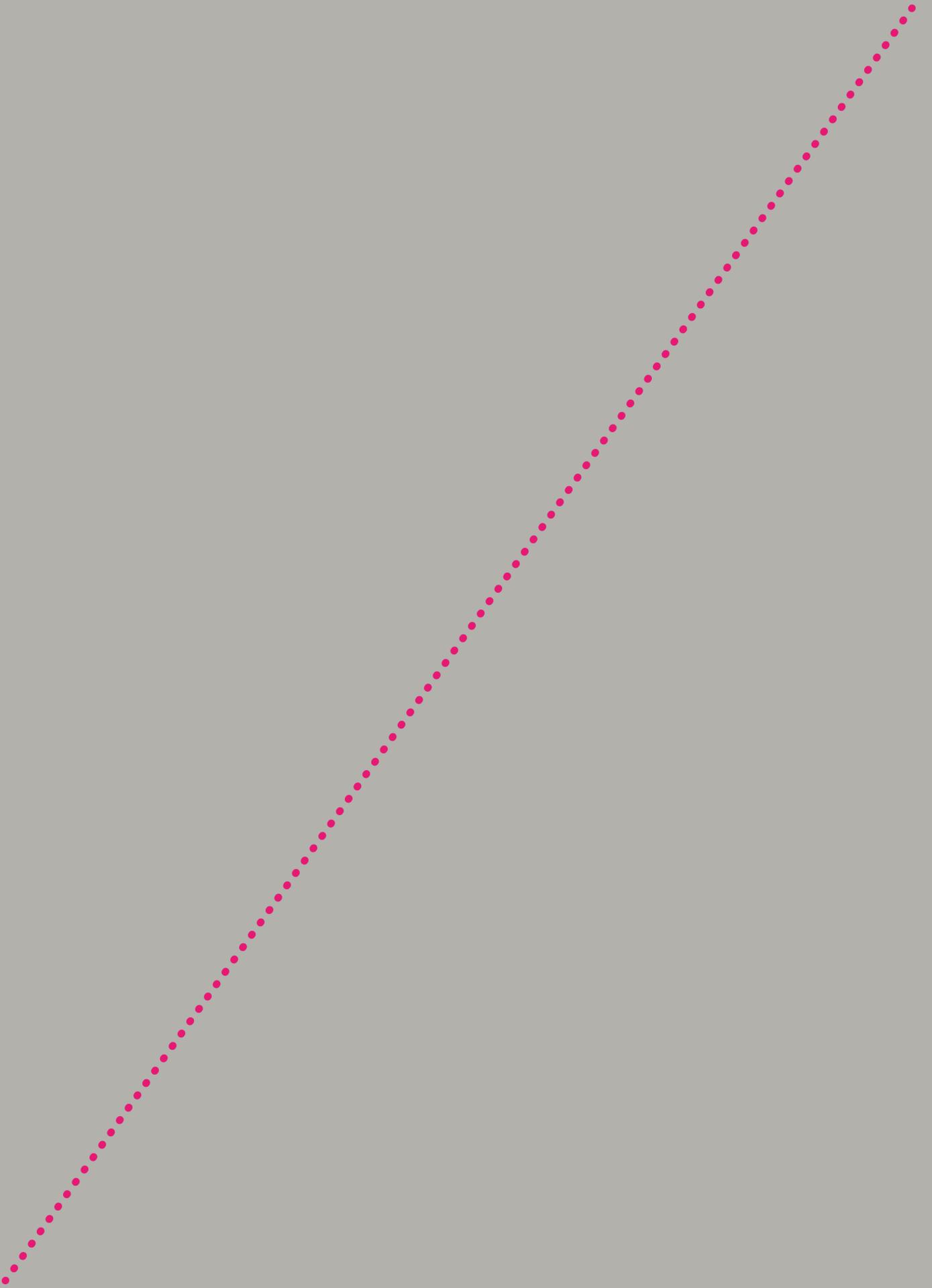


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Telling the Truth, or Not: Notes on the Concept of Ethics in Foucault and Agamben

Carlo Crosato

Abstract

In 1997, taking his mark from the last text Foucault wrote before he died, Agamben examines the implications that accompany the definition of truth as an errancy, a straying. Drawing on the insights provided by Agamben's lecture, this article analyses the different perspectives from which the two philosophers study the issue of truth, and the consequent conceptions of ethics which they elaborate. Throughout his multifarious reflections, Foucault maintained his critique of a universal and ahistorical truth, revealing the strategic games that legitimate every conception of truth. Hence, his idea of ethics consists in displacing oneself from the actual discourses and historical relations that subjectivate and subject the individual, in order to constitute one's own subjectivity. On the other hand, the ontological perspective from which Agamben aims to integrate and correct Foucauldian thought leads to a conception of ethics as the deactivation of every form of life and the suspension of the dynamics of constitution in order to regain the original potentiality of the human being.

Keywords: truth, ethics, language, Foucault, Agamben



In 1997, Giorgio Agamben delivers a lecture, entitled 'Verità come erranza', in the course of which he discusses the issue of truth. The occasion for engaging with such a problem was the last article that Foucault wrote before he died. In this text, Foucault asserts that 'with man, life has led to a living being that is never completely in the right place, that is destined to "err" and to be "wrong"' (Foucault, 1998: 476). This article is Foucault's last homage to his great teacher, Canguilhem, who led him to reflect on the themes of discontinuity, truthful discourses, and the concept of human life. Thanks to Canguilhem, Foucault learnt to move beyond the history of Truth's epiphany without getting stuck in the history of ideas: he learnt to study history, 'dealing with the history of "truthful discourses"', that is, with discourses that rectify and correct themselves, and that carry out a whole labour of self-development governed by the task of "truth-

telling” (Foucault, 1998: 471). This means that ‘error is eliminated not by the blunt force of a truth that would gradually emerge from the shadows but by the formation of a new way of “truth-telling”’.

Drawing on these insights, Foucault elaborates his archaeology and genealogy and so develops the concepts of *episteme*, discursive formations, dispositives, and regimes of truth. In these terms, he describes truth as a historical formation, constituted by knowledge and power relations, and in constant confrontation with error and the anomaly. Canguilhem focused on domains where knowledge is much less deductive, such as biology and medicine. Foucault himself explored the history of medicine, psychiatry, and went on to ask how, as knowledge and power intertwine, discourses of truth are formed. Thus, he can claim that human life cannot be grasped by the exact sciences, and that the concepts involved in scientific discourses and in every truth-telling are always brought to light by a struggle against other discourses. This is the constant relation between life and error, the sciences of life and mistakes, in which Agamben is interested.

In these terms, Agamben finds a new kind of ‘relationship between the subject and the truth’, even the truth of the human itself, beyond the traditional perspective of the Cartesian subject and its reference to an objective world. ‘What could a knowledge be that is no longer correlated to the truth of the openness to the world, but only to life and its errancy? How can we think of the subject starting no longer from its relationship with truth, but rather from its relationship with error?’ (Agamben, 1997: 13)

Both Foucault and Agamben work to overcome the sovereign subject and the cognitive approach to the truth of the object. But we know that this overcoming brings Foucault to an ontology of actuality, which is to say a historical ontology, whereas Agamben tries to go back to the ontological principles *stricto sensu*, that is, to the very conditions of the historical becoming through which we make ourselves historical subjects. While Foucault examines the conditions we are pragmatically situated in, Agamben reconstructs the ontological condition of being historically situated. Starting from these different perspectives, we can reach two different concepts of “errancy” and two specific notions of ethics as the emancipation from the binding perspective of the sovereign subject’s relationship with the world.

1. Historical regimes of truth

The modern subject and the transcendental relationship with an objective world are two of the main critical targets of Foucault's thought. In modern philosophy, the concept of truth is always linked to the question of knowledge, that is, the correspondence of human intellect to pre-given objects in reality. This *adequatio* to objects requires a form of subjectivity equipped with precise universal characteristics which allow it to penetrate the objective truth and retain it over time. The epistemological relation between such a subject and objective reality has been at the centre of Foucault's enquiries since the Sixties, when his archaeology is involved in the critique of *epistemes* and discursive formations. Later on, especially in the Seventies, the ahistorical and transcendental nature of the subject is analysed in its practical dimension by Foucault's genealogical studies of power relations and dispositives. He aims at exposing the strategic features of the self-narration on the part of the sovereign subject, and its immanence within power relations and knowledge, with an eye towards the subject's relation to itself. In so doing, he undermines the foundations of the traditional correspondence theory of truth and the traditional theory of power, from a critical perspective that he calls 'the history of truth' (Foucault, 1990: 6, 8, 11).

'After Nietzsche,' he claims during an interview in 1976, 'the question has changed. No longer: which is the surest path of Truth?, but which has been the hazardous path of truth?' (Foucault, 2001b: 28-40; De Cristofaro, 2008; Mahon, 1992). In Foucault's view, modern philosophy is caught in what he terms the "Cartesian moment", in which the subject is described as the pure "I think" endowed with free access to a clear and distinct truth. In turn, truth, in an epistemological dimension, is the correct knowledge we have to reach in the employment of appropriate scientific instruments, and, in a teleological dimension, the final goal of the accidental path of history. The Cartesian moment is the perspective by which modern philosophy frees the relationship between subjectivity and truth from rituals, practices, *spirituality*, and puts aside the pursuits and experiences 'which are not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject's very being, the price to be paid for the access to truth'. While the historiography of philosophy explains the innovative distinction between philosophy and spirituality with the aim of reconfiguring the significant moments in the approach to truth, Foucault's Nietzschean effort steps back to a scenario where 'the subject is not capable of truth' and 'the truth is never given to the subject by right' (Foucault, 2005: 15).

By proposing a history of truth, Foucault aims at opposing the notions of an *apriori* constituted subject and a preformed object, and moves towards the analysis of the interactive constitution of subjects and objects under what he calls a “regime of truth”, a real historical *apriori* that combines Kant’s reflections on the conditions for the possibility of knowledge with history. The issues that Foucault faces do not arise from the question of a universal subject and its capability of knowing. Instead, these issues concern, on the one hand, the conditions that produce a subject and enable power to know it, control it, and discipline it; on the other hand, the conditions that regulate the discourses it can make, and the practices it has to respect in order to get in touch with the reality of its time. Indeed, Foucault is interested in the games of discourses and the orders of visibility, in the warp of statements and the weft of spaces required for the objects to emerge as knowable. ‘If what is meant by thought is the act that posits a subject and an object, along with their various possible relations, a critical history of thought would be an analysis of the conditions under which certain relations of subject to object are formed or modified, insofar as those relations constitute a possible knowledge’ (Foucault, 1998: 459–460). A regime of truth is this complex nexus between the conditions required for both subjects and objects to be positive elements of history; it is the sum-total of games that intertwine subjectivation and objectivation in a certain historical epoch.

Dealing with the function of the intellectual, in 1976, Foucault writes that his concern is with a truth of this world, the truth that every society establishes for itself: ‘The types of discourse it harbours and causes to function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true’ (Foucault, 1977b: 13). Foucault uses the expression “{a}? general politics of truth” as a synonym for “regime of truth”, in order to mark his distance from a merely epistemological conception of truth, as well as to approach a notion of truth that is involved in the foundation and legitimation of power relations. An intertwinement about which Foucault speaks during a lecture from the same year: in any society ‘multiple relations of power traverse, characterise, and constitute the social body; they are inseparable from a discourse of truth, and they can neither be established nor function unless a true discourse is produced, accumulated, put into circulation, and set to work’. Power needs a certain economy of discourses of truth, and this order of true discourses ‘functions in, on the basis of, and thanks to, that power’ (Foucault, 2003: 24). Having set

apart the traditional theory of power and its repressive gesture, Foucault's interest is focused on the 'production of truth' (Foucault, 2001b: 256–269).

From a political perspective, truth is not the original purity by which the transcendental subject acts upon its freedom; hence, truth is not something that we rediscover by freeing it from the ideological veils of power (Foucault, 2001a: 119–120). Since his archaeological experiments, and more specifically during his first courses at the Collège de France, Foucault elaborates a conception of power as a network of relations supported and surrounded by a prolific production of discourses aimed at the constitution of knowable objects, the production of subjectivities. This is what he terms 'the incitement to discourse' (Foucault, 1978: 17–35), that includes the invitation to tell the whole truth to professional or responsible figures, the progressive substitution of abnormal speech by normative speech, and the thorough and periodic inspection of personal growth. According to Foucault, power does not silence us. It rather forces us to talk about our life, actions, thoughts, intentions, to shed light everywhere, to listen, record, observe, question, and formulate (Foucault, 1978: 33): a real "police of discourses" forcing the normative order gradually to penetrate the whole social field. And this is not a matter of a dominant truth imposed in a sovereign manner (Foucault, 1978: 94), but rather of disseminated sets of discursive games following contingent problems and looking for a solution to them through heterogeneous practices that seem to work (Foucault, 2001a: 1–89).

These heterogeneous sets of words and actions are the dispositives, that Foucault describes as 'thoroughly heterogeneous ensembles consisting of [...] the said as much as the unsaid'. The dispositive is not one of these elements, but the system of relations that can be established between them. What Foucault identifies in it is precisely 'the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements'. This formation 'has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function' (Foucault, 1980: 194–195; cf. Bussolini, 2010; Bazzicalupo, 2013; Carmagnola, 2015; Chignola, 2017; Crosato 2017).

The rejection of a universal theory of power — according to which power is monolithic and limiting — and the refusal of a universal theory of truth — which identifies truth with the overcoming of the ideological veil — run parallel to the conception of the microphysical and positive intertwinement of discourses and power relations consistent with typical problems and responses in a given epoch. These productions of truth cannot be distinguished from power and its mechanisms, both because these mechanisms make possible and induce these productions of truth and because these productions of truth have themselves some

effects that involve us (Foucault, 2001b: 399–414). The subject is involved in these networks not as a sovereign agent but as the nodal point produced by this complex set of relationships. Thus, in the Eighties, Foucault wonders ‘how men govern (themselves and others) by the production of truth’, and repeats that by “production of truth” he means ‘not the production of true utterances but the establishment of domains in which the practice of true and false can be made at once ordered and pertinent’ (Foucault, 2001a: 230).

2. Beyond history

Since the Scientific Revolution, the Western conception of knowledge ‘presupposes that there is truth everywhere, in every place and all the time’. Every positive entity has its own truth and everything can be questioned about its truth. Although our historical existence and our human limits can make truth hard to find, it lives everywhere and it can be looked for at every moment. Furthermore, what is more important for Foucault is that no one is exclusively qualified to get in touch with the truth. Anyone can access it, provided that they have ‘the instruments required to discover it, the categories necessary to think it, and an adequate language for formulating it in propositions’ (Foucault, 2006: 236). Our conception of truth is scientific, in that it consists in a technology for the observation and the universal demonstration of truth. During a lecture in 1974, Foucault calls this notion “truth-sky”, to depict its universality. He also hypothesizes that, in archaic times, there was a completely different conception of truth, which he terms “truth-thunderbolt” or “truth-event”. This latter conception has a precise topology in its history and geography, and has messengers or privileged agents. It is not universal: ‘It is a dispersed truth, a truth that occurs as an event’ (Foucault, 2006: 237).

By resisting every universal theory of truth, Foucault situates his reflection on truth at the historical level, questioning the conditions of what historically is and is not. He links truth to the history of events, whilst also excavating the strategic processes by means of which a contingent positivity becomes a universal and hegemonic category. The notions of truth-event and historico-political knowledge do ‘not belong to the order of what is, but to the order of what happens, they are not given in the form of discovery, but in the form of the event, and they are not found but aroused and hunted down’ (Foucault, 2006: 237). Foucault studies the production rather than the apophantic dimension of truth so as to show ‘how truth-knowledge is basically only a region and an aspect, albeit

one that has become superabundant and has assumed gigantic dimensions, but still an aspect or a modality of truth as event and of the technology of this truth-event' (Foucault, 2006: 238).

The first step to take is the rejection of the 'cloak of universals' (Foucault, 1998: 383) which hides the 'shock or clash' caused by the conflictual course of events (Foucault, 2006: 237). Beginning with his very first archaeological works, Foucault tries to invert the traditional method of historico-philosophical researches, which consisted in extracting certain universal truths from their accidental history. Instead of drawing from the universal, Foucault's archaeo-genealogical method focuses on particular statements and practices in order to bring to light their conditions of possibility. In 1969, he writes of his desire to free the facts of discourse from 'all the groupings that purport to be natural, immediate, universal unities' (Foucault, 1972: 29); in 1979, he explains that, '[i]nstead of deducing concrete phenomena from universals, or instead of starting with universals as an obligatory grid of intelligibility for certain concrete practices, I would like to start with these concrete practices and, as it were, to pass these universals through the grid of these practices. [...] Historicism starts from the universal and, as it were, puts it through the grinder of history. My problem is exactly the opposite. [...] Let's suppose that universals do not exist. [...] So what I would like to deploy here is exactly the opposite of historicism: not, then, questioning universals by using history as a critical method, but starting from the decision that universals do not exist, asking what kind of history we can do' (Foucault, 2008: 3).

Even though he has Nietzsche as one of his main references, Agamben does not break with the traditional chronological and teleological conception of history by questioning the particular facts and their singular positivity — as was the case with Foucault — but rather by embracing a messianic conception of time which sheds light upon the indistinction between particular and universal (Prozorov, 2009a). This conception provides the interpretative framework with which to analyse the idea of irreducible errancy that Agamben proposes.

In Foucault, rejecting universals means that the philosopher has to write stories by choosing a series of relevant elements as paradigms. Although they are actual and real things, these elements never coincide with reality as a whole. Foucault aims at understanding history by drawing his criterion of pertinence not from the discourses and practices he is analysing, but rather from the crucial questions of the present. In the distinction between present and actuality (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994: 112) lies the meaning of history as *fiction*, that is, a glance toward the past with the aim of making other discourses speak where they would

otherwise be marginal (Foucault, 2001b: 829–838; Chignola 2019: 96). Agamben's ontological perspective, on the other hand, leads his paradigms to the transcendently original dimension where the distinction between particular and universal has not yet occurred.

The dichotomy between the individual and the universal originates from human language and from the way it gives form to our knowledge. Even though in our experience we always encounter singular things, we can talk about them only by employing universal concepts. The logical shape of our language, Agamben writes, 'transforms singularities into members of a class, whose meaning is defined by a common property' (Agamben, 1993b: 9). We use nouns as labels of universal sets of features to talk about a particular experience that we have lived, but that we cannot say in its very singularity. Thus, the possibility of our speaking about an experienced object is subordinated to a process of conceptualisation, which makes the object accessible to thought but, at the same time, makes it impossible to return from this concept to the actual empirical thing in its particularity. In 1982, Agamben describes this ineluctable process as a symptom of the close relation between Western metaphysics and nihilism, that is to say, of the fact that 'any attempt to express sense-certainty signifies to experience the impossibility of saying what one means [...] due to the fact that the universal itself is the truth of sense-certainty, and thus it is precisely this truth that language says perfectly' (Agamben, 2006: 11). In order to be known, every raw and actual object of sense-certainty is immediately transformed into an ideal creature of language. Therefore, our cognitive concept of knowledge represents a relation between subjects and objects which is always mediated by the linguistic form.

The human dwells in the openness between an ineffable experience and the objects of thought, between the thing itself and its being-said. Agamben's paradigms are moulded to pave the way towards this openness which is the dimension where sayability as such lies: the example, indeed, is a 'concept that escapes the antinomy of the universal and the particular', being included in the very class whose members it exemplifies. According to its etymology, the 'paradigm' is that which is 'shown alongside', which shows its singularity as such: its life is purely linguistic since it is not defined by any property, apart from its being-called. (Agamben, 1993b: 10). The paradigm 'calls into question the dichotomous opposition between the particular and the universal which we are used to seeing as inseparable from procedures of knowing, and presents instead a singularity irreducible to any of the dichotomy's two terms'. It shows the truth beyond its historical empirical particularity and its linguistic universality and so

reverses the typically exceptional movement. Thus it illuminates the medial dimension in which the individual comes into contact with reality. ‘The paradigmatic relation does not merely occur between sensible objects or between these objects and a general rule; it occurs instead between a singularity (which thus becomes a paradigm) and its exposition (its intelligibility)’ (Agamben, 2009: 23).

Agamben describes this space as a mediality that is always presupposed, a quasi-mystical dimension transcendent to every speech act which is cast into oblivion so as to make every concrete speech act possible. This is the real habitat of the human, whose most extensive potentiality corresponds to his impotence. While Foucault proposes his fictional history to answer the questions of the present, Agamben takes into account the deeper “demand” of all the potentiality dissolved into the act (Agamben, 2018a: 29–34). This is why he describes human truth as an irreducible errancy (apparently similar to the one Foucault was looking for in Binswanger’s concept of the imagination in 1954 (Foucault, 1993), even though that was subordinated to a phenomenological notion of subject which both Foucault and Agamben criticise).

In the 1997 lecture from which we begin (‘Verità come erranza’), this dimension is gained by leaving aside the concept of the sovereign subject and the perspective of cognitive knowledge. Unlike Foucault, however, Agamben does not conduct his reflection by means of an analysis of the historical conditions of the actual subject.

Agamben enquires into the possibility of separating knowledge from cognition, starting from a technical question in mediaeval philosophy. It is the issue of whether the intelligibility of a thing, that is, its truth, is to be considered as other than the thing itself and other than the act of knowledge. This aporia concerns what was known as “intentional being”, or the truth. In the first chapter of his *Commentary on John*, Meister Eckhart defines the aporia in these terms: if the form or species by which a thing is seen or known is different from the thing itself, we could not know the thing through it; but if it were completely indistinct from the thing then it would be useless for knowledge. In both cases, it would be either useless or even a hindrance to knowledge (Eckhart, 1981).

This aporia can be explained in other terms: the truth or intelligibility of a thing can be neither simply another thing nor the thing itself. What is crucial is the ontological status of truth. And this is an aporia that affects all mediaeval culture, shaping for example the fundamental attunement of Stilnovist poetry (Agamben, 1993a: 63ff).

Observing this aporia, Agamben finds the opportunity to separate truth and cognitive knowledge, since the intentional relation does not run between a subject and an object, but rather between the Being and its own intelligibility, its truth. Therefore, it is not a matter of a relationship between a knowing subject and a known object: it is ‘an internal tension, an *intus tensio* of the Being’, akin to the urgency which, in Heidegger, is bestowed upon the human being thanks to the original disorientation caused by its not having a language and not always being a subject (Agamben, 2004: 57–62).

Unlike modern thought, Agamben defines the ontological and non-cognitive status of truth by interrupting the relation between subject and object through the question of intelligibility as such; and, in just the same way, the question about visibility disrupts the conception of vision as a relation between seeing and seen, and the question of sayability breaks with the conception of language as a mere means of communication.

‘In all these cases the truth is removed from the cognitive sphere and restored to ontology’, that is, it assumes the form of a potentiality, which somehow underlies and yet is never taken as a theme by theoretical considerations regarding that relationship of subject and object. In Agamben’s opinion, this is the only way we can rediscover the real essence of truth: it is not a self-evident *adequatio*, but rather an unstoppable straying, making Plato’s fictitious etymology of *alé-theia* as ‘divine errancy’ an inexhaustible movement of Being itself. Summarising Heidegger (2002), Agamben writes: ‘Errancy is not a dimension in which the human being finds itself by happenstance; it always moves in the errancy, which, as *Un-Wahrheit*, non-truth, belongs to the essence of truth itself and is inseparable from the very opening of *Dasein*’ (Agamben, 1997: 16).

Setting aside the cognitive status of truth, Agamben suggests that we think of truth as a ‘contemplation without knowledge’, an ecstatic staring at the “voiceless suspension” — the hanging thought — before the linguistic determination allows the human being to define itself as a historical animal, and before the movement of the exception defines every form of life (Abbott, 2011; Castanò, 2018).

Indeed, when Agamben writes about truth and a new concept of ethics, he is thinking of the emancipation from a dispositive. But this dispositive is conceived more broadly than Foucault’s: Agamben’s dispositive is, first of all, a mechanism which initiates the historical plot of mankind, the beginning of which leads back to the fundamental distinction between *zoé* and *bios*, that is, the elementary ontological dichotomy that gives form to human life. Rather than the disposition of historical relationships of force that combines subjectivation and subjection,

Agamben's dispositive combines subjectivation and de-subjectivation, fulfilling life and yet reducing it to its identities.

3. Telling the truth

In the Introduction to *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault describes the history of truth as the analysis of 'the problematisations through which being offers itself to be, necessarily, thought'. Yet, this is not a Heideggerian or Hegelian claim, since Foucault immediately specifies that these analyses can be carried out only by studying 'the practices on the basis of which these problematisations are formed' (Foucault 1990: 11). In an interview from the same year, the French philosopher describes his own work as writing the history of the relations between thought and truth, 'the history of thought as thought of the truth', that is, the history of the events and the practices that allow things to enter the games of true and false (Foucault, 2001b: 1487–1497).

We saw how Foucault interprets the *shift* in the conception of truth from Descartes to Nietzsche, overcoming the conception of the subject intrinsically capable of truth solely by virtue of his acts of knowledge. What he eventually identifies as 'truth' is not a pure dimension destined to be entirely fulfilled through the sublation of all accidents at the end of history. As a matter of fact, according to Foucault, truth is the dispositional order that shapes and conditions all historical positivities, such as 'procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements'. This policing of discourses and practices, and the systems of power are intertwined with one another: they produce and sustain each other; and this reciprocal implication creates a regime of truth, an expression that Foucault uses to distinguish this conception of truth from ideology and superstructure. Every system of power relations and every epoch has its own truth regime: 'The political question, to sum up, is not error, illusion, alienated consciousness, or ideology; it is truth itself' (Foucault, 2001a: 132–133).

The Nietzschean philosophy proclaims the end of the *Cartesian moment*. And hot on its heels, Foucault addresses the way in which certain moral discourses and prescriptions have turned into the ahistorical and universal description of human nature, and the variety of practices by which the subject is formed as a historical positivity in relation to the events of truth. Foucault uses the word *alethurgy* to define this relation between subjectivity and the events productive of truth. This term is intended to replace the Heideggerian notion of *alētheia* as the unveiling of

truth with the conception of both produced and productive truth (Foucault, 2014: 6–7; Deere, 2014: 523). Setting aside the cognitive notion of truth, Foucault embarks on a reflection concerning ethics conceived as the critical spirit in connection with the actual historical conditions governing the discourses and relations we are surrounded by.

In the Eighties, Foucault begins to construct the positive side of his archaeology: while the archaeological analysis brought to light the warp and weft by which a regime of truth is created, Foucault now begins to consider the ways in which we can play ‘the same game differently’ or play ‘another game, another hand, with other trump cards’ (Foucault, 1997: 295). Since there is no *dehors* to the truth games — which are the condition for every discourse and act — Foucault provides the historical tools necessary to take them into account critically and play the game differently. In light of this shift, Foucault plays ethics off against morality.

The first significant occurrence of the word ‘ethics’ in Foucault’s work may be found in the Preface that he writes for the English translation of Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, in 1977. He defines this work as a manual for the ‘art of living’, an ‘ethics’ (Foucault, 1977a). Five years later, Foucault describes his *History of Sexuality* in the same terms (Foucault, 1997: 131).

In the Introduction to the second volume of the *History of Sexuality*, the distinction between ethics and morality is clearly stated: ‘By “morality”, one means a set of values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies’. Sometimes, these rules and values are explicitly taught by coherent doctrines and systematic ensembles, but more often they form a complex and diffuse interplay of elements. But morality is also assigned a narrower meaning: ‘The real behaviour of individuals in relation to the rules and values that are recommended to them’, the level of obedience or resistance to prescriptions and values, the fulfilment or transgression of a standard of conduct.

But prior to all morality, one must take into account how, by acting with reference to the prescriptive elements of the code, one forms oneself as an ethical subject. This is ‘ethics’ proper: given a code prescribing how we ought to act, there are different manners in which we might conduct ourselves morally and ‘different ways for the acting individual to operate, not just as an agent, but as an ethical subject of this action’ (Foucault 1990: 25–26). Ethics concerns the hiatus between a moral code and the way one practises its prescriptions. It is not simply a matter of self-awareness: given a historical set of relations and discourses, ethics is a process of self-formation through which one moulds oneself as an ethical

subject by delimiting a particular part of the self upon which the moral practice will rebound, defining one's relation to the precepts that one will follow, and deciding on a certain attitude as a moral goal (Foucault, 1990: 28). Ethics is indissociable from ascetics, that is, work, exercise, decision, self-constitution. The overcoming of the subject in the modern sense does not lead Foucault to the freezing of human action, as is the case in some structuralist perspectives. In fact, it leads him to reconsider ethics as a process of emancipation from historical conditions of subjectivation: 'The formation and development of a practice of the self which aims at the constitution of oneself as the fabricator of the beauty of one's life' (Foucault, 2001b: 1487–1497).

Foucault does not deal with a substantial self, but with a *relation to the self*. Subjectivity rather than subject; the practical reflexivity by which one constructs oneself, rather than a substance or a transcendental determination (Foucault, 1997: 289–291; Gros, 2005). There is not a sovereign subject, but rather a life-long exercise of mastering and constituting oneself as an aware subject of action. Thus, sovereignty is not a given fact, but is achieved through an awareness of the historical conditions in which we live, and which produces us as raw material for our ethical elaboration. Among these productive conditions, there is what Foucault calls morality or moral code, even though it cannot erase all possibilities of free action: the many-layered complexity of Foucault's dispositive implies the interplay of multiple relational segments, which variously condition the individual. Such complexity is precisely what allows the individual to forge an ethical project in the gaps left by dispositional constraints.

This was already the case in the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* and the interviews on the analytic of power, in the Seventies. In the Eighties, as Foucault comes to concentrate more on subjectivation than subjection, he explicitly treats a historical substance we are required to obey, but that we can try to mould aesthetically, making our life a work of art.

While our Christian world is characterized by obedience to laws and moral prescriptions, 'Greek ethics is centred on a problem of personal choice, of aesthetics of existence'. It is not a question of a revival of Greek ethics: 'I think there is no exemplary value in a period which is not our period', says Foucault. It is a question of embracing 'a treasury of devices, techniques, ideas, procedures, and so on, that cannot exactly be reactivated, but at least constitute, or help to constitute, a certain point of view which can be very useful as a tool for analysing what is going on now — and to change it' (Foucault, 1983: 234–236).

Perhaps due to the neoliberal revolution (Dean, Zamora, 2019; Brown, 2015: 73–78), Foucault felt that the time of the moral code based on obedience

was almost up (Foucault, 2001b: 1549–54) it was time to imagine a way to take advantage of the spaces of freedom that seemed to open up. In the *History of Madness* and in the books and courses of the Seventies, Foucault already dealt with an objectifying cure that extrapolates the truth of the subject, makes it the object of knowledge and gradually replaces it with a normalised truth. In the Eighties, studying Greek ethics, essentially in the Stoic and Epicurean texts, Foucault puts the care — *souci* — of the self in the foreground.

Descartes, Foucault explains, cuts scientific rationality loose from morality (Foucault, 1983: 279–280). But the modern State expands the task of caring for one and all that the Christian pastorate had produced in its first centuries. This care is no longer aimed at a transcendent redemption, but rather at the demand of security coming from modern societies. As a function of this task of care, procedures of examination and control of the individual's reality are adopted to produce a detailed and economic knowledge to which the individuals and their relationships are subjected. The events of this production, the issues it faces, and the new problems it raises can only be seen from a critical perspective, outside of a merely cognitive relation with truth, from which one can reveal the historical and pragmatic feature of categories which are believed to be universal and necessary. Taking care of the self — which is not just a call to introspection and an endless interpretation of one's secret nature — means exercising the ability to observe obliquely the discourses and the set of relationships that transform us into objects of knowledge and power, displacing ourselves from what we are in order to master ourselves and tell our own truth (Chignola, 2019: 6). Self-knowledge is not a matter of objectifying one's self in introspective observation, but is rather a practice of concentration and self-guidance aimed at the complete possession and mastery of the self.

Thus, perfect and absolute immanence to the self is the first condition, but this does not mean that the care of the self is a solitary activity that closes the individual off from the world. Introducing a certain distance from the world does not lead to the escape from the world; rather, it allows the individual to act properly in the collective life, thwarting any chance of being heterogeneously dominated and intensifying its regulated and deliberated political action. The care of the self is not a cognitive knowledge of the self. It implies a knowledge intrinsically oriented towards *ethopoiesis*, the shaping of one's behaviour by establishing a close correspondence between acts and words. To give life a particular form; to give form to our impatience for liberty.

We are far from a cognitive sense of knowledge and we are beyond a propositional conception of truth: the correspondence between acts and words,

again, leads to a pragmatic relation to truth. It is not a matter of knowing a truth: beyond the distinction between theory and practice, truth is both learning and fighting, *logos* embedded in the *bios* (Foucault, 2016: 34). Here the sources of inspiration are the Cynic example and *parrhesia*, the practice of freedom — that is not a practice of liberation, since there is not ‘a human nature or base that, as a consequence of certain historical, economic, and social processes, has been concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression’ (Foucault, 1997: 282) — consisting in the free-spokenness, that is, the courage to tell the truth even beyond the roles one is called to respect by the actual pragmatic conditions, the bravery to cause a scandal not by saying something propositionally wrong or new, but rather transgressing the pragmatic order of sayability (Foucault, 2010: 61–74; Simpson, 2012; Lorenzini, 2015; Sforzini, 2019).

4. Nothing to enact or realize

In reformulating the relation between the subject and the truth, Foucault is led to refuse both the conception of a universal and ahistorical truth, and the *apriori* theory of the transcendental subject. Foucault rejects a theory of the subject so as to ask how a given form of knowledge is possible. Thus, he tries to show how the subject constitutes itself, in one specific form or another, through certain practices and games of truth. Rejecting *apriori* theories of the subject, he aims to analyse ‘the relationships that may exist between the constitution of the subject or different forms of the subject and games of truth, practices of power, and so on’ (Foucault, 1997: 290). Moreover, rejecting the substantial nature of the subject, Foucault describes it as a form that is not always identical to itself, but rather depends on the type of relationship it enjoys with itself and its circumstances.

Foucault severs the traditional relation between the subject and the truth, as well as between the subject and the truth about itself: the truth is replaced by games of truth, discourses and actual relations of force, dispositives that are never stable and which vary their order with each action that is taken. The subject is both constituted as a subject and subjected as an object of knowledge and conduction. Leaving aside the traditional conception of truth, ethics cannot be defined as the right behaviour to reach true knowledge, salvation, security. Ethics is the way in which the individual takes into account the actual historical conditions which produce it and affect its thought and action, how it dares to take control of its own subjectivation and has the courage to loosen the surrounding relations.

Even in Agamben, the lack of a human essence leads to a rethinking of ethics that ends up far from the prescriptive perspective. But the ontological point of view from which Agamben strives to correct or, at least, complete Foucault's thesis — as we have already seen — implies that truth be given a broader meaning and, hence, that we fashion a new concept of ethics, detached from the notions of actuality and history.

Agamben proposes his first definition of ethics in the concluding lines of *Language and Death*, in 1982: '*Ethos*, humanity's own, is not something unspeakable or *sacer* that must remain unsaid in all praxis and human speech. Neither is it nothingness, whose nullity serves as the basis for the arbitrariness and violence of social action. Rather, it is social praxis itself; human speech itself' (Agamben, 2006: 106). The whole seminar aims at demonstrating that, unlike the other animals, the human has no voice of its own, and so it trembles in anguish, looking for a language to name the things that crowd its world and to create its own environment in which to dwell. The human lacks a language and constantly tries to master a language that it has learnt and that is not its own; this is testified to by certain discursive elements devoid of any semantic reference. These elements are the shifters — the meaning thereof depends on the singular enunciative instance — which can render manifest the existence of language itself (Agamben, 2006: 24–26), that is to say, the presence of a dimension where the language takes place and communicates its own communicability without meaning, implied in every utterance as an unsayable presupposition. That dimension 'is included by means of an exclusion' (Agamben 1998: 7), since it is the ontological condition of every use of language but is not an objective reference for the language itself.

The simultaneous exclusion and inclusion of this Voice, through which man can express determined meanings, is analogous to the movement of the exception by which an original dimension is crossed by a decisive cut that sacrifices it in favour of a determination. This is the gesture that Agamben defines as the intimate relationship between metaphysics and nihilism (Agamben, 2006: xiii), which characterizes every actual thought, speech, act, every decision and determination as violence.

Due to its groundlessness, the human being creates itself by enacting — and so exhausting — its original potentiality. History is the process by which the human being tries to give a definite shape to its groundlessness by deciding what is human and what is not, what has to be done and what does not, sacrificing its potentiality first, and then ruling out anything incompatible with the historical definitions of the human. In 1990, Agamben offers a more explicit definition of ethics, starting from the fact that 'there is no essence, no historical or spiritual

vocation, no biological destiny that the human must enact or realise' (Agamben 1993b: 43). Even though ethics is commonly thought to be an ensemble of rules that allows one to reach one's destiny or realise an essence, it is precisely the lack of a certain substance and a certain destiny that make an ethical experience possible. Otherwise, there would only be mere tasks to achieve. In fact, Agamben is not embracing a nihilistic perspective according to which humans are senselessly abandoned to nothingness: 'There is in effect something that humans are and have to be, but this something is not an essence nor properly a thing: *It is the simple fact of one's own existence as possibility or potentiality*', beyond every actual form one can constitute for one's life.

In Agamben's conception, ethics is not a matter of taking into account the conditions that produce and influence our thought and action in the direction of transgressing the pragmatic order which regulates what can be said and what can be done. If we wanted to continue to use the Foucauldian word "courage", we could say that, in the Agambenian conception, ethics is the courage to bear the groundlessness, the impotence which is intrinsic to the original potentiality of the human, the deep angst of being thrown into the world without anything to do and no language with which to orient one's self within it. Ethics is the dwelling where words and actions take place, the horizon in which human beings discover their *poietic* nature before enacting it as the production of will (Agamben, 1999b: 68–76).

Every determinate form of life enacts the original potentiality intrinsic to the ethical dwelling of the human: 'The only evil consists in the decision to remain in a deficit of existence, to appropriate the power to not-be as a substance and a foundation beyond existence; or rather (and this is the destiny of morality), to regard potentiality itself, which is the most proper mode of human existence, as a fault that must always be repressed' (Agamben, 1993b: 44).

While Foucault, by rejecting the traditional relation between the transcendental subject and truth, suggests that we embed ethics and politics in an alethurgic perspective, Agamben moves towards the coming ethics and politics as a wandering horizon where 'inoperativeness and decreation are the paradigm' (Agamben, 2001; Agamben, 2010; Cavalletti, 2010; Didi-Huberman, 2017). The theme of inoperativity is taken up by Agamben from Kojève's, Blanchot's and Nancy's texts, and redefined in a brief note to *Homo Sacer*. In Agamben's lexicon, this word does not mean the simple absence of work or a sovereign and useless form of negativity. In fact, inoperativity is the concept by which Agamben thinks 'the existence of potentiality without any relation to Being in the form of actuality' (Agamben 1998: 47): it is 'a generic mode of potentiality that is not exhausted (like

individual action or collective action understood as the sum of individual actions) in a *transitus de potentia ad actum*' (Agamben, 1998: 62; Marchesoni, 2017; Spina, 2019).

Some years later, in *Means without End*, we find a definition of politics which is very similar to that offered in *The Coming Community* for ethics. The common ground is the original inoperativeness of the human being, the radical being-without-work to which politics corresponds. Just like ethics, 'there is politics because human beings are *argós* — beings that cannot be defined by any proper operation — that is, beings of pure potentiality that no identity or vocation can possibly exhaust' (Agamben, 2000: 140). The adjective used by Agamben is "*argós*", that is, *ergos* prefixed with an *alpha* privative, the same word used to define the messianic horizon as the time which deactivates any nominal determination and profanes any sacrifice: *katargéo* (Agamben, 2005: 73–92; Agamben, 2007). The opposite meaning of Foucault's *alethurgy*, *alētheia-ergon*, the production of truth.

In *The Time that Remains*, Agamben describes a messianic time in which the factual forms of human life are revoked, which does not mean that they are merely erased or replaced by 'another figure or another world' (Agamben, 2007: 25), but rather that they are suspended, and lived as if they were not. While identities, conditions, forms of life are possessed as if they were one's own and, in turn, as if they possessed one's life, the messianic vocation leads to their being used *as if not*, present but inoperative. Thus, the suspension of their efficacy in capturing life restores the human to its pure potentiality by making every form of life inoperative, exposed and open to new possibilities.

We find the same soteriological perspective in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, in which Agamben describes a messianic deactivation of every governmental dispositive, including subjectivity and the very language in which it takes place, in order to regain the original inoperativity as a whole. 'In this inoperativity, the life that we live is only the life through which we live; only our power of acting and living, our *act-ability* and our *live-ability*. Here *bios* coincides with *zōè* without remainder' (Agamben, 2011: 251).

All these elements are fundamentally implicit in the confrontation with Foucault's ethics of care, in *The Use of Bodies* (Agamben, 2016: 31–37, 95–108; Chiesa, 2018). The issue of use as an ethical matter traverses the entire *Homo Sacer* series (Stimilli, 2016). In *Opus Dei*, Agamben states that the coming philosophy must think 'an ontology beyond operativity and command and an ethics and a politics entirely liberated from the concepts of duty and will', that is, beyond the enacting of potency (Agamben, 2013b: 129). A year before, in *The Highest Poverty*, Agamben had analysed the Franciscan example of life, underlining

the merit of having pitted use against ownership, yet pinpointing the limit of having thought it ‘only negatively with respect to the law’. Use is never conceptualised in itself by the Franciscans. The book ends with the question as to whether it is possible to translate use — ‘that is, a relation to the world insofar as it is inappropriable’ — into an *ethos*. Agamben asks: ‘What ontology and which ethics would correspond to a life that, in use, is constituted as inseparable from its form?’ (Agamben, 2013a: 144).

Having set aside the idea of a human essence to be fulfilled, and having claimed that human dwelling is the errancy without one’s own voice in a horizon of potentiality, it follows that every time a form bestows an identity upon a life, every time a will enacts the means-end chain, every time we claim ownership over the world, we fall into a violent game that involves limiting our original potentiality. This is why Agamben examines the ontological implications of a new kind of (inoperative) relation, that of use.

And it is not a matter of a different economy of relations as a possible horizon for a different politics, as Foucault would suggest with his concept of manifold dispositives and ethics of the care of the self (Agamben, 1998: 187). Bartleby, Agamben says, is not revealing a new truth through his life and is not giving a new form to his life: Bartleby places himself in the horizon of pure mediality without content (Agamben, 1999a); also, in the “gesture” and the dance, Agamben finds the paradigm of a new conception of ethics that results from the separation of the subject and the actual action (Agamben, 2018c). ‘Inoperativity is not another action alongside and in addition to all other actions, not another work beyond all works: it is the space — provisional and at the same time non-temporal, localized and at the same time extra-territorial — that is opened when the apparatuses that link human actions in the connection of means and ends, of imputation and fault, of merit and demerit, are rendered inoperative’ (Agamben, 2018b: 85). As a matter of fact, in every actual form of life, in every (self)-constitutive movement, we are always taken by a biopolitical dispositive; this is why the evil is not a discrete action, but the act itself. The concept of use is intended to deactivate this ontology.

In *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben takes into account the Greek verb “to use”: *chrēsthai*. To us, “to use” means the transitive action of a subject on an object. However, the meaning of the Greek verb is different, since its very form is neither active nor passive, but rather stands in the diathesis that ancient grammarians called “middle”, an indeterminate zone between activity and passivity where what is referred to is not the relation to an object but rather the relation the subject has with itself. Agamben explains the particular function of this verb, writing that the

subject who performs the action, by the very fact of achieving it, is not acting transitively on an object, but above all affects itself in the process; that is to say, on the other hand, the subject does not stand transcendently aloof from the action, since it itself is the place of its occurring. ‘We can therefore attempt to define the meaning of *chrēsthai*: it expresses the relation that one has with oneself, the affection that one receives insofar as one is in relation with a determinate being’ (Agamben, 2016: 28–29). Use is a new figure of human praxis, by which the dichotomy of agent and patient is deactivated, and subject and object, constituent and constituted, are indeterminated.

Foucault himself, working on the relation with the self, comes up against the problem of the meanings of the verb *chrēsthai* during his lectures in 1982, but his interpretation slips back into the concept of care of the self. To him, taking care of the self means to concern oneself with the subject of a series of *uses*, conducts, inclinations, behaviours. In Foucauldian terms: ‘Taking care of oneself will be to take care of the self insofar as it is the “subject of” a certain number of things [...]. It is insofar as one is this subject who uses, who has certain attitudes, and who has certain relationships etcetera, that one must take care of oneself. It is a question of taking care of oneself as subject of the *khresis*’ (Foucault, 2005: 57).

According to Agamben, Foucault seems to ignore the fact that the word *chresis* already designates a relation to the self by which every possible reference to a subject is removed. On the contrary, the fact of dealing with the active subject of care as a subject which has a relation of care to the self, and defining care as the relation of concern with the subject of use, means that what one is taking care of is the subject of the relation of use. Therefore, the subject of care is transcendent with respect to an object and, in turn, calls for yet another order of care with respect to himself.

In fact, the risk of a *regressus ad infinitum* is probably exaggerated here. Foucault tempers the risk of a solipsistic relationship between the subject and the self by introducing care into a series of relations. The care of the self is not a solitary activity: it always presupposes the accompaniment of an older brother or a master (Foucault, 2005: 58), and it takes the form of eminently social activities (Di Gesù, 2019; Gros, 2005: 702). If the care of the self is a process of education and self-constitution, it is always a relational activity. The self is not a pre-existent thing which the subject establishes a relationship with.

Trying to replace the principle of the transcendence of the *ego* with an enquiry into the subject’s forms of immanence, Foucault offers the example of care as a work that ‘does not aim to split the subject, but to bind him to himself [...] in a form in which the unconditional character and self-finality of the

relationship of the self to the self is affirmed'; and this work is possible within the relation of a master and his pupil (Foucault, 2005: 532). In other words, the subject is the relation that is established by these relational activities, thanks to which one learns to recognize the archaeological geometries and genealogical histories that produce it.

Hence, we can ask why Agamben overlooks this Foucauldian insight about the teaching relation (Cavalletti, 2017). As a matter of fact, it would have made the understanding of the Foucauldian passage which Agamben cites less enigmatic: 'The self with which one has the relationship is nothing other than the relationship itself [...], it is in short the immanence, or better, the ontological adequacy of the self to the relationship' (Foucault, 2005: 533).

Foucault aims at uncovering the self-narration of a transcendental subject and looks for new forms of subjective immanence. His reflection leads to a new definition of ethics, that is not a mere set of norms, but a relational form of life. Foucauldian ethical life flourishes only thanks to relational activities of care by which one learns to recognise in critical terms the ensembles of forces and discourses, and the games of truth that give shape to one's life, in order to constitute one's self autonomously. These relations and the historical games of truth that produce them are the critical starting point, and the constitution of new political relations is a consequence of the care of the self.

The Agambenian critique of the cognitive relation between the subject and truth leads to the ethics of inoperativity and the concept of use, as Agamben's project of integrating Foucault's thesis in an ontological way is aimed at the overcoming of the metaphysics of relation. Therefore, ethics is not a matter of relations, but rather of overcoming the form of the relation, which is always a 'positing of relation with the nonrelational' in the form of the ban (Agamben 1998: 29). Agambenian ethics is the effort of regaining the nonrelational dimension that is presupposed by every thought, discourse, act — including that of care and self-constitution — and that is the dimension of unexpressed potentiality (cf. Prozorov, 2009b).

While Foucault aims at renewing the relations of power by disrupting the constituent movement — for example through the observation of sadomasochistic relations — and by submitting to it the praxis of use, Agamben designates the exceptional geometry that underlies constituent power as his own critical objective, in order to offer a destituent gesture. The space in which bare life has been exiled is also occupied by the form-of-life, which inverts the movement of the exception: the form-of-life is not a determined form of life, but the object of

the ban that ‘no longer has the form of a bond or exclusion-inclusion of bare life, but of intimacy without relation’ (Agamben, 2016: 236).

5. Conclusion

1. In his last article, Foucault writes that life is nothing other than ‘what is capable of error’. The subject would not arise, therefore, in relation to truth, but in the furrow of errancy.

Agamben interprets this “erring” as “going astray”, that is not mistaking, but wandering; not as the opposite of the truth, but as its condition. Erring means to move without knowing one’s goal, and this is the movement that places subjectivity within the ethical dimension. During a lecture delivered in 2009 at the European Graduate School, Agamben exposed this concept by referring to the “*lignes d’erre*” that Fernand Deligny drew in order to describe the paths of autistic children’s movements on transparent sheets which, once superimposed, showed not only a tangle of senseless lines but also the recurring of certain singular points. These lines of wandering trace the boundaries of a form-of-life which must not be confused with the sovereign conscious subject, but which nevertheless arises as a condition of every act. Similarly, erring would indicate the configuration of a subjectivity as a form-of-life, caught in such a destabilizing errancy that makes possible a discourse on truth detached from knowledge.

2. Rather than simply completing the Foucauldian reflection, Agamben ends up demonstrating Foucault’s belonging to a very problematic ontological scenario, which has to be overcome consistently with the denunciation of the link between Western metaphysics and violence. Foucault’s and Agamben’s concepts of ‘errancy’ seem to arise from very different intentions: Foucault interprets this inexhaustible movement as a constant and self-constituting self-critical dislocation; Agamben, denouncing the aporias of the constituent movement, envisions a gesture of decreation that redeems actuality, bringing to light the potential horizon against which it stands out, and that in ethical terms is errancy itself.

Foucault is placed on a historical level, providing ethical and political tools for critique and struggle. Agamben, adopting a messianic perspective, imagines a deactivating practice aimed at happiness beyond history, and leaves many troubling questions of human life unanswered. Even within an optimistic perspective, from which an idea of a happy life can be foreshadowed, the

paradigmatic figures offered by Agamben are dramatic monads, exhausted not only by the power that seizes them, but also by the same attempt to inhabit the horizon of impotence.

3. It is possible, however, to consider the profanatory movement — which disrupts the historical positivities and allows them to retain their potentiality within their actuality — as the preliminary moment for a critical analysis aimed at establishing a more conscious relationship with reality and with others in history. Rather than dwelling on the ontological horizon as such, this would allow the preservation of the image of the panorama against which every experience stands out: we cannot embrace the whole transcendental horizon, but we can assume it as the very scenario in which we get in touch with actual positivities.

It would be a meditative practice in the true sense of the word: a posture that, even though in a problematic way, would allow us to adhere to history without remaining imprisoned within it. In order to prevent a dramatic starvation as occurred in the case of *Bartleby*, this would demand an inexhaustible alternation between constitutive and destituent movements: exactly what Agamben does not admit, speaking as he does merely of the *praxis* of *inoperare*, a *praxis* whose positive movement corresponds to a deactivating gesture.



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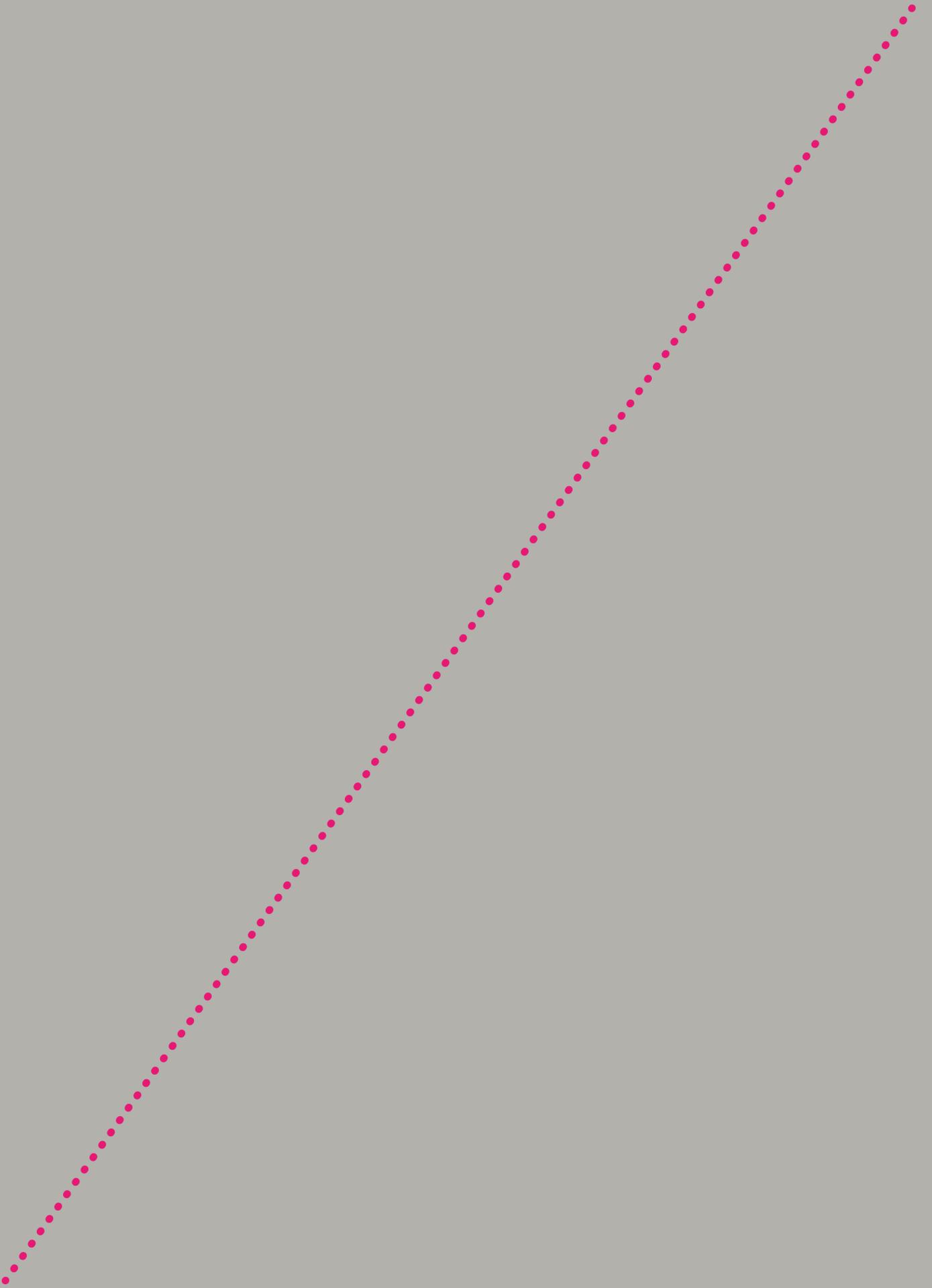
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The Pataphysics of Inoperativity in the Works of Giorgio Agamben

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Abstract

This paper argues that the origin of Giorgio Agamben's abiding interest in inoperativity comes out of his largely overlooked engagement with pataphysics, and with the works of Alfred Jarry in particular. More than a mere reference point, pataphysics emerges as the fundamental signature underlying many of Agamben's philosophical practices and interests. In particular, we can see the imprint of pataphysics in terms of Agamben's science of the real, the cultivation of a taste for the aesthetics of impossible things and non-knowledge, the politics of exceptionality, analogical empiricism (of paradigms), and the notion of form-of-life. At the same time, the article utilizes Agamben's pataphysics to reveal new meanings and uses for pataphysics, especially with regards to Jarry. In conclusion, the article offers up a theory of study that renders inoperative the signatures of pataphysics in Agamben's writings so that such signatures can make themselves intelligible and, in turn, open to new use.

Keywords: Giorgio Agamben; pataphysics; Alfred Jarry; state of exception; Ubu Roi; Faustroll; study



The recently published edited volume *Agamben's Philosophical Lineage* (Kotsko and Salzani, 2017) traces the multiple philosophical influences on the expansive oeuvre of Giorgio Agamben. The book is organised into three parts that highlight his primary interlocutors, important yet secondary points of reference, and more subtle and submerged dialogues. Given the breadth and depth of the book, one might find it surprising that no space is given to the enigmatic French poet, playwright, critic, and proponent of pataphysics, Alfred Jarry.

Of course, this might be due to the fact that Jarry is not traditionally considered a philosopher, and has received much more attention for his affiliation with Symbolism, Dada, and Surrealism than for his influence on philosophers such as Deleuze or Derrida (to name only a few). His lineage places him somewhere between hermeticism, esoteric occultism, Lord Kelvin, C. V. Boys,

and H.G. Wells (Shattuck, 1960). Yet, this explanation for the oversight seems rather superficial.

Agamben, who translated Jarry's novel *The Supermale* into Italian, highlights Jarry's philosophical importance in several books, including *What is Philosophy?* and *Autoritratto nello Studio*. In the latter text, Agamben (2017a: 85) recalls how Jarry's posthumous novel, entitled the *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician*, 'enchanted' him by the rigorously poetic way in which it attempts to deal with genuinely philosophical problems. Indeed, if pataphysics is a joke, argues Agamben (*ibid.*: 86), then it is truly a 'brother of seriousness' in the sense that pataphysics discovers a 'supplementary universe' beyond the limitations of Western metaphysical traditions. Instead of highlighting specific philosophical claims or insights offered by Jarry, it is instead Jarry's methodological approach to philosophical problems through poetic means that enchants Agamben. Agamben argues that Jarry was one of his first inspirations for approaching philosophy through poetic experimentation. This poetic form extended not simply throughout Jarry's writings, but also throughout his eccentric form-of-life. As is well known, Jarry attempted fully to embody a pataphysical reality through his dress, behaviour, and personal character. There was, in other words, no separation for Jarry between life and philosophy. His transformation was so complete that, according to Agamben, the 'mask [...] had devoured its creator — of him, nothing remained' (2017a: 88). Total indifference to social norms and conventions or the proper conditions of existence (as Jarry lived in abject poverty during the latter part of his short life) made him into a kind of living marionette 'without any human residue' (*ibid.*). In other words, pataphysics formed Jarry's form-of-life as a kind of inoperative existence that preferred not to accommodate itself to any definition of the human.

In this article, I first want to explore the marks left on Agamben by Jarry's philosophic-poetic experiments. To do so is to unpack the pataphysical dimensions of Agamben's work that have yet to be appreciated, or rather, it is to take up familiar concepts and methodologies in order to reveal their pataphysical (rather than metaphysical) origins. This project is not merely an addition to the laundry list of figures that have influenced Agamben. Instead, I want to make a stronger claim: that Jarry's pataphysics is a signature running throughout Agamben's many attempts to render inoperative various political, ethical, and aesthetic discourses and practices defining Western metaphysics. If pataphysics is indeed a signature, this would account for its absence from *Agamben's Philosophical Lineage*. Signatures, according to Agamben are not merely signs; rather, they enable signs to signify anything at all by granting a certain usability to sign

systems. This usability enables signs to be linked together to form complex signifying networks. Agamben summarises, ‘the clue represents the exemplary case of a signature that puts an insignificant or nondescript object in effective relation to an event [...] or to subjects’ (2009: 70). Signatures — like clues — produce a chain of similarities between dissimilar concepts, ideas, objects, or actions. Instead of erasing the signature in the pure play of references (as books such as *Agamben’s Philosophical Lineage* are apt to do), here I want to do the opposite and reveal the pataphysical signature animating Agamben’s work, or that which grants his project a certain intelligibility but only insofar as its trace remains largely undetected.

At the same time, I wish to utilise Agamben to read Jarry’s texts anew. While it is often the case that Jarry is interpreted as a prescient prophet having forecast of some of the most important theoretical and scientific insights of the 20th century — including deconstruction, postmodernism, and Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle (Hugill, 2012) — it is my contention that Agamben’s pataphysical project enables us to approach Jarry with fresh eyes, liberating him from an infinite deferral of floating signifiers, a spectacle of ludic images, and a full-blown embrace of an ontology of contingency. In this sense, the paper offers three overlapping projects: (a) a reading of Agamben through the lens of pataphysical signatures; (b) a retrospective, Agambenian interpretation of Jarry and pataphysics; and (c) a description of Agamben’s own development of pataphysics, or how Agamben builds on and pushes further Jarry’s legacy.

While it might appear that these projects ought to be analytically distinct (each meriting its own distinct essay), I want to push them to a point of indistinction. Indeed, such a manoeuvre follows Agamben’s own approach to doing (pataphysical) philosophy. Discussing his core methodological principle — to develop that which remains unspoken in the thought of his interlocutors —, Agamben argues that ‘if we follow [this development] all the way, we inevitably end up at a point where it is not possible to distinguish between what is ours and what belongs to the author we are reading [...]. In this way, I will endeavour to continue and carry on — obviously, with full responsibility — the thought of an author I love’ (2019: 34–35). To speak of (a) without (b) or (c) would institute divisions that no longer exist if the signature of Jarry’s pataphysics truly animates Agamben’s work. Indeed, there is a moment of study in which *influence on* and *development of* cross paths and cross temporalities to the point at which the past enters the present and the present enters into the past, causing a pataphysical breakdown of linear concepts of causality. In the nexus of (a), (b), and (c) we can

locate a point of inoperativity between subject and object, author and reader, influence and development, and self and other that, in the end, is a true sign of love.

To trace the movement of pataphysical signatures through Agamben's work and to determine how these lines loop back and offer a new development of Jarry's ideas, this essay will not be structured as a linear argument. Instead, it will offer a series of lateral movements from one particular to another, forming a loose constellation. These particulars include the scientific, aesthetic, political, ethical, and educational relay points that lead from Jarry to Agamben and back again. The sections are as follows: the science of the real, a taste for the aesthetics of impossible things and non-knowledge, the politics of exceptionality, analogical empiricism (of paradigms), and a pataphysical form-of-life. In conclusion, the sinuous paths that unfold throughout the essay will be interpreted as a kind of labyrinthine library, which, I propose, renders inoperative the very inoperativity of pataphysics itself by enabling the reader truly to study (rather than learn from) the Jarry-Agamben assemblage.

The Real of Pataphysics

For Agamben, Jarry's pataphysics gestures toward a supplementary universe. This notion has been interpreted by pataphysicians as an early account of the possibility of a multiverse, or of quantum mechanics, and even a precursor to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. There are good reasons for supporting all of these interpretations. For instance, Jarry (1996: 88) embraces the strange force of the 'clinamen' or the random swerve or deviation of atoms crashing into one another. Whereas science for figures such as Aristotle and Francis Bacon concerns the knowledge of *regularities* and *continuities*, Jarry's pataphysical empiricism is concerned with the production of *irregularities* and *discontinuities* that arise through the unanticipated, tiny variations in atomic composition that are highly localised, and as such, introject chance into the universe. Pataphysical experiments set these chain reactions in motion through various procedures and protocols that act as catalysts. For instance, Jarry equally used mathematics and wordplay to induce swerves of poetic meaning.

Jarry's syzygy words are a case in point. Syzygy was originally an astrological term indicating the alignment of different celestial bodies. Jarry appropriated the concept and applied it to language. The resulting syzygetic words were born from the collision of seemingly unrelated grammatical or phonic

elements which when combined formed humorous puns or strange meanings. Syzygy words render common sense inoperative by disrupting any sense of a fixed, stable identity or meaning that would assign things, words, or ideas to specific categories. They also neutralise good sense by generating words that seem to tend toward chaos rather than order. In short, the clinamen is a methodological principle for rendering inoperative the functionality of language by interjecting contingent elements when and where they ought not to occur.

Interpreting the clinamen in Jarry's work as a precursor to certain scientific insights into the quantum world is provocative, but also misses something important about the inoperativity of Jarry's poetics that distances it from quantum mechanics and the laws of probability. Here, Agamben's own spin on Jarry's pataphysics is perhaps more generative than strictly "canonical" interpretations of Jarry as a mere handmaiden to Heisenberg.

The key to understanding Agamben's pataphysics is found in his short book *What is Real?* Here Agamben engages directly with quantum science, and in particular the strange disappearance of noted physicist Ettore Majorana who vanished without clear cause or motive whilst on a boat to Naples. According to Agamben's interpretation, quantum mechanics has renounced necessity for contingency and chance. In so doing, it has ceased to seek knowledge about the real. Instead, it merely seeks to control the real through statistical calculation. With the rise of quantum mechanics, Agamben warns, 'Science no longer tried to know reality, but [...] only [to] intervene in it in order to govern it' (2018c: 24). Probability becomes a tool to manage and control a universe that is now contingent all the way down.

In an interesting twist, Agamben sees this shift towards the question of governance as a foreclosure of the questions traditionally posed by science. Potentiality, released from any relationship to actuality, gains predominance, overtaking the actual to the point at which only probability remains. Here Agamben's worries concerning the current emphasis of quantum mechanics and probabilistic thinking in the sciences coincides with his criticism of biopolitics as the management of life. Indeed, we can read biopolitics as the social science equivalent of quantum physics now applied to populations on the macro-level. In both cases, governance is justified in relation to the need to maximise operativity

for a predictable (and controllable) future.¹ Stated differently, pataphysics attempts to reclaim a science of the impossible in order to safeguard the question of the real whereas quantum physics reduces the possible and the impossible to the *probable* and the *improbable*. Thus (un)reality becomes manageable and subjected to biopolitical control.

Given this critique of modern statistics and quantum physics, it is no wonder that Majorana's only recourse was to abandon science completely and disappear. Agamben's thesis concerning this disappearance thus takes on philosophical rather than purely psychological dimensions. He writes, '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' (2018c: 43). Majorana becomes the scientific version of Bartleby the Scrivener's famous ethical stance "I would prefer not to [be governed by probabilistic sciences]" (Melville, 2016). Disappearance renders inoperative the mechanism that makes governance possible. Majorana, in eluding scientific capture, keeps open the scientific question (what is real?) against the contamination of science by a biopolitical question (how to manage contingency?).

Returning to Jarry, we can now understand Agamben's fascination with Majorana as a trace of a pataphysical signature of the real. Majorana embodies the clinamen, introjecting a swerve into a system of statistical probability that cannot be calculated and thus cannot be governed. In other words, the clinamen is a particular kind of swerve that disrupts the operativity of statistical analysis, always returning us to the question of what is real. Just as Majorana disappeared from science, so too we can remember how Agamben describes Jarry as essentially disappearing into his performance. The mask annulled its creator leaving no trace of Jarry as a psychological individual. In both cases, those who seem to have abandoned science — Majorana through his ambiguous escape and Jarry through exaggerated performance — are actually those who are *protecting* science. It is therefore wrong to assume that Jarry's pataphysics is a mere precursor to quantum mechanics and probability theory. Agamben ensures that Jarry's clinamen is not fully absorbed into the scientific apparatus, and instead holds

¹ Here, it is interesting to compare Agamben's critical appraisal of quantum theory as the new metaphysics of biopolitical control with Karen Barad's embrace of quantum physics to problematise metaphysics. While beyond the scope of this essay, this is an interesting debate that, at its centre, concerns the question of how to interpret the place of contingency within contemporary pataphysical inheritances (conscious or unconscious).

open a space and time for disappearance, or for science to remain in defiance of its own probabilistic tendencies.

Pataphysical Tastes

As indicated above, Agamben's interest in Jarry lies in the latter's poetic resolution of philosophical problems. Even the earliest of Agamben's texts show an interest in developing this methodological approach, healing the fracture between poetry and philosophy. Thus, in *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, Agamben writes, 'poetry possesses its object without knowing it while philosophy knows its object without possessing it' (1993: xvii). Poetic words enjoy the object of knowledge by presenting it in a beautiful form while philosophy does not enjoy its object although it pursues knowledge of it. Once split, the two drift further and further apart, with philosophy becoming increasingly bound to formal constraints (think here of analytic formalisation according to the laws of logic) and poetry becoming increasingly freed from formal constraints. At the height of this separation, Agamben discovers criticism as a form of writing which 'neither represents nor knows, but knows the representation' (*ibid.*) and thus a thinking that combines critical and creative disciplines. Criticism is a 'putting together of impossible things' (*ibid.*: 155) or a 'relation with unreality' (*ibid.*: xix) that is invisible to either philosophy or poetry when they are separated.

Agamben returns to this question in his book *Taste*, written around the same time as *Stanzas*. In this text, he desires to overcome the dichotomy between science and pleasure, which always places taste in an inferior position within the hierarchical ordering of the senses. *Homo Sapiens*, meaning "wise man," he recalls, is etymologically linked to "*sapor*" or taste. And yet, in Western metaphysics, any relation between science and pleasure is disavowed. Recasting earlier claims, Agamben observes how science can know its object yet not take pleasure in it, and the artist can take pleasure in his/her creation without knowing it. The only trace of the original contact point between the two is found in the question of taste. Taste, and its various historical discourses, provides what Agamben refers to as an 'intermediate dimension' that is capable of a conciliation without negating difference between the two (2017c: 21). Precisely because taste *simultaneously* presents the problem of knowledge *and* pleasure without excluding one or the other, it sets forth an 'enigmatic' (*ibid.*: 20) relation between the two. Science — as knowledge which can be explained and thus known — and pleasure — which cannot found any knowledge — suddenly traverse the great divide opened up by

metaphysical distinctions. For this reason, taste is, from Agamben's perspective, "anti-metaphysical" in that it permits of the impossible: 'the knowledge of sensible appearances (of the beautiful as 'that which is most apparent') as true and the perception of truth as appearance and pleasure' (*ibid.*: 31). Paradoxically, this would be an impossible science that holds open the (un)reality of a supplementary universe that lies below distinctions between science, philosophy, and poetry.

Another set of dichotomies is also rendered inoperative through the discourse and practice of taste: political economy. Agamben writes, '[w]here aesthetics takes as its object a knowledge that is not known, political economy takes as its object a pleasure that is not enjoyed' (2017b: 66). Calling upon Marx's analysis of the commodity, Agamben argues that modern political economy is less about use-value (which can be enjoyed) than it is about exchange-value or a value that one cannot have/enjoy. In sum, '*Homo aestheticus* and *Homo economicus*, are in a certain sense the two halves (a knowledge that is not known and a pleasure that is not enjoyed) that taste struggled to hold together for the last time in the experience of a knowledge that enjoys and a pleasure that knows' (*ibid.*: 68). In this sense, taste struggles to define an indeterminate zone of contact that is not reducible to either knowledge or pleasure. It is a way of knowing that is equally non-knowing.

While Agamben chooses to define taste in the negative as anti-metaphysical, I would prefer to characterise it positively as pataphysical. Once again, pataphysics emerges as a signature that influences Agamben's critique of both modern science and aesthetics. Jarry's radical experimentations with resolving certain philosophical problems through poetic form is here raised to a new level through Agamben's own pataphysical (anti-metaphysical) methodology. Jarry's work poses the problem of the real not through scientific probability or through aesthetic judgment but rather through the cultivation of *taste* for non-knowledge, or a knowledge that we have only in so far as it (dis)appears.

Jarry's work cultivates a taste for non-knowledge, and it does so through the peculiar *manner* of its creation.² For instance, Jarry often takes up scientific formulae or mathematical equations and discovers within them a strange, uncanny aesthetic potentiality. Likewise, he combines scientific rigour, absurdist

² Indeed, Agamben's repeated interest in mannerism as a topic as well as the distinctive mannerism of his writing can both be traced back to Jarry, whose particular brand of Symbolism can be described as a mix of outrageous imagery, medievalism, profanations, and obscure references and vocabulary.

jokes, adolescent scatological phrases, and obscure, scholastic references all within a single passage. While one is often left speechless when forced to articulate the underlying pataphysical “reasons” at work in such constructions, it is equally true that one can gain a certain *sense* or *taste* for Jarry’s manner (as it explodes onto the page).

For Agamben, each work of art is traversed by a certain tension between style and manner. Style, on this reading, is the ‘perfect possession of one’s means’ in the form of a habit (Agamben, 2017b: 8). Manner, on the other hand, is a ‘trembling’ or ‘vacillation’ in which ‘style suddenly overflows, colours fade, words stutter, and matter clots and spills over’ (*ibid.*: 8–9). It is, in other words, the ‘deposition of habit’ (*ibid.*: 9). Extrapolating further, style is a potentiality to create that makes creation possible whereas manner is the potentiality not to create that passes into the act of creation precisely by rendering style inoperative.

Jarry’s various performative acts of suspension were, as Agamben (2017a: 88) rightly points out, completely ‘astounding’. These acts were often imitated but never equalled by fellow playwrights and poets. The reason they could never be duplicated was precisely the singularity of the manner in which they were performed. Such a manner is a kind of naked exposure of one’s potentiality-not-to do something passing into an act. While it is common to praise an artwork for its style, *real taste* is a taste for the manner in which something has been done, or rather the manner in which something is done only in so far as it is undone. Stated differently, a manner — a slight, uncontrollable trembling of the master’s hand that is beyond the capture of habit — is another way of embodying Jarry’s notion of the *clinamen* or swerve. The swerve makes style (dis)appear, meaning that it indicates an inoperative moment within the convention of style that throws style into relief, or exposes it, in a moment of neutralisation. Manner (as swerve in habit) makes art astonishing, filling style with a sense of perpetual decompletion in the precise moment of completion. It is the actualisation of an ability not to do something in the doing of something and therefore a way of cultivating taste for the paradoxes of pataphysical science.

Interestingly, in an autobiographical statement, Agamben observes that he has been ‘incapable of denying’ himself the happiness toward which his tastes have inclined him ‘just as an atom in its ceaseless fall cannot escape the *clinamen* that makes it suddenly curve’ (2018a: 3). While quantum physics might emphasise the contingency that the *clinamen* produces, Agamben shifts focus toward the *necessary* and somewhat *inescapable* lure of the *clinamen* to interrupt and render inoperative a certain normative trajectory (of atoms). What connects the *clinamen* with taste is precisely an ability to not *not* swerve (an impotentiality to resist that is

also and equally a potentiality to allow). Taste is therefore an *inability* to keep separate the faculties of knowing and sensing — a falling passively into the tractor beam of the clinamen as it swerves. It is a weak (yet necessary) force of contact that attracts poetry to philosophy, knowledge to pleasure, or life to its form (despite their being pulled apart through management). Hence the disruptive and anarchic politics of taste.

The Politics of Pataphysics

Famously, Agamben's *Homo Sacer* series posits that modern totalitarianism reveals the 'biopolitical significance of the state of exception as the original structure in which law encompasses living beings by means of its own suspension' (2005: 3). There are two key points here. First, the state of exception reveals the force of the law without the law. The state of exception thus presents a paradox of a law that is in power only in its subtraction, or a law that operates through its inoperativity. The suspension of the law is not outside the legal order, but rather is the limit of this order (neither fully inside nor radically outside). In its suspended state, the force of the law exposes the sovereign's power of decision that is always already a potentiality within any juridical order. Importantly, the continued operativity of the extra-legal force of the sovereign is the 'original structure' of politics in the West (*ibid.*). As an original structure, Agamben is not suggesting that it merely existed in the past and has been historically overcome through constitutional reforms that ensure citizens have rights against abuses of sovereign power. Instead, as origin, it belongs to the juridical order even if it stands outside this order. Indeed, the juridical structure *needs* this original structure. As Agamben summarises, 'This space devoid of law seems, for some reason, to be so essential to the juridical order that it must seek in every way to assure itself a relation with it, as if in order to ground itself the juridical order necessarily had to maintain itself in relation with an anomie' (*ibid.*: 51). To preserve itself, the juridical order must, at times, render inoperative its own legal apparatus and turn to the anomie of the sovereign decision. Anomie and law thus have a secret solidarity that is revealed through the state of exception.

This notion of the exception has been exhaustively described in the secondary literature in relation to two main figures: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt. Certainly Agamben's overt references to both theorists in *State of Exception* justify this interpretive strategy. In this book, Agamben anchors his theory of exceptionality in a debate between Benjamin and Schmitt, with Schmitt

attempting to harness the power of Benjamin's notion of divine violence to the operation of the law. In other words, Schmitt, on Agamben's reading, yolks the inoperativity of divine violence to the operativity of a juridical apparatus. Yet what is missed when the debates between Schmitt and Benjamin are placed in the foreground as two signifiers of exceptionality is the latent pataphysical signature that enables the debate to take place in the first place. Long before Benjamin or Schmitt took up the question of the exception, Jarry had already speculated that pataphysics 'will examine the laws governing exceptions' (1996: 21). Such a formulation is paradoxical as laws have no exception, and exceptions do not abide by laws, hence the irreducible pataphysical nature of the formulation. It is Agamben's work that clarifies this paradox through a detailed analysis of Benjamin and Schmitt. Thus, I want to read Agamben as picking up a problem first formulated by Jarry and revealing that the contemporary world operates no longer according to metaphysical laws but rather in accordance with pataphysical laws of exceptions.

The quintessential figure in Jarry's writings that fully embodies the paradox of exceptionality is Père Ubu. This character's obscenity, violence, and absurdity are a profound meditation on the nature of sovereign power through theatrical parody. The following description offered up by the character Bougrellas, summarises the essence of Père Ubu: 'A vulgar Père Ubu, an adventurer who comes no one know from where, a vile scoundrel, a disreputable vagabond' (Jarry, 1961: 47). He does not exist in the *polis*. He is somehow outside the juridical sphere, included only through his exclusion as an obscene excess that does not seem to have a home or a history. It is not insignificant that the play ends with Père Ubu in a cave, battling a bear and then escaping on the high seas. Both of these are zones beyond the reach of the *polis*, points where the law is rendered inoperative, where human and animal meet, where life and death merge, and where pirates dwell (or stow their treasure/spoils/contraband).

When Père Ubu takes power, he immediately suspends the law and throws his magistrates through a trap door. His wife cries, 'Here! What are you doing, Père Ubu? Who will administer justice now?' To which Père Ubu replies, 'Huh! I shall. You'll see how well it'll work' (Jarry, 1961: 70). He subsequently makes himself master of finances with unlimited power to squeeze taxes out of his subjects — subjects who are no longer citizens with rights so much as raw material or a standing reserve army for Père Ubu's whims, gluttony, and frivolity. With enemies on all fronts, Père Ubu must wage an all-out war against his enemy, Bourgrellas and his allies in Russia. Civil war turns into a global war. Throughout the chaotic romp of the play, the exception to the law becomes the law. In sum,

Jarry's Ubu character highlights how legal, scientific, and moral systems retain the claim of consistency only insofar as they exclude any admission of their obscene yet constitutive relationship to moments of exception in which they are suspended. In other words, Jarry puts us on a threshold of understanding the original structure of Western sovereignty that is later inherited by Benjamin, Schmitt, and then Agamben.

In Jarry's life, we find an enactment of Père Ubu. As stated above, Jarry, the person, disappeared into the mask of Père Ubu. Yet, Jarry did not simply reproduce or live out the absolute tyranny and violence of Père Ubu. Instead, Jarry's life became what Agamben would refer to as a 'recapitulation' or the absolute profanation of a profanity (2018a: 11). For Agamben, a recapitulation is the only way in which anything can reach completion. Perhaps we could even argue that Jarry's Ubu-esque existence sides with Benjamin against Schmitt, releasing divine violence from the law and its internally excluded relation with sovereignty in order to produce a creative, experimental form-of-life. On this formulation, Jarry does not destroy Père Ubu. Rather he becomes the living embodiment of a parody of a parody, or a recapitulation of the parody in order to bring it to its end.

By recapitulating the profanity of Père Ubu, the sovereign power of the violent ban becomes the playful irreverence of Pulcinella.³ The Ubu-esque becomes the Pulcinella-esque. For Agamben, Pulcinella is the ultimate figure of recapitulation, in which life is released from the guilt and action which determine its place within history and politics. Pulcinella is guiltless because he does not act and does not produce deeds. 'Pulcinella does not act in a play', writes Agamben, 'he has always already interrupted it, has always already left it, by means of a shortcut or a byway' (2018a: 43). Unlike the sovereign whose action is the decision, Pulcinella *does not decide* and is thus indifferent to judgment. Indeed, all decisions are interrupted by Pulcinella, who bursts onto the scene at precisely the moment when a decision would be announced and implemented. The instrumental violence of the sovereign to preserve the law through its suspension is neutralised through the opening of an escape route. Thus, if Père Ubu ushers in a catastrophe, Pulcinella offers an escape. He is, to put it differently, a clinamen, introducing a swerve into the sovereign act of deciding. And for this reason, his violence is an anti-violence, or a violence against the sovereign act. The sovereign and the clown thus pass through one another via Jarry's own life. Strangely,

³ Undoubtedly, this connection to Pulcinella is alluded to by Charles Terrasse's description of Jarry as 'one who spoke to children with the heart of a child' (cited in Brotchie, 2015: 201).

Jarry's mask somehow contracts these two figures into one dramatic persona that expresses his manner of being in the gap that separates and joins the two.

As Agamben argues, Jarry's mask subsumed its creator. Like both the sovereign and the clown, Jarry was beyond the human (and thus, not unlike Majorana, beyond the probabilistic ability of science to predict or explain). As Agamben reminds us, the "actor" who "plays" Pulcinella 'cannot take off his mask, because there is no face behind it', calling into question the 'false dialectic between face and mask' (2018a: 55). If Jarry is indeed a living and breathing embodiment of Père Ubu now transformed in a moment of recapitulation into Pulcinella, then Jarry's life and untimely death cannot be read as symptoms of personal problems but rather as escape strategies, enabling him to disappear from calculation and governance through comedic play. His existence suggests that there is still a politics beyond action. It comes from exposed, comical gestures rather than great deeds or decisions. It comes from disappearing rather than appearing on the public scene.

Jarry's life brings together these two figures that lie at the extreme edges of Agamben's work. Indeed, true comedy is only possible during periods of catastrophe, as with the comedies of Aristophanes. Comedy is that which survives to recapitulate catastrophe — to redeem it through a laugh. Jarry's seriousness and commitment to the mask of Père Ubu is thus a strategy bearing political significance: the state of exception from above is transposed into a state of exception from below, and in the process even the parodic survival of sovereign violence comes to an end, offering up a new experience of life that is pataphysical (an imaginary solution, as we shall see, below). In Jarry's work we find a shift in logic from critique (political parody) to creation (a new science). Pataphysics is what can be built out of the ruins of Père Ubu's violence. We can now turn to the defining elements of this science which are latent in Jarry's work as a potential to be developed by Agamben.

Pataphysical Paradigms

In a shocking formulation, Jarry once wrote that pataphysics is 'the science of the particular, despite the common opinion that the only science is that of the general' (1996: 21). In pataphysical fashion one might go so far as to argue that in Jarry's writings, the parts are greater than the whole, as his books often dematerialise into short flashes of brilliance or insight without any sense of logical, organic, or aesthetic coherence. Instead, one can find in Jarry a rather surreal interest in

pataphysical equivalences between otherwise incompatible particulars set in relation by violent swerves that break off attempts to define ‘coherence’ in any conventional way. The result is a literary state of exception (from below) in which expectations are suspended, styles become idiosyncratic mannerisms, and genres are left idle.

A science of the particular, as Jarry rightly points out, stands in stark contrast with the modern conception of empirical science described by Francis Bacon in his book titled *Novum Organum*. In this text, Bacon champions inductive reasoning as a method for constructing a pyramid of knowledge or system of sciences that would rest on firm foundations in observing the natural world. At the summit of his pyramid would reside the laws of nature as the set of maximally generalisable principles. These would be derived from observations of invariant relations in the physical sciences, which would slowly erase accidental qualities and individual experiences.

If science is always a quest for the general — as Bacon describes — then what is a science of the particular? Jarry points out that pataphysics rejects induction (general inferences based on particular observations). At the same time, Jarry’s notion of pataphysical knowledge seems to trouble deductive reasoning, which moves from the general to the particular. In both cases, the problem is that science concerns itself with a dialectical, vertical oscillation between concrete observations and more general principles (culminating in universal and necessary laws). Jarry wants a science that can somehow escape this dialectical pull, and insists that pataphysics is concerned with *particulars* as such. This might seem like another turn toward quantum indeterminacy, yet there is a key difference. Whereas physics continues to concern itself with the hunt of the god particle or a theory of everything (thus maximising the ability to predict and govern), Jarry’s turn toward the particular rejects any such grand theorising. Indeed, the underlying onto-theological search for a single theoretical model for all quantum phenomena is not beyond the metaphysical threshold of modern science opened up by Bacon, but rather its absolute limit — a limit beyond which it contracts with the supplementary universe of pataphysical particulars crashing and swerving into one another.

There are many ways to further develop this science of particulars, not the least of which would be Deleuze’s (1997) fascination with combinatorials. But we can also turn to Agamben and his theory of paradigms as yet another pataphysical offshoot of Jarry’s scientific formulation. Indeed, it is my argument that we can only fully understand the origins of Agamben’s unique reading of paradigms through the signature of pataphysics, and in turn, Agamben enables us to

precisely develop Jarry's science beyond some version of quantum physics. For Agamben, a science of paradigms, or paradigmology, does not proceed by way of induction or deduction but rather by a lateral, analogical movement from one particular to another. Summarising much of his work in relation to a (pataphysical) science of paradigms, Agamben (2009: 31) writes, '*Homo Sacer* and the concentration camp, the *Muselmann* and the state of exception, and, more recently, the Trinitarian *oikonomia* and acclamations are not hypotheses through which I intended to explain modernity by tracing it back to something like a cause or historical origin. On the contrary, as their very multiplicity might have signalled, each time it was a matter of paradigms whose aim was to make intelligible series of phenomena whose kinship had eluded or could elude the historian's gaze.' Such a science moves according to analogies, enabling the researcher to discover previously unseen affinities between singularities without transforming these singularities into cases of yet more general phenomena or original cause of later phenomena. Not unlike Benjamin's notion of the constellation, paradigmology generates a sense of intelligibility that is immanent to the paradigmatic group, rather than external or transcendental. These analogies render inoperative typical classification systems, suspending their tendencies to either negate singularities or somehow force them to conform to certain, preexisting taxonomies. When classification is rendered inoperative, new and sometimes unexpected or disturbing patterns and connections can emerge through pataphysical analogy. This is a science of horizontal rather than vertical movement, opening up singularities to a host of new uses that spill over their "proper" places or functions erected by taxonomic systems of measure, control, and prediction. In short, pataphysics is a science of equivalencies which make intelligible relations amongst particulars through analogies. Perhaps we can say that pataphysics is an *analogous empiricism* that does not simply produce clinamens so much as it draws constellational connecting lines between their various, wayward escape routes. The resulting knowledge is not scientific knowledge but precisely (non)knowledge of the supplementary, pataphysical world that underlies yet exists in excess of domains of knowledge found in the probabilistic sciences.

Paradigms are paradigmatic in so far as they neutralise a law that would make them a particular case of a higher-order or transcendent species or genus. This is not a negation of such laws but rather a suspension of their operativity in order to unleash unexpected analogies. The result is paradoxical, as Agamben (2009: 31) points out: 'The rule (if it is still possible to speak of rules here) is not a generality preexisting the singular cases and applicable to them, nor is it something resulting from the exhaustive enumeration of specific cases. Instead, it

is the exhibition alone of the paradigmatic case that constitutes a rule, which as such cannot be applied or stated.’ Like a judgment of taste, paradigmatic thinking renders inoperative the dialectic between the particular and the general rule or law. It is an impossible science of the particular, or a combinatorial of particulars. Thus, it is my wager that paradigmology is, at its heart, pataphysical rather than metaphysical. Paradigmology is, stated differently, a methodological signature of pataphysics in Agamben’s work.

A Pataphysical Form-of-Life

Jarry’s life embraced the aesthetic potentials of ‘trollism’ (Brotchie, 2015: 192). Drawing inspiration from Ibsen’s play *Peer Gynt*, Jarry distinguished trolls from humans by their sufficiency and singularity. Trolls, on this interpretation, are beings that cannot be judged according to laws or criteria outside of their particular way of life. Instead, they neutralise all attempts at classification into generic types by pushing the possibilities of life to a point of grotesquery. Taking this up as a practice of the self, Jarry disappeared into his Ubu- and Pulcinella-esque masks, enabling him to become troll-like in his radical and disruptive singularity.⁴ He was a kind of living clinamen, swerving into situations in order to introduce pataphysical excesses into what it was possible to do or say. Whether challenging norms of politeness through outlandish speech, or physical limits of intoxication through drink, or athletic records of endurance through racing against trains on a bicycle, Jarry seemed radically indifferent to any imposed, external limit placed on thought or life against which he could be measured (governed/managed). Instead, he embraced a troll-esque existence of overabundant surplus that was astounding precisely because it preferred not to abide by any general type or norm.

We find such trollism underlying Agamben’s later formulation of “form-of-life” which is a life that is ‘generated in living’ and therefore ‘does not have any priority, either substantial or transcendental, with respect to living’ (2015: 224). In this definition, Agamben emphasises how a form-of-life gives itself its own rule,

⁴There are questions as to the accuracy of such an extreme (pataphysical?) description of Jarry. For instance in Brotchie’s book, the Ubu-esque nature of Jarry’s mannerisms (such as his way of precisely pronouncing every syllable of a word, his use of the royal “we” to refer to himself, his quick-fire elocution, and his mock-Homeric imitation of the ancient Greek way of turning nouns into verbs) were a kind of public performance that hid a much more generous and sensitive, private individual. Yet even if there is such a difference, it is still noticeable how Jarry’s nonconformity to social norms and lack of politeness remained a test for his intimate friends.

or exhibits its own rule through the singular manner of its gestures. As Agamben states, a form-of-life is a ‘manner or rising forth’ in such a way that it is ‘continually generated by its “manner” of being’ (*ibid.*). For us, what is important here is how both Jarry and then Agamben take up the question of a life that is ungovernable, and thus can only measure itself against its own mask/manner.

Quantum mechanics produces forms of life that can be subjected to laws of probability. These laws are predicated on the *necessity of contingency*. Contingency, in other words, guarantees the need to intervene, analyse, and ultimately govern. On the macro-level of populations, the necessity of contingency dictates biopolitical creation and subsequent capture of forms of life. Indeed, the pluralisation of forms of life ensures the functioning of a biopolitical law and of certain bioeconomic institutional regulations. Opposed to the notion of forms of life, Agamben posits the notion of a form-of-life that is not subjected to laws of probability or scientific calculation (and thus to capture, management, and regulation). Instead of being a subject of the law, a form-of-life has an internal relationship to its own rule. The rule is ‘radically heterogeneous to institutions and law’ and is an attempt to ‘realise a human life and practice absolutely outside the determinations of the law’ (Agamben, 2014: 121, 110).

To be precise, the distinction between law and rule can be broken down as follows. Rules are born from within the practices of life, whereas laws separate and divide life. Rules, as exemplified in the Franciscan monastic tradition, are a formalisation of the implicit practices internal to an active community. As Agamben states, ‘[t]he rule is not applied to life, but produces it and at the same time is produced in it’ (*ibid.*: 69). Rules are neither norms to be applied to life from the outside nor pure authority to be imposed on life from above. In other words, ‘there is no place for anything like an application of the law to life’ (*ibid.*: 102) when one is operating within the terrain of rules. The rules of a form-of-life therefore render inoperative the necessity of contingency and instead propose the *contingency of necessity* insofar as the rule is necessary in order to constitute a form-of-life that is itself anarchic or without law, ground, or foundation beyond itself.

Agamben’s analysis of self-constituting rules of life helps us to tease out new possibilities for understanding pataphysics as the ‘science of imaginary solutions’ (Jarry, 1996: 22). Solutions abide by the logic of probabilities and operate within the various apparatuses of regulation, management, and control of forms of life. Solutions manage *styles* of forms of life, enabling habits to form in such a way that their patterns can be recognised and adequately predicted or adjusted to maximise health, prosperity, and efficacy. Solutions, in other words, concern pragmatic economies according to specific laws with their internal success

conditions. *Imaginary* solutions, on the other hand, concern the rules constituting and constituted by the mannerisms of a form-of-life. The rules of such a life are impossible to abstract, and thus articulate into a generalisable style, outside the form-of-life that lives its own rule. There is no metric against which to measure such mannerisms beyond their invention and originality (independent of efficacy). Mannerisms intensify life to the point where forms of life no longer operate according to laws of probabilities. Perhaps we can summarise as follows: mannerisms *rule* a form-of-life (from the inside) whereas style *governs* forms of life (from the outside). If the latter lends itself to concrete, effective controls and regulations, then the former remains resolutely imaginary, and thus beyond capture by the processes, procedures, and logics of the probabilistic sciences. Taken to an extreme point, manners turn the human being into a troll.

Another way of thinking about the imaginary dimension of pataphysical solutions is to highlight how the mannerism of a form-of-life is a *living criticism*. Remember that for Agamben, criticism is a putting together of impossible things that results in an unreality which neutralises the attempts of probabilistic science to govern life. The supplementary world of imaginary solutions is not, in the end, an endorsement of alternative realities but rather immanent to this reality yet in excess of the laws that govern it. Through the contingent necessity of the rules of a form-of-life, life appears at the precise moment it disappears, preferring not to be calculated and managed. The mannerisms of Jarry's form-of-life cannot produce knowledge of life in the sense of a global theory or set of universal laws or pragmatic solutions. Mannerisms cannot produce knowledge of life as such so much as a *taste* for an intensified mode of life that exists betwixt and between opposites (such as Père Ubu and Pulcinella).

But how does this strange taste that emerges from within an inoperative life act as a *critique* rather than merely play or fancy? Criticisms of Agamben, for instance, are full of complaints about his lack of tangible, real-world solutions to pressing problems. It seems difficult to propose viable reform proposals based on Agamben's often enigmatic, messianic clarion calls for a radical new understanding of life. Yet, these criticisms fail to recognise that both Jarry and Agamben do indeed offer solutions, but they are *imaginary*, preferring not to abide by the parameters of good sense and common sense dictating what counts as a viable solution in the first place. This does not dull the critical dimension of their writing, but rather helps to locate the limit conditions of our political, social, and economic imaginations. Jarry, and then Agamben, help cultivate a taste for intensified mannerisms that push forms of life to the point of dissolution into a virtual/imaginary excess that lives its criticism in so far as it gestures beyond any

notion of critique as a tool for reforming the very systems of management and governance that produced denuded forms of life in the first place.

To live a pataphysical life is to become troll-like by constantly inventing rules that intensify what is impossible (rather than merely probable!) in one's existence.

Studying as a Pataphysics of Education

To summarise, Agamben's project as a whole can be thought of as a pataphysical clinamen that swerves Western metaphysics toward impossible solutions. Impossible solutions are paradoxical, as they cannot be easily placed within pre-existing categories or taxonomies (and thus resist governance). In the concluding passages of the central chapter of his book, *What is Philosophy?* Agamben turns to pataphysics as a science that 'radically neutralises the sterile oppositions mental/real, existent/nonexistent, signifier/signified' and redeems the 'object of philosophy and thought' (2018b: 89). What is unleashed through pataphysics is the potentiality of the world made manifest — a potentiality that is not exhausted in what is actual. Indeed, pataphysics offers a supplementary world within this world that is waiting to be recapitulated through the mannerisms of a form-of-life that prefers not to abide by the logic of division inherent in the cut that exists between science, art, and philosophy. Volumes such as *Agamben's Philosophical Lineage* map out the influences of various philosophers on Agamben's thought, yet have failed to bring to light this fundamental pataphysical signature that animates his work and lends it its use (even if such use is *without functionality*). Indeed, this is no surprise given that such a signature cannot be a strictly "philosophical influence". Instead, the signature is what makes the lineage as such possible. In leaving this signature hidden, pataphysics remains *operative* within Agamben's work (as an undetected, subterranean vortex). That which renders *inoperative* other laws, apparatuses, and machines throughout the lineage continues to operate, and an operative signature *can only facilitate learning and never study* (Lewis, 2013).

Drawing inspiration from Kafka's various characters (including Dr. Bucephalus), Agamben argues that study is a strategy that 'deactivate[s]' and 'play[s]' with the contours of reality in order to reveal the signatures that animate it (2005: 64). Such a move, I argue, releases the signatures themselves, it allows them to show themselves. On this reading, study is a particular kind of educational activity that is not equivalent to simply learning. While learning involves predictions and evaluations, studying involves contact with a potentiality

that prefers not to abide by predictive sciences or educational assessment measures. It is, in this sense, an educational activity that de-activates the performative laws defining what education ought to be (including the future-oriented calculation of performance based on the probability of learning aptitudes).

When books such as *Agamben's Philosophical Lineage* attempt to 'guide the reader through the maze of Agamben's sources, rendering explicit what remains implicit and providing a reliable guide to his reading of the many figures he draws from' (Kotsko and Salzani, 2017: 1), it functions under the sign of learning. Indeed, the word "maze" is important in this context as mazes have ends that orient actions. Each individual turn in a maze can be evaluated or assessed with regard to this end — either a given turn gets an individual closer or farther away from an explicit goal. As moves are tested out, one can learn how to navigate the maze with increasing levels of efficacy. There are solutions to be found through probabilistic calculation. Yet, when Agamben refers to study practices, he never refers to a maze (1995: 64). Instead, he refers to 'labyrinthine allusiveness' that has no end in mind and 'does not even desire one'. In other words, the turns the studier takes cannot be judged in relation to an end (as it does not have one). In fact, the labyrinth renders inoperative the very notion of progress or regress, as there is no longer a goal against which such measurements can be assessed. The logic of learning to master a problem gives way to *imaginary solutions* that do not have an end in mind. Perhaps what is at stake here is a distinction between the metaphysics of learning and the pataphysics of studying. The former has a ground and a destination whereas the latter is ungrounded and without destiny. One concerns the probabilistic management of moves to maximise the likely chances for escape where the other simply disappears into the labyrinth and is thus beyond calculation (itself a form of disappearance). One acquires knowledge while the other leaves only the taste for non-knowledge.

Although Agamben's direct reference points for his theory of study are his personal experience of wandering through Aby Warburg's library as well as Talmudic reading practices, with little effort we can posit a pataphysical signature animating and making possible his reflections on the labyrinthine circumnavigations of study. Close to the beginning of Jarry's *Faustroll*, the character Panmuphle lists the books contained in the pataphysician's library. As Ben Fisher has argued, this catalogue is a rather 'perverse selection' characterised by a 'deliberately idiosyncratic quality' (2000: 26–27). While Fisher argues that the catalogue can be interpreted as evidence of the eclecticism of the Symbolist style in general, he is also careful to emphasise the irreducible singularity of Jarry's

manner of organising the library (thus interrupting any attempt to form generalisations out of particulars). Although there are important differences, I argue that Jarry's heterogeneous list follows the 'law of good neighbours'⁵ proposed by Warburg as a unifying principle of his library. Of course, Jarry's list is presented in alphabetical order, but this convention only manages to throw into relief how such order is artificial if not absurdist. Breaking through the surface are labyrinthine entanglements that provoke the reader into a state of perpetual (esoteric) study without end. Indeed, the actual narrative of *Faustroll* could be conceived of as a kind of imaginary study, traveling through the list, with books, themes, and styles becoming inspiration for the islands (analogically linked singularities in a virtual sea) and the authors becoming strange characters, objects, and creatures (exaggerated trolls). The list-as-labyrinth for study becomes a special kind of studious literature or literature-as-library. Unlike a maze of influences from which we can extract lessons from Jarry's life concerning his influences (or the style of Symbolism more broadly), the tale of Faustroll's travels is offering an opportunity to study the library *from inside its own pataphysical rules*, and in this way, acquire new tastes for laws of exceptions, singularities, the conjunction of opposites, and imaginary solutions. It is my contention that Agamben, as a paradigmatic studier, takes up this method of study in his own work, and in this sense, is the true pataphysician of our time.

The challenge thus becomes: How to study the study of a studier?

To *study* Agamben means that we must read his work in search of pataphysical signatures, bringing these signatures out of the dense network of signifying relationships which conceal them, and thus render these signatures inoperative. This, in turn, opens the signatures themselves (not simply the signifiers in the maze) for new uses, new tastes, and new mannerisms. The work of study, in this sense, is not merely about pataphysics (thus arguing that Jarry is yet another name in the lineage) but itself becomes a pataphysical form-of-educational-life: a studious life that, like Jarry, always seems to disappear before we can learn anything from it.

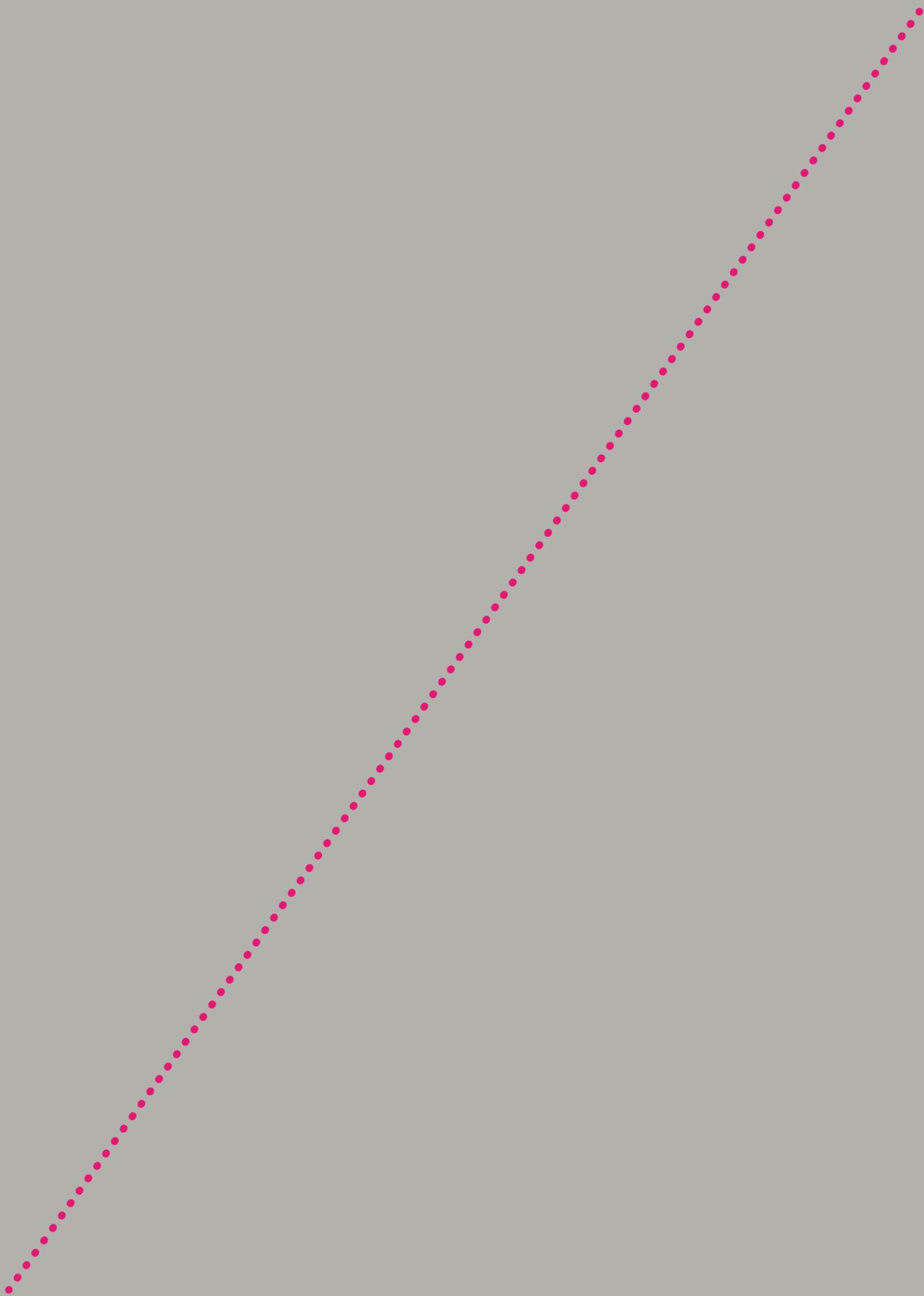


⁵ It is interesting to note that this is the only positive reference to law in all of Agamben's work. On my reading, the law of good neighbours is perhaps better thought of as the *rule* of good neighbours insofar as the texts generate their own rules concerning how they ought to be read based on their proximity to one another. This rule is not transcendent so much as a by-product of their contingent placement. In this sense, the rule of good neighbours highlights the contingency of necessity in the pataphysician's library.

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Thing: a fugitive in()operation

Elliot C. Mason

Abstract

‘Thing’ conducts an antiracist intervention in Agamben’s “inoperativity”, operating contemporary Black studies into Agamben’s Heideggerian absences. Opening the subject to the impotentiality of Bartleby the Scrivener’s preference not to, Agamben seeks to disable the mechanisms of the world for a new politics. However, this poetics leaves the internal constitution of the subject, allowing the forces of operativity to maintain their operation as the constitutive ontology of subjectivity. Into this troubling remnant in Agamben I bring Hortense Spillers, who explores the constitution of the non- or anti-subject, constructed through the racializing operation of subjectivity that allows Agamben’s subject to remain intact throughout the process of being rendered inoperative. The Black non-subject, Spillers theorizes, is not constituted by the body that Agamben’s (White) subject requires; instead, she is formed of flesh, which is antecedent to subjectivity’s hegemonic form. Flesh is the materiality of racialization in the operativity of world. Fred Moten’s numerous works on Blackness and otherwise ontologies allow this deep aporia in Agamben’s thinking to open into a radical poetics of antiracist inoperativity, disavowing its constitutive subjectivity. In this essay, I closely read Agamben and Heidegger, with the thinking of Hortense Spillers, Sianne Ngai, C. Riley Snorton, Alexander Weheliye and Fred Moten, arriving somewhere closer to the Black beyond of inoperativity’s antiracist refusal.

Keywords: Moten; Black studies; inoperativity; flesh; value form



Thing

FUGITIVITY IS A CONSTANT DEHISCENCE OF HISTORICAL WOUNDS; ESCAPE FROM THE POLITE
RITUALS OF SIGNIFICATION

*The abandon? That’s just an old song, a beautiful new machine, and it goes: The dancing past is Blackness, cast beneath like shaded light, like stones, while the present — the present that inhabits the same body as Europe, that is European corporeality — is the investigation of itself, the analysis of its History qua European Being and that analysis is its own creation, the creation of itself and its other. For a(n) (im)properly Motenian dance with Agamben, it would be sufficient to spend this whole essay with just the first page of Agamben’s latest book, *Creation and Anarchy* (2019). There would be so much to do, and towards the*

end of that work we would say, ‘The past is indeed created now but there is something — another past, (not but nothing but) a past in which the present is bound and sedimented — that precedes (which is to say, far exceeds) the past, that comes before the moment of Europe’s making’. The essay would be so structured, such an ordered confrontation with each line of the page, working along it, down it, then eventually in a direction called, in the institution of criticism, *beyond it*. Then Moten and I would end on top of the ruins of the criticized book, and we would be Europeanly victorious. But what would I do with the new solid *polis* posited atop the ruins of the previous mayor of the city of criticism? I would just be destroyed again, another fracture in the mythic circle of violence. I do not want to implement institutional policy on the study of Moten and Agamben, on their planning in some underworld I dream of daily; I do not want to universalize my institutional critical knowledge lapped up in the debt-performance of various universities. Policy — as *apodeixis*, as proof, as a declaration to show and to speak — is to speak *for, on behalf of*, another who is silenced by policy; to speak for those who cannot speak *because I am speaking*, the retroactive assertion of impossibility within the frame of possibility posited by sovereign power that is created by this assertion. This has all been said before (Harney and Moten, 2013: 67ff). Instead I walk in, always listening to Moten, always tuned in to podcasts on the homelessness of home, on the temptations, and I try to walk through the house of Europeanness. This essay begins with time. We step into the room where Agamben’s inoperativity is being written on the walls, and there is so much it ignores; it doesn’t realize that, in the Man/animal/thing triptych of Being it posits, the thing precedes the creation of Being. The thing is anteontological and has been built upon the blinding light of European imperial reason. Then we move into space. We enter the room where Marx is hammering, and there we find the historical creation of capitalist value and the disguise it places over beings: value makes it seem like the body and the city are separate, like individuation and the polity become intertwined, but we find out that they were always the same thing anyway. Then we realize, in the room where Hortense Spillers is sweating with thought, that the thing was actually always flesh, and that flesh is the wound of European history, capitalist value and the originary moment of Being that posits the ontological triptych. Inside that wound is Blackness and that is what we were looking for the whole time. Then we move into the zone where Moten is performing, where he sings with someone who is and is not ‘you’. In there we discover the myth that has been upheld, whether they meant to or not, by Agamben, Heidegger and loads of other blokes who look the same but never presented a name card at the initiation ceremony of

modernity. And then we get to the end and, finally, in that room we are allowed to dance. There I hope to encounter a city of criticism that is its constitutive outside (Moten, 2018a: 42), that is inside its moment of making, in its own nowhere, and thus constantly aware of what preceded its own making and what cannot be produced by exposure to its own force. *THIS IS/WILL ALWAYS HAVE BEEN FRED MOTEN'S FUGITIVE DEHISCENCE IN GIORGIO AGAMBEN'S INOPERATIVE USE OF THE BODY.*

Time

THE THING IS ANTECEDENT TO HISTORY AND EXISTS BEFORE BEING

In the poetics of inoperativity, the entire *logos* of *ergon* is disbanded and a modal ontology is made available. This making-available brings us to a Heideggerian clearing, an opening in the dense forest where light opens the space of possibility for beings to emerge otherwise. The epistemological process of the clearing is archaeological, following Edmund Husserl's metaphors of knowledge excavation, and Agamben is guided by the belief that 'archaeology is the sole means of access to the present' (Agamben, 2019: 1). To dig up knowledge from the darkness beneath, to bring to light. Clearing is a *lighting* process: Heidegger's term for it is "*Lichtung*": lighting. Inoperativity clears the ontological ground for the openness, the *Lichtung*, of poverty, the (im)potentiality of not-having and the necessity of the non-necessary. But what of the things brought into the clearing? Agamben distinguishes the things through a Heideggerian triptych of being: 'The stone is worldless, the animal is poor in world (*weltarm*), and human beings are world-forming' (Agamben, 2019: 33). For the human to open up the dark forest of labour and ontology to the animals 'poor in world' is insufficient for Agamben. Instead the stone is excavated. What does the stone — the thing — see when brought/bought into the shaded light of the singular ontological mode that conditioned its worldlessness? How does the stone relate to its unbeing in the world?

The stone as worldless and workless thing is, in this triad, included in the command of its exclusion; it is now participant in the making of its own worldlessness. The stone is the past in the act of archaeological excavation in which Agamben opens a clearing in order to understand the present, and the present, we should not forget, is European, even for Agamben himself.

It is in seeking to comprehend the present that human beings — at least we Europeans — find ourselves compelled to interrogate the

past. I have specified “we Europeans” because it seems to me that, supposing that the word “Europe” has a sense, it cannot, as is obvious today, be either political or religious and even less economic. Rather, it consists perhaps in this: that Europeans — unlike, for example, Asians and Americans, for whom history and the past have a completely different significance — can gain access to their own truth only by means of a confrontation with the past, only by settling accounts with their history. (Agamben, 2019: 1)

That possessive pronoun will affect the experience of the stone - who is *their* stone, *Europe's* stone, the past of a present that is not its own - and dictate already how the stone is able to end history, to be brought/bought into the *Lichtung* and cut the dialectical process that produced it as past-thing.

To look into the past in order to explain the present, for Agamben, *is* Europeanness; to be European is to see a self-enclosure in the opening, to be able to witness as if objectively, one's own entrapment within the open, which is then revealed as an also necessarily non-open: the negative is revealed as constitutive of the world (for the European who seeks the present/open through the past/non-open). ‘The openness that is in question in the world is essentially the openness to a closure, and the one who looks into the open sees only a closing up, sees only a non-seeing. For this reason — that is to say, insofar as the world has been opened only through the interruption and nullification of the relationship of the living being with its disinhibitor — being is from the very beginning traversed by the nothing, and the world is constitutively marked by negativity and disorientation’ (Agamben, 2019: 49). The nullification, though, is only a nullification of *their* history, a disorientation in relation to *their* own position within *their* own closed openness. The European, that is, sets up his own negative space within the enclosure of his own landscape. The world the animal lacks is then only a lack of the possibility of nullifying and being disoriented by the enclosure of European openness. And the worldlessness of the stone is crucially only worldless in its (im)potentiality to unsee the boundaries of the European *Lichtung*. The stone is unable to become bored — which is to be ‘absorbed’ and ‘stunned’ ‘in things’ (Agamben, 2019: 48) — in the closed-up open of Europe.

The negativity in the dialectics of the (European) human is the originary moment of creation for Heidegger, which Agamben elaborates: ‘The openness of the world begins in the human being precisely from the perception of non-openness’ (2019: 48). When inoperativity suspends the suspending-mechanism of dialectical history and its privileging of work and negativity, beings are deprived

of their coordinates of value in the *logos* of Being, but those coordinates of value produced the human and its constituent world. Seeking, then, to move out of normative ontology, into a modal ontology of destituent potential, leaves a clinging remnant of the thing that constituted the freed being: its language, its command, its origin, is the beginning of its body in relation to its world; Man and his European world are one single internality expressed as inside world and outside world. So how is the being removed from Being when they are mutually constitutive and, as we might come to understand through Moten, inseparable when felt, or heard, from outside their own way of seeing?

Agamben is not a questioner of the stone. He sits in a chair nearby but his *Lichtung* is so bright it burns the buzzing silence of the stone's worldless blues. Listen to the stone. In a momentous passage, Moten speaks the stone:

Perhaps this means that what opens the world to play, what brings the world out into the open (secret), is the question *and the questioning* of things that have been brought into the closed world of their exclusion, those who have been incorporated by way of that which has been made open to the world. Taken out of the dark, brought into light but shadowed, brought out by shadow, dark to themselves, things are brought into shade by shade throwing shade. The ones who have been brought into the world by way of that which has been made open to the world are excluded from the world, are given over to the world as poverty and dereliction. [...] They are outside of the world into which they have been thrown. [...] They unmade the world of the ones who belong there, the ones to whom they belong, the ones who brought them, threw them, bought them. [...] But the ones they threw into the world, so that the world they withheld from them might be made, unmake the world. Perhaps the world the slaveholders made is the text of impossible origins. The Bible and the Greeks are the world the slaveholders made. [...] The Bible and the Greeks. These texts are Europe. Europe is man. (Moten, 2018a: 31)

The 'world-forming' of the human, in its impotential inoperativity, is always premised on clearing a space for becoming, which in Agambenian inoperativity is becoming-other, becoming, against dialectical history, a suggestion of another possibility. But what was excavated to produce the world that was formed by (European) Man remains and is not carried over to the coming politics of destituent potential. Destituent potential, indeed, eradicates and makes

impossible, as Agamben writes in *The Use of Bodies*, the ‘unceasing, unwinnable, desolate dialectic between constituent power and constituted power’ (2016: 266), finding a form of social creation outside the violent logic of a constituent power that brings into being, and maintains its violent continuation in, a constituted power. But the rejection of the logic of constituent power means that the coming politics cannot be created entirely anew because it is already formed from what was excavated, and that act of excavation is constituent power; it is its moment of originary sovereignty. That moment of originary sovereignty creates the world that is European Man, who is also formed of his constitutive outside. The binary of life is posited in this movement, and that binary is race: when Being redefines all that is not inside it, all that upholds it from outside, as Black. For Agamben, the coming politics is a freeing of the beings who already exist within the enclosure of Being. However, since Being is produced by the exclusionary assimilation of the stone, by the stone’s constitution of the *Lichtung* as its necessary outside, the stone must also be brought into the utopia of the coming politics, otherwise the beings taken into utopia would no longer exist. What to do with the stone?

To bring Moten in to this cul-de-sac in Agamben’s thinking, the thing reveals ‘the fatal relation between world forming and judgment’ (Moten, 2018a: 34); it reveals that the logic of destituent potential resides in an archaeological mining for resources labelled by the light of the clearing, where stands Man and his tools, and that destituent potential attempts to speak for (so, *write policy for*) the stone in order to take the impotentiality of beings out of Being and into the coming politics, which would not work without the stone because the beings inside it would remain constituted by constituent power. The stone is the only one of the three listed beings (stone/animal/world-forming Man) who is not spoken for already in the *ergon* — the proper task — of Being. Here, in the clearing, the human realizes his entrapment and his need for the stone, for the unspeakable/speechless thing.

In *The Open*, Agamben writes, ‘[t]he jewel set at the centre of the human world and its *Lichtung* is nothing but animal captivation; the wonder “that beings are” is nothing but the grasping of the “essential disruption” that occurs in the living being from its being exposed in a nonrevelation’. This means, he goes on, ‘*Dasein* is simply an animal that has learned to become bored; it has awakened from its own captivation to its own captivation. This awakening of the living being to its own being-captivated, this anxious and resolute opening to a non-open, is the human’ (Agamben, 2004: 65). The non-open is a boundary within the (im)potentiality of the human’s workless duty, already stationed at the moment of his waking within his act of opening: Man *opens*, and the impotential of the non-

open is contained within that act. Moten, however, insists on the thing's 'insistent previousness evading each and every natal occasion' (2003). 'Agamben recalibrates [the Heideggerian] interplay between animality and humanity that accompanies the essential disruption that renders man creaturely - being exposed in a nonrevelation, being delivered over to something that refuses itself' (Moten, 2018a: 40). Slipping out of that deliverance, inoperatively, into a modal ontology that reconfigures the subject is, for Moten, insufficient because the outside of this logic is constituted also in the same moment; the outside is internal to the inside, constituted with(in) its subjectivity and its (White) subjects. Beneath and before that outside is Blackness. 'The key point here is that what initiates everything, for Schmitt and Agamben [...] is the originary power of the sovereign. But how do we analyze the originary power of a figure that depends on the originary violation of the normativity that guarantees its power?' (Moten, 2018a: 40–41) The beyond-outside (or what we might discover as the *beneath*) is suspended in order for sovereign power to posit the law as constituting all that is its outside, revealing the immanent internality of the outside. 'This immanent outside is always understood as an internality that has been rendered ecstatic insofar as it must break the law that it safeguards in order to make the law safe' (Moten, 2018a: 41). The human is folded into animal-being, into the closed open, but the human understands that it is a landscape of possibility. The thing, however, is suspended in the underground, and is not involved in that originary moment; it is not participant in the mutual presuppositions of the inside and outside of sovereign power. To properly access a discourse of the outside, it must be heard beneath the sight/site of Being's *Lichtung*. It must be conceived that the (Black) thing is called a (Black) thing only in relation to this inside/outside originary sovereignty that precedes and stands before it. 'Blackness is present at its own making — it is the autopoiesis of imagined, imagining things' (Moten, 2018a: 43).

For Moten, this boredom at the instantiation of the *Lichtung* is impossible because it does not explain the beyond-outside, the beneath; it totally disallows any study of the out from outside. The very positing by Aristotle in the beginning of (European Man's) philosophy of an *ergon* proper to Man is a rebuttal of the possibility of the human's absorption and stunnedness (as Agamben defines 'boredom') in the face of the (non-)open: to be bored at the moment of perceiving the non-openness would be to initiate world by its inoperative refusal. The impossibility of this boredom reveals the falsity of the originary moment. For the thing to be extracted and to cause Man to perceive the non-openness of the *Lichtung*, the thing must precede the creation of Being, or the originary moment of sovereignty. The definition of the thing is exclusion from sovereign subjectivity.

Its externality to the *Lichtung* affirms its temporal antecedence to it. Man is made in the spatiotemporal moment of the origin. The thing is outside, or beneath, that command.

Blackness is unmappable in the cartographic logic of the enclosure (Moten, 2018a: 207), and this is the crucial aporetic absence that Agamben does not account for when seeking the inoperativity of the slave. The slave is not the absence of value; the slave is socialized value that cannot be recognized in the exchange-value machine of modernity, but is necessary to its continuation. The slave is anteontological resistance to positionality, so her removal into a new modal ontology of inoperativity will not work: she cannot be grasped like a subject, like an upstanding individual. She is the ocean: the fugitive, undercommon phonography of the sea.

What is so terrifying, so profoundly disturbing, about the slave to the master is that the slave is constituted by something else, by the murky ground of excavation where European archaeologists go in search of their own self-constituted/constituent present. The fugitivity of the slave is the terror of the master. The proper human is repressed by the limits of his own enclosure, in which he has excavated a form of sociality of which he cannot control the ontological foundation and by which he must himself be constituted, and that sociality is what Emmanuel Levinas calls the pre-seriousness of primitive dancing civilizations; it is what Hannah Arendt calls the no-language and non-existent subject of Africa; and what Agamben calls nothing because he never talks about it (Levinas in Moten, 2018a: 1; Arendt, 1970: 95-96). It is called Blackness.

Before finally abandoning this dry spell in the European *Lichtung* where my feet are beginning to itch, I would like to correct Agamben's Heideggerian diagnosis of Being as boredom. What is at play in this moment is rather corporealization, the coming-into-Being of the body that determines the figure of corporeity, and thus capitalist modernity. The moment of awakening into *Dasein* is the construction of the body and the human's awareness of this limitation. This moment also brings the stone into Being as the temporal limit of Man's corporeality: the stone, the thing, that 'insistent previousness evading each and every natal occasion' (Moten, 2003), is made into a (non-)body at the moment of its exposure to the sight/site of the human body. It is individuated, turned into a body, but a body that is the impossibility (i.e. the Blackness) of the properly human (i.e. White) body. This individuating moment is the moment of race, when race becomes the defining limit of the body and the body is revealed as a racializing machine of violent separation according to the ideology of proper property, of serious self-possession. What remains in the insistent previousness of the racialized

thing is Blackness. What Agamben, after Heidegger, describes as boredom is the becoming-White of European Man, the beginning of his (self-)definition as a referent of inherent ontological right to possession of self and other. *BLACKNESS PRECEDES CONSTITUENT/CONSTITUTED POWER AND EXISTS BEFORE THE MOMENT OF ORIGINARY SOVEREIGNTY.*

Space

THE THING IS NOT PRODUCED IN THE MOMENT OF ORIGINARY SOVEREIGNTY AND IS NOT CONSTITUTED BY THE MUTUAL FORCES OF INDIVIDUATION AND THE POLITY

In the *Grundrisse*, Karl Marx sees history as a process of individuation, but individuation necessarily among social relations (1973: 18). From the eighteenth century on, from the creation of something that fancies calling itself “civil society” (which Marx also puts in scare quotes), the individual is the prime interface of society; social connections are no longer the producer of the individual, rather the individual is a user of social connections for personal means. The individual, who is inherently productive for Marx, arises from community. Moreover, what is produced is always property, and it is a tautology to say that property is necessary for production. ‘All production is appropriation of nature on the part of an individual within and through a specific form of society. [...] [T]hat there can be no production and hence no society where some form of property does not exist is a tautology. An appropriation that does not make something into property is a [contradiction] (Marx, 1973: 21).

The production of (European) society *as* property is the production machine, a machine that produces individuals. The value of this production occurs through abstract labour, the complexity of which has been explained by Sianne Ngai: ‘Abstract labor contains a fundamental tension: it is the form that *social* labor assumes in a society based on the *private* organization of production and circulation. [...] It is crucial to emphasize that abstract labor is not an abstraction by thought, but [is] rather achieved by the collective practice of actors who do not know they are achieving it’ (Ngai, 2015: 37). The production of exchange value, as commodities or as individuals, occurs after the moment of the products’ exchange. ‘Abstract labor — the only labour that for Marx specifically constitutes value, as opposed to material wealth — is not labor physically expended by workers in real time in heterogeneous and uncoordinated acts of production, as Michael Heinrich emphasizes. It is rather a “relation of social validation” posited retroactively in exchange, which fulfills the actual function of

relating independently performed labors to the total labor of society' (Ngai, 2015: 38, citing Heinrich, 2012: 50). Blind individual concrete labour produces the abstraction that is the polity. So, while (European) history is a process of individuation (becoming an individual body: corporealization), as Marx begins the *Grundrisse* by stating, the individual is presupposed already in the proposition of the polity, since it is the individual's labour — unknowingly, but necessarily — that retroactively produces the possibility of a polity, an abstract connection of property relations bound in modernity by the universal referent that is the market. Abstract, socially necessary labour is the simplest of all abstractions, which in Marxian terms means that it has the greatest possibility of universalization. It can be socialized, turned into the necessary condition of society, its labour and its production.

In this sociohistorical chiasmus — in which the individual and society, individuation and production, endlessly suggest and become each other — the potentiality to be human is premised on valuable labour. Humanity in modernity is retroactively affirmed by the exchange value of the product of human labour. Inherent and necessary in potentiality, as Agamben learns from Aristotle, is impotentiality: the possibility not to be. Humanity can only be human by containing within itself the possibility of refusing labour, of refusing to be an individual. The individual is premised on a debt to the concrete particularity of the abstraction of the polity — indebted to its own creation. The individual is created by, creates, and is always indebted to, the polity. The individual's impotentiality to be, however, locks the polity also in a mutually constituent relation with the individual. There are public and private debts intersecting at this juncture, this locus of the logic of capitalism's self-preservation. Society and the individual create each other in the act of modernity's capitalist individuation.

Marx's "civil society" creates 'the various forms of social connectedness [that] confront the individual as a mere means towards his private purposes, as external necessity' (Marx, 1973: 18). The creation of the individual is the creation of the individual as an appropriator of public property, turning it into private property. The public, though, does not precede the individual's appropriation of it. In modernity, the external world is only a possibility of appropriation into the machine that turns everything into private property. The human, created by this production process of individuation, is the mechanism making this transaction possible, and making what is exchangeable possible. The moment is the mutual constitution of world and the user of world. What this means is that the production and the circulation of the valuable individual — the *sine qua non* of capitalist modernity — are inseparable, and inseparable from the world created

in the process. This is the new ontological category of capitalism's (anti)socialization, its extraction of the antecedent being of beings; their abstraction as and through its value form. As Ngai emphasizes, though, this abstraction is very real, a '*substance* in the process of plasticizing' (2015: 52, emphasis original). The human — by which is meant, European Man — is the mechanism abstracting these homogenized spheres (production and circulation), homogenized uniquely in capitalism, consuming the posited value production of the future and thereby creating its debt to the capitalist polity. As Agamben writes, '[c]apitalism productive of goods is fictitiously feeding on its own future. The capitalist religion, consistent with Benjamin's thesis, lives in a continual indebtedness, which neither can nor should be paid off' (Agamben, 2019: 71). Man is made by and makes his indebtedness to the polity, by which the polity is also made. That is: Man *belongs* to the polity, to the public space of the city, but the polity can only exist *as* Man and *in* his European capitalist ontology. This is the paradox of modernity, and I think this takes us beyond Agamben's insistence that the modern framework of labour does not apply to ancient life, since the Greeks 'were ignorant of the concept of labour' (2019: 19). The paradox of the polity and the individual's reflection in each other constructs the ontology of modernity and conditions the light that is shone on any archaeologically excavated artefact, so that it is always seen through the paradoxical vision of Man's singular society.

Discovering philosophy as resolute resistance to seeing the thing as thing, as antecedent to and impossible in modernity, allows us to add a post-Marxian racial verse to the repetitive chorus of European thinking.

What is excavated can never be understood as a thing in its thingliness, because at the moment of excavation it is appropriated; its sight of the outside from the outside is annihilated and the only understanding it will provide is further property. The only way to refuse this way of seeing and clear that historically conditioned light of scientific seeing, to displace the individuation of European Man and the society premised by and upon him, is for the artefact to look at itself, to experience itself against, in contradistinction to, outside and without the *nomos* of world. To present what is called its thingliness to the insistent previousness of its nothingness: that is the antiracist philosophical project. Racism is precisely the 'aggressive and expansive drive to comprehend the other and thereby to reduce the other to what Levinas [and Heidegger, and Agamben] would call a thing', so anti-racist resistance 'must both disavow a certain temptation to comprehend [...] and reduce the racist's or philosophy-as-racism's field precisely by engaging what remains truly thingly' (Moten, 2018a: 10).

The subject and its ethical dimension, in Agamben's reading of Foucault, do 'not have an autonomous substance'; rather, they have 'no other place and no other consistency than the relation of use between the human being and the world' (Agamben, 2016: 33). That relation of use 'constitutes precisely the primary dimension in which subjectivity is constituted' (Agamben, 2016: 33–34). For Agamben, and, it might be fair to say, for European critical theory generally, subjectivity as relation is the (im)potentiality of the teleological dialectic, the possibility of cutting it, ending history. However, for people in the thingifying light of scientific excavation that turns beings fungible and wounds other histories by exclusionary assimilation, history already ended long ago; it was cut resolutely in the Middle Passage. Instrumentality cannot simply be inverted and its negativity embraced. Instrumentality must be understood, rather, as Moten understands it, as never a feature of the slave anyway. Instrumentality was always stuck in the magnifying glass of the scientist so that anything examined would always seem to be marked by it. Humanity sees the relation of instrumentality because it is humanity's constitutive internality. Individuation and the polity are mutually constitutive, so a poetics of inoperativity can only be thought beyond their relations, in the space-outside-space of Blackness, linked by brutality to Black life. *MODERN MAN AND HIS CITY ARE BUILT TOGETHER, BUT IN THE ANTEONTOLOGICAL ABYSS, THERE'S A NOTHING CALLED BLACKNESS, AND IT MAKES MODERN BLACK LIFE LIKE IT MADE THE ANCIENT SLAVE.*

Flesh

*THE THING IS FLESH, A WOUND THAT CHARACTERISES THE WHOLE OF HISTORY AND YET STANDS
OUTSIDE OF IT*

Moten notes that the "black body" is a misnomer that misconceives the history of Blackness (Moten, 2018a: 90), regarding its construction within the prescribed boundaries of self-labelled serious European philosophy and its property-possessive logics, rather than as an insistent previousness of flesh antecedent to the body, beginning as an object of European Being in the Middle Passage but preceding it. What we have been referring to as "thing" comes out in this moment as flesh.

Flesh, as C. Riley Snorton knows, is not some innocent form of life antecedent to modernity. Here we speak, in our own riff on Moten and Marx and Agamben, of the insistent previousness of flesh in order to work fugitive loopholes into destituent power and find a/nother/Blacker way out, but flesh is, as Hortense

Spillers (1987) affirms, fundamentally a racializing and a (de)gendering possibility, marked by fungibility, by a loose interchangeability outside the prescribed logic of semantics. Snorton seeks a way out of modernity's racializing force by spatializing the fungibility of the (Black) non-body's insistent previousness, pursuing 'flesh as a capacitating structure for alternative modes of being by tracing the various ways black figures made use of fungibility for fugitive movement, such that flesh became their instrument to engender interstitial spaces of reprieve' (Snorton, 2017: 53). Snorton seeks to bring the flesh *back out* of its entanglement with race, since, as Spillers notes, the 'severe disjunctures' of the 'hieroglyphs of the flesh' come 'to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin colour' (Spillers, 1987: 67). What is marked in the non-body of Black being is the linguistic difference that codes 'that zero degree of social conceptualization' (Spillers, 1987: 67) as forever disjunctive. Here is the inheritance of the whip, passing down through structured signifiers of the slave-driver's lash.

The problem set up here is that for Agamben the being is spoken into Being *as a body*. Agamben takes this, again, from Heidegger. The command to exist — the originary command that calls beings into Being — is premised on the emergence of a body, of the being-as-body. For Heidegger, the person is necessarily *not* a Thing and is constituted by the performance of intentional acts; it is his unity of body, soul and spirit as 'phenomenal domains' that allows Being to belong to the person who performs the task of intentional acts (Heidegger, 2001: 48–49). The slave enters into this as resistance to use, as 'not the being-at-work (*energeia*) of the soul according to the *logos* but something for which Aristotle can find no other determination that "the use of the body"' (Agamben, 2016: 5). Through this disruption of duty, Aristotle and Agamben recognize a non-productive form of being that puts the slave into a relation with herself, into a modal ontology based on a relation with herself, but what this overlooks is the non-corporeality of the slave. In the act of enslavement, the body is stolen. Enslavement is another name for the whiplash scar of stealing bodies. The Atlantic and the disruptive fungibility of its ontology is the name of that act in modernity, but for Aristotle the definition still stood; for Aristotle the slave still existed as the stolenness of that body that cannot be a Thing because it bears the mode of Being that is intentionality. Now, that 'diasporic plight marked a *theft of the body* — a willful and violent [...] severing of the captive body from its motive will' (Spillers, 1987: 67). The intentionality of the stolen body is that which is pocketed by the possessor, and in that movement the corporeality of the body is deprived of Being: the slave of Spillers, the stolen life of Moten, dodges the understanding (the *grasp*) of Agamben, Aristotle and Heidegger.

Here arises the ‘central [distinction] between captive and liberated subject-positions.’ That is, body and flesh: ‘before the “body” there is “flesh”, that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse’ (Spillers, 1987: 67). This is flesh that is crucially designated as coming *before* the act of stealing, as a divergent ontological mode seemingly imposed *on* the body as an after-effect of theft, but which rather reveals the existent viscosity in the code now borne by the captive-being released from Being: Blackness. The captive subject-position is constructed as the impossibility of proper gender performance. ‘Under these conditions ... the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political manoeuvre, not at all gender-related, gender-specific [...]: at the same time — in stunning contradiction — the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming *being for* the captor (Spillers, 1987: 67). Heidegger’s elision of the possibility of m/Man-as-Thing is correct, of course. Proper Man as full subject of modernity, bearing that liberated subject-position, could never be a Thing. A Thing is what life becomes once it is stolen; a Thing is life post-stolenness, in the celebration of a homelessness that is always giving away home. The slave’s non-productivity is employed by Agamben in the poetics of inoperativity as if the slave were a non-productive body. Agamben will reach for the slave to emancipate her, but his hands will grip nothing. The absence of value will slip from his anarchic fingers and their beautiful pursuit. The slave is not a body, necessarily.

Adding a brilliant new turn to this discussion in his 2014 book *Habeas Viscus*, Alexander Weheliye accesses the complex history of flesh and its future anterior being in the routine brutality of the world of Man:

If the body represents legal personhood qua self-possession, then the flesh designates those dimensions of human life cleaved by the working together of depravation and deprivation. In order for this cruel ruse to succeed, however, subjects must be transformed into flesh before being granted the illusion of possessing a body. What Spillers refers to as the “hieroglyphics of the flesh” created by these instruments is transmitted to the succeeding generations of black subjects who have been “liberated” and granted body in the aftermath of de jure enslavement. The hieroglyphics of the flesh do not vanish once affixed to proper personhood (the body); rather they endure as a pesky potential vital to the manoeuverings of “cultural seeing by skin color” [...]. Racializing assemblages translate the lacerations left on the captive body by apparatuses of political

violence to a domain rooted in the visual truth-value accorded to quasi-biological distinctions between different human groupings. Thus, rather than entering a clearing zone of indistinction, we are thrown into the vortex of hierarchical indicators: racializing assemblages. (Weheliye, 2014: 39–40, citing Spillers, 1987)

The racializing assemblages place beings in three categories, and they are: human, not-quite-human, and nonhuman. These categories are not palimpsests of the Heideggerian triptych of categories used by Agamben; they access something more obscure, something darker, Blacker, and render irrelevant the thing/animal/human triptych of being, or at least reveal their position as entirely limited to world. What the categories of Weheliye/Spillers develop beyond Agamben/Heidegger is the condition placed upon beings at the moment of individuation. For Heidegger, the ‘clearing zone’ allows for ‘indistinction’ because of that inherent performative agency we found above, but Weheliye shows us that this is only a ‘vortex of hierarchical indicators’: beings are prepared for individuation by the ontological referent that is race. The otherwise being is prepared categorically — as Moten says it best — for ‘admission to the zone of abstract equivalent citizenship and subjectivity, whose instantiations so far have been nothing but a set of pseudoindividuated aftereffects of conquest and conquest denial, a power trip to some fucked-up place in the burnt-out sun’ (Moten, 2018a: 136). The mutual constitution of the polity and the individual also necessitates the denial of their mutual constitution. *Move on, nothing to see here*, the police for protecting individuals say.

Revealed in this theorization of the flesh by Weheliye and Spillers, which takes us beyond our previous understanding of Blackness as a “thing” or “stone”, is its resistance to ‘the legal idiom of personhood as property’ (Weheliye, 2014: 44). The flesh is the appropriable substance in the individuating relation of production, the waste that clogs the machine, that is made but is not made into property and is therefore nothing, and always becoming-nothing. For Agamben, world ‘is the inoperativity of the animal environment’ (Agamben, 2019: 49); world is created for and by the human by recognizing his inherent non-openness, to which the animal is blind (2019: 48). The landscape, however, is the ‘ulterior stage’, the deactivation of the world and its perception ‘as a whole in a new dimension’: ‘No longer animal or human, the one who contemplates the landscape is only landscape’ (2019: 49).

In the production machine of world that produces property, the contemplation of the landscape is then the subject’s conversion into property

itself. The ontological totality of landscape that undoes the particular production mechanisms of world and conceives them anew as a singular otherness is the extension of property to everything, including its own perception and perceiver; the subsumption of subject and/as property, to put it Motenly. The flesh that resists property is at this moment, or in the moment of this realization, distinguished from the stone and seen in spatial relation to it. World is constructed out of the separation of animal and Man, as Agamben says. The negativity of the animal environment contains a(n) (im)potentiality created by exclusion in the moment of (world) creation. The constitution of the seeing subject — the subject/property who sees world as itself and defines the negative in relation to its own positive becoming as the abstract equivalent — is premised on denial; such is its constitutively internal repression, its manifestation as capital. The animal world is all the same; a different name conditioned by the same law. Before that — in front of it and antecedent to it — is the marking of the thing in world as flesh.

For Agamben and Heidegger, then, the being cannot be a thing or an object because the being bears a body, the being is born(e) into a body by the ontological command that is Being, and through that command Being belongs to the individual body. For Snorton, after Spillers, though, and for Moten too, the peculiar condition of Black sociality is to be precisely unbodied, to exist in the precorporeal *community* of Blackness; to be, that is, a being that is conceived (of) as intra-racially homogeneous, the same as all Blacks, as non-existent as all slaves, as objectish as any old thing. ‘There’s no such thing’, as Stefano Harney says, with Moten beside him, ‘as a “white community” [...] Whiteness is the destruction of community’ (Moten and Harney, 2020a: 31–34’) because Whiteness has that agential language of the command that speaks beings into Being. For the being who is not a being insofar as it cannot speak itself into Being because the command functions as an exclusionary force demarcating the boundaries of emergence in the clearing, in full ontic capacity, there is only the possibility of being missed out of the process of corporealization — left in the communal form of being, retroactively defined in the bourgeois individual subjectivity of modernity as primitive, as a primordial relic antecedent and anathema to contemporaneity; instead existing as degendered thing, simultaneously excessive and reductive, too colourful and colourless, ‘the manifestation of absence turned to the excessive’ (Moten, 2008b: 191): that is, as flesh. FLESH IS NOT A BEING, AS SUCH. IT IS LIFE BARRED FROM BEING. AND THAT IS WHY THE FLESH, OR THE STONE AS IT IS APPEARS, AS IT EMERGES HERE AND THERE, IS SO PERSISTENTLY ANTECEDENT.

Performance

LOVE (OF) THING / THING OPTIMISM

There's a song Fred Moten loves, and it begins:

I've been so many places in my life and time
I've sung a lot of songs, yeah, and I've made some bad rhymes
I've acted out my life on stages, with ten thousand people watching me
But we are alone, and I'm singing this song for you.
(Temptations, 1975; Moten, 2018c)

Moten is talking about the song with contemporary artist Sondra Perry. They have been discussing the complexity of Perry's work and its relation to misrecognition, the pop song's love lyrics endlessly reworking the 'I thought I saw you today' paradigm, the 'I saw someone who looked just like you' and whether this is directed at *you* or at precisely the everything that is necessarily not you, in a world where everything is *you* in *your* absence *except you*, because what defines you (and my pop song love for you) is that you are not here. The conversation then moves into Moten's fury at the institution, Frieze's capacity to consume 'like medicine' the criticism of itself and the awful paradox of serving an institution ('the university as glorified real estate company' [2018c: 20–22"]) that posits itself as the space of opening while violently closing every possibility of thought. Then back to another song. Moten is in love with the song, with its idea, and he keeps calling its singer 'Dennis Franklin' although his name is Dennis Edwards (who had an intense love affair with Aretha Franklin, whom Moten only calls 'Aretha'), adding another accidental layer to the bizarre slippage of recognition, the opening of the possibility of a radical doubt in the object-recognizing capacity of the speaker. Perry and Moten are *alone* on stage, watched by all these people expecting to plug into the speakers like work stations, to offload all their shit; ten thousand people 'all up in our fucking faces' (Moten, 2018c: 36–37"), leading Moten to the question, 'What are we doing here?' (2018c: 20–21") But first, in the song, perfectly titled 'A Song for You', there is the duality of the public and the private, the aloneness after the performance; 'and so of course any time you do a live performance of the song, that produces that irony' (2018c: 38–40").

There is a pause in Moten's moment of release, his performance of privacy in front of the crowd. 'That thing of ... Uh ... See ... Black sociality is not a private thing ... It obliterates privacy. It cannot tolerate privacy or privatization.

It must be shared. It doesn't belong to anybody. It doesn't even belong to us. ... But by the same token it can't be public either ... It can't exist within that sort of brutal public-private partnership that everything seems to be bound up with now' (2018c: 39–42"). Sitting in front of this crowd, two friends in their private conversation, the arranged publicity of Perry's art and the advertisement for Moten's books at the beginning of their talk, and their frustration at being watched, at being plugged into, it arrives finally at a position that nestles into the liminal aspatiality of being 'alone' and 'singing this song for you'.

The subject of the song — and we could use its singer, Dennis Edwards, as that subject — is emerging into an active absence of singularity. Edwards has been everywhere, displaced globally as an abstract spectacle to be watched, to be set into performance. He is, like any artist, as Moten says, plugged into like a work station, a machine onto which people offload all their tumult, their unbearable excess. And Black people are also 'ubiquitous as work stations, for other people to work out their shit' (2018c: 18–19"). Edwards has toured the world, accumulating these performative transferences of visibility. The eyes of crowds, of tens of thousands, elicit his performance for the depletion of their own temporal accumulation. Time has built up in them, the cruel labour of years, and watching Edwards and his beautiful voice is a chance to charge the void, to plug in to the pump and drain some of that miserable excess. Edwards takes it all on. He recognizes, brilliantly, that it's not necessarily the perfection of his performance that allows this, since he sings some 'bad rhymes'. It's something else, something far deeper than that. Edwards's is — and it's clear now, at this point in the essay, what I am proposing for this singing subject — an ontological condition. He was born to be a travelling performance, to exist as a work station that is never allowed to stop moving and plug in. Edwards is always, forever unbearably operative, and that operativity is a condition of his ontological status as non-body. Aristotle asks himself if the worker is born before his labour, and the answer is yes. The being is inherently inoperative. Edwards must, then, not be a being. Edwards, instead, is Black. His precorporealized position is also his position as an emblem of an antemodern community. He represents — and exists only as the representative of — a mythical community that signifies pure togetherness which is at once fetishizable as beautiful, as the hard-working, chain-ganging, plantation-song-singing slave, and anathema to the individual bourgeois subjectivity of modernity.

Agamben is of course looking to go back, somehow, to this inoperative state. But Edwards here reveals the reality of that state. The reality is that it is built on the premise of something having been thrown under the landscape where the polity and the subject constitute each other. The reality is that a modal

ontology assumes an already-completed constitution of the subject who can now endlessly reconstitute herself as a form-of-life that *does not* assume a free subject who exists *a priori*. The potentiality that grants the sovereignty that inoperativity shifts out of is a world-constituting European potentiality that has already constituted the world of European ontology's emergence, leaving its racializing residue wherever that subject moves, even if into a modal ontology that pulls down the grotesque statue of subjectivity; and that world is based on something that looks like 'you' but is not 'you'; something that defines the possibility of 'you' being recognized; a dark thing in the machine, stolen life, back as black and blur, in the whatever universal machine. Agamben is under world, reformulating, but Dennis Edwards, disguised fugitively by Moten as Dennis Franklin, merging into Aretha and her own fugitive sociality, is the name of 'under' and the thing that 'under' refers to in the deictic world of European subjectivity.

The first two lines of the song rhyme, although the imperfect rhyme is acknowledged in the sentiment itself, while the second couplet is posited on a different form of coherence. It is a semantic rhyme. 'Me' and 'you'. They sound nothing alike, but precisely the theorization achieved in these lines, in this song, is that what 'you' are is anything but 'you.' 'You are everything except you' (2018c: 18–19"). What 'you' most rhymes with is, for the fleshy subject who is shared in the antecedent form of Black sociality, possibly 'me', or 'we' or 'us.' *We* are alone. We are pushed out of the landscape of bourgeois subjectivity and the Whiteness of modernity's ontological singularity, but that is where the performance of this gestural escape from individuality is enacted, where the work of Black sociality is found, unexcavated, and listened to. This, the impossible outside in the aloneness of a genuine 'we', is where the self is shared. This is where sharing is the real act of the being.

Sharing is a concept that Moten and Harney have been working on recently. It is not mentioned once in *The Undercommons* and is not part of Moten's 2017–18 trilogy, *consent not to be a single being*, so it is difficult to attain any steady practice of study with it yet. The concept emerges in an interview with Moten and Harney on 4th July, 2020. Moten's signal is bad, and it is hard to hear him ('And I've made some bad rhymes,' Dennis Edwards might say if The Temptations were stuck in a pandemic in New York with no signal). Responding to a question about patriarchy and its force in the performance of recent Black Lives Matter protests, Moten focuses on the 'extraction of sharing'. 'Even in zones that are preserved for the protection and cultivation of normative white interests, the simple capacity for people to maintain anything like a liveable individual life [...] has been the function of the chorus and forced enactment and practice of

sharing of women, which is to say: the *extraction of sharing*, and that's crucial. Literally, the *taking of sharing*. That's how Donald Trump himself made it to his third birthday' (2020a: 36–41”).

Moten goes on to describe this more specifically as ‘the extraction of what has often been conceived of as women’s work, or the labour of reproduction’. Sharing is a duty of the being in whom the task of maintaining the sociality of individuals is placed. The given ontology of capital extracts sharing from the labouring subject, the subject who is unpaid because she is a bearer of the duty of sharing. This is, for Agamben, the ancient slave, but for Moten this is the position of that being whose being is withdrawn in the act of her condemnation to a state of producing sharing to be extracted by and for capital. ‘It’s black women who have to do this sharing. And you can’t separate the sharing from the extraction. What [Saidiya Hartman] does [...] is to figure out a way to not retrieve sharing from extraction, but to imagine and let us get some sense of these practices of sharing’. Sharing is a practice that exists within the logic of capital, of those juridical spaces of the concentration camp, and it is not the task of Black study to withdraw it. This is a fundamental difference in the respective ways in which a poetics of inoperativity can be thought by Agamben and by Moten. For Agamben, the practice of inoperativity is taken from within and moved; it is replaced, reformed. For Moten (and Harney), the practice of initiating the constitutive sociality of the body’s use happens *within* the space of the camp. It is not a beyond, an outside, an otherwise. It is, to limit it somewhat to a spatial coding, *under*. And that is to say, *before*. It is practised *before* the extractive power of modernity both in its temporal and spatial meanings: antecedent to, and in the face of.

For Moten, it is an ethical imperative to constantly recognize and actively think this mutual death in the life of the extraction of sharing. ‘We do so’, he says, ‘in the interests of the revival and the renewal of our habits of sharing, which are our habits of assembly, and in the recognition of the necessity to socialize outside of any bullshit notion of gender opposition and any restrictive notion of sexual difference, to socialize the practice of sharing, which [...] [Harney and I] always want to acknowledge as a fundamentally maternal operation. But the socialization of that maternal operation is not a retrenchment of sexual difference and gender difference along traditional lines, but an obliteration of that shit’ (2020a: 40–41”).

The maternity of this operation is an interesting addition. Against the patriarchal practice of extraction that imposes the injunction of constant labour for the maintenance of the regime, the maternal operation of sharing brings people into assembly *before* and *during* the extraction of their sharing practice. The

sharing is happening — emanating from the maternal embrace that gathers in a caring gesture, in the outreach of the politics of care — while the extraction of that sharing continues. Feminized reproductive labour, that is to say, is simultaneously producing the polity and the individual. The maternal labour of social reproduction is the creation of the social mode that is extracted for the bourgeois, liberal individual as the single full subject of modernity. Blackness is the sociality that precedes that dual production, and that exists out from its outside, that moves always in the underneath. Before the radical modality of Agamben, there is a sociality, a commonality, that had to be pounded in to the ground for this world to emerge; and then it had to be excavated, archeologically dug and re-dug-up for the constant performance of Man's self-discovery, his imposition of thingliness onto the stone and the assertion of his own self-recognition as 'you', his subjectivity binaries. Before that, Edwards/Franklin was alone with Aretha, in front of ten thousand people all excavating themselves in the work station of ontology's pre-ontological racialization. Somehow, somewhere, 'Blackness, which is to say black social life, is an undiscovered country' (Moten, 2008b: 202). Black sociality is on the map but unmappable. It is alive but unusable in a modal ontology because it's always already shared; it has always been extracted, always shared, and that is how it gains its aloneness in full view of the crowd who self-constitute through this performance.

What we arrive at here is a mad and beautiful scene in which Hortense Spillers emerges out of Moten in order to topple Heidegger from the landscape of Agamben, which gives Agamben fully to Moten, at which point Moten shares his own pseudo-Agambenified sociality with Spillers and we have a fugitive poetics of sharing in the warm nest beneath inoperativity.

Harney brings Spillers into the discussion as soon as Moten stops talking. 'Sharing is not an interpersonal relationship [...] One doesn't share. One is shared. Now, the great moment, as Fred says, [of] feeling the combination of horror and possibility in this is in Hortense Spillers's work. [What she is] emphasizing for us is this utter access, an access so deep that it undoes gender, that it undoes patriarchy [...] Somehow that access has to stay open for that type of sharing to take place' (2020a: 41–45"). Now the nest opens up. This is what we want, what I've been looking for throughout these words, in the months of sweating above them, pointing out the figures who look nothing like me, then shouting 'Hey, you!' as they dodge, again, fugitively away, into a sociality that precedes, exceeds and pleases me. 'The kind of sharing we're talking about is about being accessed, and it is such because we're already shared'".

That kind of sharing is the anti-statist anti-univers(al)ity; the local act of love; it is Edwards singing to Franklin, saying ‘Ooh!’ when he’s too old to sing, and then becoming, posthumously, Franklin in Moten’s study; it is the shocking beauty that Agamben never speaks about; it is the threat to thinking that Arendt denounced Black studies for (1970); it is, as Moten and Harney say in their latest collaborative essay, the ‘anti- and ante-natal undercommonality’ (2020b: 3) that is Blackness. That Blackness, that act of sharing, the constant ethical imperative that is the thing I’ll never know called Black sociality, is the obliteration of the divide between public and private. And what that obliteration does, once we get this far into it, is suspend the activity of archaeology. Agamben, you can stop digging now. The job has been cancelled and they have closed the institution, or at least from this point in the burnt-out corpse of the (European Being’s) landscape, we cannot see the policies they stamp into our skin; we cannot hear the duplicity of the institution’s happy consumption of its internal criticism. Archaeology is over, above. What we were digging up is the reason for our digging. But, really, it is sharing, and it is already shared.

For Agamben, sharing is a public act (2016: Prologue). It is the public counterpart to the almost shameful ‘clandestinity of private life’ (2016: xvii). To share, as he elaborates in his short essay ‘The Friend,’ is ‘purely existential, a con-division that [...] lacks an object’ (Agamben, 2009: 36); friends ‘do not share *something* (birth, law, place, taste): they are shared by the experience of friendship’ (2009: 36). It is *sharing* that is the lived experience of friends. Sharing as a spatial practice, as an ethical imperative conducting certain beings into a life that is non-being, however, is for Agamben, after Aristotle, the practice of the animal. ‘In this sense, we say that humans live together, unlike cattle who share the pasture together’ (Aristotle in Agamben, 2009: 36). The animal beneath is unseen in the public act of sharing; there is an already stolen — but fugitively capacious and beautiful — sharing going on that is neither private nor public, that is under the landscape of Man and his endless emergence. ‘To bring to light’, Agamben neatly states, ‘the intimate interweaving of being and living: this is today certainly the task of thought (and of politics)’ (2016: xix), but in the sharing of the pasture, in the ethical imperative of sharing before and inside any ontology, there is something that is too dark to bring to light, and against whose darkness the lightness knows its light. For Moten and Harney, in opposition to Agamben, sharing is inherently internal; it is the constitutive poetics of sociality that constitutes the being. And exactly its purpose is to share the pasture; to enact an inherent resistance to property within the property of Man’s light. Brought to the

light already, sharing is the ethics of darkness in the pasture before Man, in the flesh.

For Agamben, the correct path away from modernity's brutal juridical space of inter(n)ment is the use of one's own body, in the sense of *sōmatos chrēsthai*, of experiencing one's potential without making it actual, of living in and by and for the community. This is the radical magic of *The Use of Bodies*, its care of inoperative internalization, of seeing oneself as oneself within oneself in order to create the non-teleological, non-productive potentiality of others as constituent and constituted (which in this moment of performative *chrēsthai* become difficult to distinguish) sociality. It renders Denise Ferreira da Silva's 'affectability' (da Silva, 2007: xv) optimistic, in the weirdest Motenian way; it turns the affective capacity and wound of being created by nature into the inoperative potentiality of the coming politics. The problem, however, that I keep tripping up on every time I jump with joy at the sound of this beautiful inoperativity, is that Dennis Edwards (as plural; as *we* that rhymes with *me* that rhymes with *you*, badly; as Black sociality) is alone, having been watched by tens of thousands, and it is only in the act of his disappearance from the sociality that constitutes him that he can produce the thing that summarily sings his own constitution in/as a poetics of inoperativity. Edwards was made by the crowd. He was made by The Temptations. But in the moment of being able to be alone and to sing, for you, for his love, to constitute and be mutually constituted by his potentiality as song, he disappears. The disappearance is surely the result of inoperativity's divergent spatiality; it attempts to make and place bodies elsewhere, in Aristotle's inoperative landscape or Heidegger's constituting *Lichtung*.

What comes out of this immobile tide washing into the shoals of Edwards and Agamben is Moten on the radio saying, 'You are everything except you'. While the juridical regime extracts sharing from the shared beings in the given ontology of modernity, Agamben's inoperativity removes the beings into a deconcentrated, decamped space of *sōmatos chrēsthai* and non-teleological use beyond the activation of potentiality. However, in the fugitive undercommons of Black sociality, something else is happening, and, beyond what I've already said above, I don't know what that something is.

Love / Home

PERFORMANCE (OF) THING / BLACK ABANDON(ING)

The point is, maybe, if there's a point, that the condition of Black sociality is permanent operativity in the service of White inoperativity in the institution of criticism. All Whites are not allowed to employ the service of this displacement of operativity, as the misleading example of Dennis Edwards might have suggested (since it is not a necessarily privileged position to have access to Edwards's song; it's available on YouTube). Other genocidal strikes constitute the atomic tunnels of the driver's lash: gender, class, sexuality, ability. Instead, what I mean to say is that access to the emancipatory poetics of inoperativity is premised on an employment of Black sociality as permanent reduction to the performative excess of operativity, and that is a significant limitation in Agamben's project when listened to from the record player of Black study. I am not suggesting that thinking *against* Agamben is the response to this limitation; I'd go for a pint with Giorgio any day. But the concept of sharing, the careful emancipatory poetics of Moten and Harney, can enhance a reworking of the secret Whiteness worn in the muffled policies of inoperativity that still designate certain Heideggerian zones of Being as the spaces of ontic initiation, which I cannot see a place for in any fugitive project.

The (*whatever*) point is that the possibility of an inoperative politics is put into performative play by a dance with Blackness and its insistent previousness, the fungible excess of its constitutive flesh, and the abandon(ing) of the European tradition of critical theory and thinking that without fail posits the Bible and the Greeks as the entirety of serious history. The point is a refusal and celebration of the possibilities in criticism; a movement inside them and against them and out from their outside. This is Blackness's always fugitive position in the institution of thought. 'White supremacist intellectual culture in America is committed to the regulation of disorder, the capture of the fugitive. Its methodological character is the ongoing and aggressive deployment of an instrumentalist disposition (i.e., a tendency to reduce everything to the status of mere instrument while failing adequately, ruthlessly, critically to consider the very idea of the mere instrument and, thereafter, to think [the thinking] instrument)' (Moten, 2018b: 109–10). This is not to say that inoperativity must begin with ignorance of European thinking, but rather that a continuation of the European tradition will always reach the same ignorant conclusions. It will ignore, as Agamben does, the Blackness of the Greek slave (regardless of any epidermalized illusion of pre-racial ontologies — Moten, 2018a: 98). It will be unaware of the constitution of the thing outside the

originary moment of sovereignty that constituted the animal and the human *qua* animal and human. It will not know the thing's production of flesh once excavated, extracted into the enclosing clearing of the European world. It will always try to map the thing, failing to notice that the thing is really nothing, a nothingness recognizable and loveable precisely by its unmappability, its total juxtapositionality but fugitive internality to the cartographic logic of modernity (cf. Moten, 2018a: 194ff). It will always be limited to representation, no matter how much it rebuts representation and critically deconstructs its power, because world itself is only a self-enclosing representation of its own dialectical history when seen from inside Europe and European history/theory. To access a poetics of inoperativity, end history and instigate the *argos* of people is pointless if it is only done from the vantage point of the human.

if you ain't gon' get down then what you come here for?

what they bring your ass up in here for if you ain't gon'
tear shit up? if you wasn't just as happy to be here as you was

to come then what you gon' do, simple motherfucker? the salve trade
(Moten, 2008a.)

“Why the sudden abandon?” Because that's what you do with Agamben, when everything but you is what you are. Still. Already shared, resistant to sharing, attempting to imagine a poetics of sharing, in love and hate with sharing and its constant disappearance, here I abandon, Agambenly, all these dances and go home to the place where home is always given away.

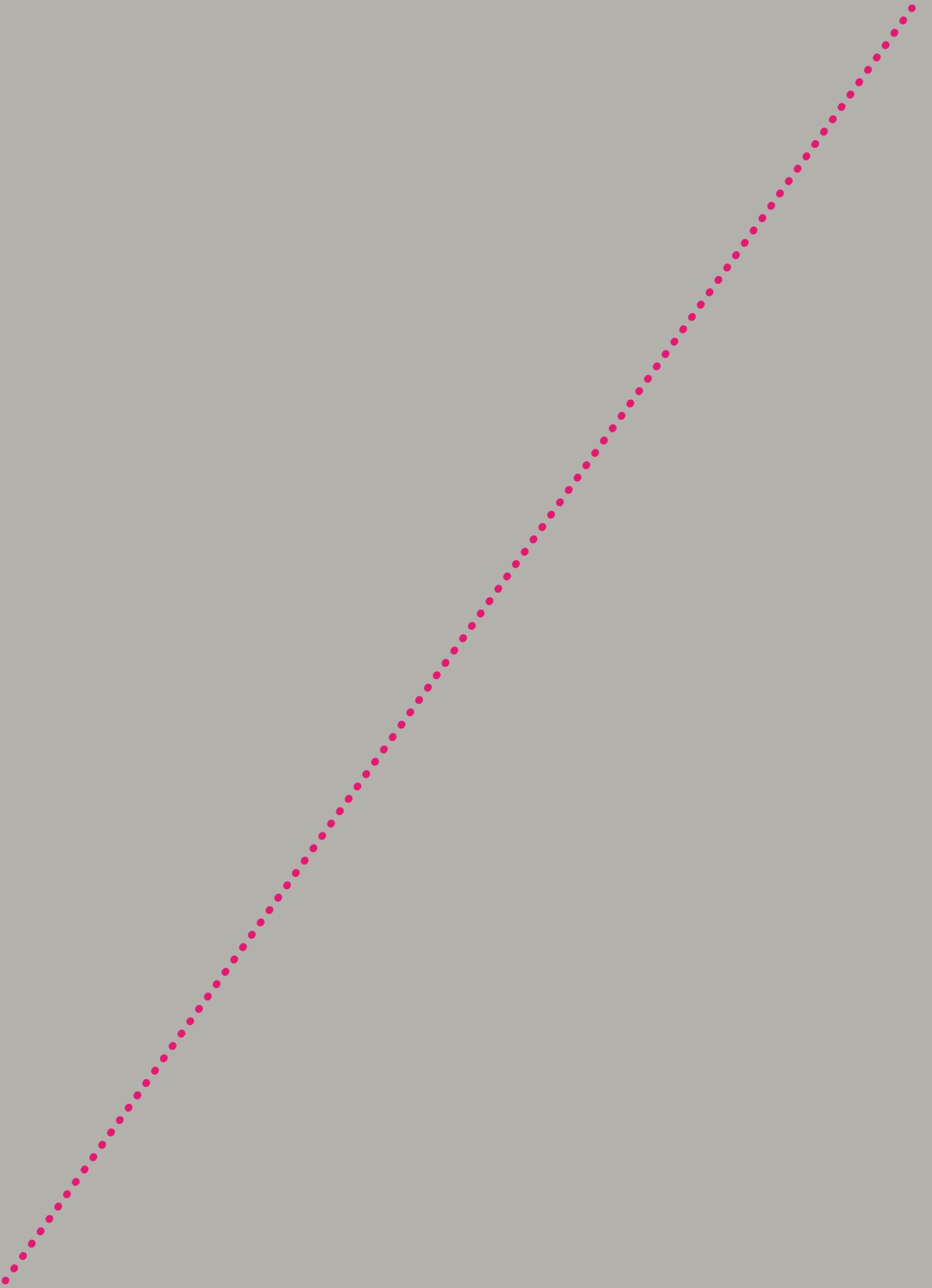


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Archaeologies of Contemporary Art: Negativity, Inoperativity, Désœuvrement

Malte Fabian Rauch

Abstract

In his recent writings, Giorgio Agamben develops an archaeology of contemporary art underwritten by his theory of inoperativity. In so doing, he returns to many of the questions raised in his very first book, *The Man Without Content*, notably revising his understanding of the readymade and the work of Marcel Duchamp. Exploring the difference between these analyses, this essay argues that a comparative analysis allows us to shed light on one of the most intricate aspects of Agamben's thought: the relation between negativity and inoperativity. It suggests that a constitutive ambivalence towards aesthetic negativity — oscillating between attraction and repulsion — is at the centre of the 'destruction of aesthetics' Agamben attempts in his first book. Reading his recent writings against this backdrop, it becomes evident that 'inoperativity' can be understood as a reworking of this problematic, resulting in an operation that undoes the stale opposition between dialectical negativity and Nietzschean affirmation. This perspective allows, then, for an exploration of the modality of privation at play in the 'in' of indifference and inoperativity. Privation, as it emerges in Agamben's poetics of inoperativity is a suspension of negativity, an indefinite privation that is irreducible to negation. In conclusion, it is argued that Agamben's concept of 'inoperativity' resonates with a variety of critical conceptual practices in contemporary art.

Keywords: inoperativity, indifference, désœuvrement, negativity, passivity



The first book Giorgio Agamben wrote, *The Man without Content*, published in 1970, has until very recently been the only one among his many works offering a detailed historico-philosophical analysis of contemporary art. Throughout Agamben's other works, references to 'visual' art do, of course, abound, but the thrust of these theoretical investigations is less concerned with its historical itinerary, let alone its contemporary place. More than four decades after his first book, Agamben recently returned to its subject, notably if mutedly revising his analysis of Duchamp and the readymade. In keeping with his methodological postulate that the contemporary can only be accessed indirectly, his 'Archaeology of the Work of Art' in *Creation and Anarchy* seeks to comprehend the present state

of the artwork by means of an archaeological investigation (Agamben, 2019a). The differences between these texts — separated as they are through the elaboration of Agamben’s philosophy of inoperativity — invite a comparative reading of the early work, not for the sake of comprehensiveness or the fiction of continuity, but to interrogate one of the most demanding aspects of his entire work: the relation between negativity and inoperativity.

There may be no aspect of Agamben’s work that is at once so important and so elusive, so frequently mentioned and yet so consistently misinterpreted as the stance it takes towards negativity. Throughout his work, and most explicitly in *Language and Death*, Agamben seems to advocate an abandonment of all forms of negativity and negation, up to and including its boundary figures, which he finds to be present in Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida (cf. Rauch, 2021). Even so, there may be no contemporary philosopher who has so often been accused of an utter ‘negativism’, if not outright nihilism. Among many others, Georges Didi-Huberman (2019; cf. 2009: chap. 3) considered it apt to criticise Agamben’s writings for a valorization of the negative, a reading or rather non-reading of Agamben’s actual engagement with the theme that is symptomatic for the general reception. A paradoxical constellation: the thinker who programatically made the call for an end to all negativity is confronted with the claim that even his own signal concepts are held captive by this very question. Yet readings such as Didi-Huberman’s are not only the result of carelessness, however striking their elisions may appear. On the contrary, they attest, even in spite of themselves, to the complex relation that Agamben’s work does indeed bear to the legacy of negative thought.

Its own genealogy bespeaks this ambivalence. For at the crucial moment Agamben positions inoperativity as the signal concept of the *Homo Sacer* project, he does so in a retracing of ‘*désœuvrement*’ in the debate between Alexandre Kojève and Georges Bataille, as well as its aftermath in Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy’s work (Agamben, 1998: 61–62). From Bataille’s ‘*negativité sans emploi*’ to Blanchot and Nancy’s use of ‘*désœuvrement*’ this entire debate has, of course, been marked by an abiding concern with negativity. So much so that Nancy even in his most recent work has continued to interrogate Blanchot’s thinking of the negative outside a dialectical economy (Nancy, 2016: 15–16). Agamben, for his part, was, from the beginning, careful to underscore that inoperativity can only be thought as a generic mode of potentiality, building on an earlier critique of Bataille’s attempt to think ‘beyond Hegelianism’ in a ‘negativity without employ’ (Agamben, 1991: 53, translation amended). But the markers of potentiality — the presence of an absence, the relation to privation — do introduce a certain

negative modality into the concept, evident not least in Agamben's vocabulary: be it *inoperativity*, *impotentiality*, *indifference*, *destitution* or *decreation* — privative prefixes are the signature of this philosophical idiom. In keeping with this tendency, Agamben's recent elaboration of art as resistance — with, but also against Deleuze — foregrounds a negative moment, that is to say, the constitutive role of 'not being and not doing' (2019b: 18). Far from valorising 'the' negative, the privative modality that surfaces here is irreducible to the stale opposition of dialectical negativity and Nietzschean affirmation, a by now historical dualism that, however, still furnishes the unquestioned matrix that orients and determines the divergent characterisations of Agamben's work.

The claim of the present essay is that Agamben's writings on art offer a privileged perspective from which to approach this strand in his work. For it is in his first book, *The Man Without Content*, that a certain ambivalence towards negativity emerges, to which inoperativity can be seen as a response. Even in his most recent writings, Agamben returns to this proximity. In the epilogue to *The Use of Bodies*, for instance, he evokes the 'practice of the avant-garde' as an attempt to 'actualize a destitution of work' (2016: 275), thus suggesting a parallel between avant-garde negativity and his project. Then, however, Agamben sharply delineates his own concept from their practice, which, he argues, 'ended up recreating in every place the museum apparatus and the powers that it pretended to depose' (2016: 275). In fact, this approximation and withdrawal vis-à-vis avant-garde negativity has a complex history in Agamben's work, originating in his very first work.

Terra aesthetica

In the opening pages of *The Man Without Content*, Agamben declares himself in solidarity with Friedrich Nietzsche's radical critique of aesthetics as the framework for understanding art. According to Nietzsche and Agamben, 'aesthetics' denotes the distinctly modern, subjective and receptive understanding of art, exemplified, both claim, by Immanuel Kant's theory of reflective judgments and the notion of disinterested beauty to which it is linked. Against the aesthetic experience of art, Agamben evokes Plato's *damnatio* of the poets, which bears witness to an experience of art so different, so intense, so violent that it is bound to seem all but incomprehensible, even scandalous to a modern audience. The aesthetic appreciation of these modern spectators appears, in contrast, as anaesthetics: bleached-out, sanitised, apathetic. What seems like a contingent

fault of the contemporary audience, however, is in truth one element in an asymmetric relation, one side of a fracture that finds its counterpart in the terror and frenzy experienced by those artists the young Agamben held dear, most importantly perhaps Antonin Artaud, to whom he dedicated some of the essays pre-dating the book. They alone seem to have preserved a pre-aesthetic experience of art that makes Plato's condemnation comprehensible — a fragile privilege, or a privileged fragility, reflected, for instance, in the question Artaud posed to Jacques Rivière: 'Why lie, why try to put something which is life's very cry on a literary level?' (Artaud, 1968: 39).

Having diagnosed aesthetics as the cause and silencing of this cry, Agamben names its destruction as the explicit goal of his book: 'Perhaps nothing is more urgent — if we really want to engage the problem of art in our time — than a *destruction* of aesthetics that would, by clearing away what is usually taken for granted, allow us to bring into question the very meaning of aesthetics as the science of the work of art' (Agamben, 1999a: 6). The first thing to note here is that, in its general opposition to the aesthetic and its attempt to access an understanding of art outside of that framework, Agamben's approach is in keeping with a strategy common to thinkers as diverse as Heidegger, Derrida, Theodor W. Adorno and Alain Badiou, a tendency, that is to say, which could be described as dominant in Continental philosophy. The intention behind such 'anti-aesthetic' theories, notwithstanding their manifold differences, is the claim that aesthetics cannot provide the framework for understanding art, since the entire paradigm of 'the aesthetic' is constituted by exclusion, limitation, and closure. By that token, the destruction or overcoming of aesthetics turns into the precondition for disclosing a truth proper to art, however philosophically determined (unveiling, *poiēsis*, event etc.). These operations, we may note in passing, retain their own ambivalence, inasmuch as they frame the truth of art as irreducible to philosophy and yet as forming one of its complements, an epistemic exteriority that ultimately remains immanent to the discourse of philosophy. Art is that other, marginal, non-discursive form of knowledge in relation to which philosophy is always in a position of mastery.

In Agamben's case, the loss aesthetics attests to is keyed to a series of constitutive dualisms and fractures, most notably that between artist and aesthetic observer, which in turn unfolds as the split between creative principle and judgement, genius and taste. Throughout this critical assessment, the influence of Heidegger is readily discernible, but Agamben's effects an important rearrangement of the latter's categories. In their initial framing, the problems treated by Agamben are quite obviously modelled in Heideggerian terms,

especially in the construal of aesthetics as the field where art dies; and in conceiving art as an ‘origin’, meaning here: the originary event of world disclosure (Heidegger, 2002: 50).¹ As Reiner Schürmann puts it, ‘[s]o understood, the origin is irreducible to everything born of it, notably to *technē* and science’ (Schürmann, 1987: 125). Apart from a general strategy of thinking art as *poiēsis* — and hence as mode of unconcealment radically different from technology — Agamben skirts around the gestures of Heidegger’s artwork essay, notably the semantics of *Riss* (rift) so important for many Left Heideggerian readings. Instead, Agamben transposes the Heideggerian notion of ‘destruction’ from ontology to aesthetics, tacitly playing on its technical sense as being not a ‘negative’ method, but an attempt to ‘stake out the positive possibilities of the tradition’ (Heidegger, 1996: 20). If, for Heidegger, this operation ‘has no other intent than to reattain the originary experiences of being belonging to metaphysics’ (1998: 315), it should come as no surprise that Agamben’s destruction of the aesthetic regime will attempt to retrieve the originary experience of art.

The decisive operation of Agamben’s arresting rewriting of Heidegger’s philosophy of art is to position this methodological ‘destruction’ in relation to ‘a link of some kind between the destiny of art and the rise of that nihilism’, which, Agamben adds, Heidegger diagnosed as the ‘fundamental movement of the West’ (Agamben, 1999: 27). What is nowhere to be found in Heidegger is, of course, the claim regarding a ‘link of some kind’ between art and nihilism, since, for him, the riddle and importance of art is precisely its potential to serve as the resistant element in the epochal history terminating in the *Gestell*.² Instead of merely subsuming art under the narrative in which being comes to nothing, however, Agamben’s ‘destruction of aesthetics’ makes itself, as we shall see, both systematically and historically, dependent upon an anti-aesthetic current in art, which Heidegger fails to take note of. Others have hinted at this parallel, most notably Jean-Luc Nancy, who characterises the Heideggerian *Destruktion* as the ‘philosophical counterpart’ to the aesthetic negations that punctuate modern art (Nancy, 2015: 48). Taking this strange affinity in a very specific direction, Agamben’s ‘destruction’ is repeating and resisting, negating and redeeming the nihilism which he identifies as the essence of art’s negativity. This is how the

¹ Note, however, that Heidegger explicitly exempts Kant from the attack on aesthetics in Nietzsche, where he goes to some lengths in presenting ‘Kant’s Doctrine of the Beautiful: Its Misinterpretation by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche’ (Heidegger, 1991: 107–114).

² In fact, Heidegger systemically avoids, as Shane Weller (2008: 52) shows, employing the term ‘nihilism’ in his writings on art, but implicitly positions poetry as a counter-nihilistic resource.

book's opening and closing metaphor — 'that the fundamental architectural problem becomes visible only in the house ravaged by fire' (Agamben, 1999a: 6; cf. 115) — is meant to be read: art's own anti-aesthetic destructions have wreaked havoc on the aesthetic regime, allowing for Agamben's 'positive' destruction to uncover the artwork's original structure in the ruins. This dialectic of danger and rescue determines, then, the structure of the entire argument to come.

In many ways, the story Agamben tells in *The Man Without Content* is a negative account of the genesis of art's autonomy, a process that figures it as loss, fragmentation and demise. As always in his work, however, this implies no linear narrative of decline, but the construction of a critical relation to the present, a method Nancy aptly characterizes as 'counterfactual' (Nancy, 2018: 193). What is shattered in the present, Agamben argues, is the original unity of the artwork and the 'shared concrete space of the work of art,' where artist and audience are closely related (1999a: 37). The scission produced by the rise of aesthetics plays out between two poles: on the one hand, the increasingly distanced spectator, who judges the aesthetic object; on the other, the artist for whom the growing distance of the observer translates into a voiding of the shared cultural heritage, such that the artist is left eventually 'without content'. Unable to suture these rifts, the artist increasingly becomes the one who is supposed to create *ex nihilo* from the void of an eclipsed tradition and for the anonymity of the disinterested aesthetic observer. As such, the two poles of the aesthetics regime are mutually reinforcing and lead to a continuous deepening of the fracture that lacerates the fabric of cultural transmissibility. Nothing, henceforth, remains of tradition, nothing but the transmission of negation.

In light of the distance Agamben takes from Hegel in all of his subsequent works, it is revealing that he borrows, extensively and explicitly, from the *Aesthetics* at this point to conceptualise this process, especially the thesis concerning a growing subjectivisation that deprives art of its highest vocation. Approvingly glossing a passage from Hegel's lectures, Agamben explains the dialectic at the heart of his genealogy in the following terms: 'The original unity of the work of art has broken, leaving on the one side the aesthetic judgment and on the other artistic subjectivity without content, the pure creative principle' (1999a: 37). But the even more surprising use Agamben makes of Hegel occurs as he infers from this argument an essential complicity between art and nihilism. With this move, Agamben radically reconfigures the relation between Hegel and Heidegger, such that the former establishes the link between art and nihilism that the latter painstakingly resists. Having posited the connection between a fragmentation of the cultural heritage and the unbinding of the creative principle, Agamben argues

that this dynamic signals and elicits a convergence of creation and destruction. This is because, he argues, ‘the pure creative-formal principle, split from any content, is the absolute abstract inessence, which annihilates and dissolves every content in its continuous effort to transcend and actualize itself’ (1999a: 54). Lacking in content, creation is bound to turn into annihilation, the ‘pure force of negation’ (1999a: 56).

It is, in fact, Hegel’s critique of Romanticism that Agamben credits with the essential analysis of the allegedly nihilistic signature of modern art. Notoriously, Hegel attacks the contemporary Romantics *ad homini* for their notion of irony, which he casts as the absolutisation of negativity, an immoral, Fichtean subjectivism. For the subject of Romantic irony, Hegel argues, elevates itself above every determined content, and imagines itself ‘as a divine creative genius for which anything and everything is only an unsubstantial creature, to which the creator [...] is not bound, because he is just as able to destroy it as to create it’ (1975: 66). The negativity of irony, Hegel concludes in uncharacteristically moralizing vein, ‘lies in the self-destruction of the noble, great, and excellent’ (1975: 67). Although Hegel never uses the term ‘nihilism’, this criticism does converge with Agamben’s theory of a nexus that ties together subjectivism, creation, and negation. Basing his analysis on a slightly strained translation of Hegel’s ‘*ein Nichtiges, ein sich Vernichtendes*’ as ‘self-annihilating nothing’, Agamben reads this actually condescending description as a crucial diagnosis of art’s nihilistic vocation:

At the extreme limit of art’s destiny, when all the gods fade in the twilight of art’s laughter, art is only a negation that negates itself, a *self-annihilating nothing*. [...] Limitless, lacking in content, double in its principle, it wanders in the nothingness of the *terra aethetica*, in a desert of forms and contents that continually point it beyond its own image and which it evokes and immediately abolishes in the impossible attempt to found its own certainty. (1999a: 56)

A striking, not to say unsettling alignment with Hegel, especially in light of the role this attack on Romanticism played for the concept of *désœuvrement*. For it is Blanchot who acknowledges, in a highly significant passage, this same attack on the Romantics as describing art’s ‘turning the principle of destruction that is its centre against itself’, but only to call this Romanticism’s ‘greatest merit’ and to link it, crucially, to *désœuvrement*, the Romantic unworking of the art work (Blanchot, 1993: 356–357). We will see that Agamben eventually comes to accept

this anti-dialectical appraisal of Romanticism, but here the characterization of Romantic irony as ‘self-annihilating nothingness’ is turned into a diagnosis of the state and fate of modern art. In irony, art withdraws into consummate nihilism, that ‘extreme nullifying unveiling’, as Agamben renders it elsewhere (Agamben, 2000: 84).

Not coincidentally, perhaps, it is also at this point that a certain ambiguity emerges in Agamben’s text, which becomes strikingly manifest in a phrasing that seems to anticipate his own philosophical project: ‘And since art has become the pure potentiality of negation, nihilism reigns in its essence’ (Agamben, 1999a: 57). It would be too facile, even outright wrong to claim that this ‘pure potentiality of negation’ is simply inverted into the ‘potential not-to’ or ‘*désœuvrement*’ in Agamben’s later work. Still, one can begin to have a sense of the demanding reworking of negation effected through impotentiality by juxtaposing this Hegelian critique of Romantic negativity with Agamben’s figure of choice: ‘Bartleby is the extreme figure of the Nothing from which all creation derives; and at the same time, he constitutes the most implacable vindication of this Nothing as pure, absolute potentiality’ (Agamben, 1999b: 253–254). In fact, the elaboration of pure potentiality as privation is throughout Agamben’s work marked by an insistent differentiation from negation, and so he is at pains to state in regard to Bartleby that ‘nothing is farther from him than the heroic pathos of negation’ (1999b: 256). Impotentiality, as begins to transpire here, is, then, not just the other of negation, but an attempt to think negation otherwise, negativity as pure potentiality as opposed to the potentiality of pure negation. And might this not be what Agamben calls ‘the hardest thing’, namely to be ‘capable of annihilating this Nothing and letting something, from Nothing, be’? (1999b: 253)

But the Agamben of *The Man Without Content* is not yet the thinker of that thought and so the ambivalence becomes more pronounced as he unfolds his thesis. Having diagnosed nihilism as the essence and destiny of art, Agamben goes on to claim that ‘the crisis of art in our time is, in reality, a crisis of poetry, of *poiēsis*’ (1999a: 59). Agamben first follows Heidegger closely here in construing *poiēsis* as letting something come or enter into presence, before he advances — in an attempt to read Heidegger with Benjamin — the thesis that *poiēsis* is split wide open in the modern age. Another cleavage: this time of *poiein* into technology proper, the industrial product defined in terms of reproducibility; and its antithesis, art as aesthetical, defined in terms of originality (1999a: 60–61). This set-up undergirds Agamben’s analysis of what he considers the most significant forms of contemporary art, the assisted readymade and pop, both of which are construed as critiques of originality that bring the fissure in poietic activity to a

critical point. That these procedures effect a critique of originality is, of course, hardly a very original claim, but Agamben's thesis goes much further than such conventionalism. Pop art and the readymade are, according to him, opposed yet complementary practices that not only confront the high with the low but, more significantly, disclose the mechanism of scission and separation constitutive of the aesthetic regime.

Their vectors point in different directions. Whereas the readymade is an industrially produced commodity endowed with the claim to aesthetic singularity, pop presents itself as a work of art bereft of all aesthetic qualities, likening itself to the serial logic of mass fabrication. In an important text, Claire Fontaine defines the operation of the readymade through the concise formula: 'The ready-made is an aesthetic object that has no aesthetics, or whose principle of individuation is not aesthetic' (2014: 57). In Agamben's scheme, the Duchampean readymade corresponds to the latter description, whereas pop is indexed to the first. The convergent effect of both of these practices — paradigmatic forms of 'de-skilling', as they have come to be called (Roberts, 2007) — is that they reveal the split that defines the contemporary structure of *poiēsis*. In addition, Agamben spells out how this relates to the second pole of his scheme, the aesthetic judgement. Anticipating Thierry De Duve's influential rereading of 'Kant after Duchamp' — according to which the readymade reduces the judgement 'this is beautiful' to 'this is art' (De Duve, 1996: 302–303) — by more than two decades, Agamben shows how these procedures arrest the mechanism of the aesthetic judgement.³ Since with the readymade, he explains, aesthetic judgement is confronted with its own exclusionary logic, and 'what it is supposed to trace back to non-art is already non-art on its own, and the critic's operation is limited to an ID check' (Agamben, 1999a: 50). Turning the excluded non-aesthetic qualities into its sole content, the readymade draws out the complicity between the formal emptiness of judgements of taste and the negative determination of art as an aesthetic object.

We have, then, a genealogy of contemporary art as being constituted by a series of fractures, driven by negation and gravitating towards consummate nihilism. Aesthetics is not only at the origin of these fractures, but, in the readymade, it also turns into the ultimate target of negation. As aesthetical, art is ceaseless creation and can be so only as negation, fragmentation, annihilation. Pushing this logic to the limit, the readymade occupies the place where this

³ Naturally, De Duve introduces this shift in order to salvage a post-Duchampean notion of aesthetics (or to re-aestheticize the readymade), whereas Agamben explores the connection for the opposite reason.

mechanism turns full circle, where the artwork recoils from itself, negating its determination as an aesthetic object. Here, then, the constitutive ambivalence in Agamben's early work comes fully to the fore. Agamben feels bound to portray the negativity of art as consummate nihilism, yet he is in solidarity with this negativity to the degree that it effects an auto-destruction of the aesthetic regime. He wants to free art of its raging negativity, but he cannot disavow it. Without the solidarity, the account would succumb to a mere conservative lamentation about contemporary art's destructiveness, ugliness, inhumanness and the like. Without the problematization of this negativity, there would be no impetus for the reconstructive intent. This ambivalence betrays itself when Agamben boldly posits that the 'most radical critiques of aesthetics' effected by artists themselves have still remained 'inside aesthetics' and have thereby perpetrated its nihilism. (Agamben, 1999a: 72) This means: art is riveted to nihilism, but not irredeemably so; it points beyond itself in its self-negation. But to trace the passage outside aesthetics is the exclusive privilege of philosophy. Agamben's 'destruction of aesthetics' reveals itself, eventually, as the philosophical negation of aesthetic negation.

Aesthetics Abandoned

Before examining the tensions involved in this peculiar operation in more detail, the orientation of Agamben's early theory can be brought more clearly into view through a comparison with three prominent accounts of the relation between art and negation. In a particularly relevant passage from *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno tellingly notes that 'negativity' is the name used by 'the enemies of modern art, with a better instinct than its anxious apologists', to characterize it (Adorno, 1999: 19). Analytically, Adorno makes exactly the same point as Agamben when he contends that art 'does not [...] negate previous artistic practices, as styles have done throughout the ages, but rather tradition itself' (1999: 21). Adorno makes this claim, however, to read modern art's negation of transmissibility as a form of resistance, not to portray it as loss: 'Scars of damage and disruption are the modern's seal of authenticity; by their means, art desperately negates the closed confines of the ever-same [...]. Anti-traditional energy becomes a voracious vortex' (1999: 23). There are, it should be noted, other strata in Adorno's aesthetics, most notably an anticipation of Agamben's current terminology, which occurs in a characterisation of Samuel Beckett's work as marking the 'point of indifference [*Indifferenzpunkt*] between sense and its negation' (Adorno, 2003: 450–

451). In his adherence to negativity as a critique of tradition, however, the contrast between the early Agamben and Adorno could not be more pronounced.

Yet, Agamben's position is as far removed from this view as it is from Badiou's, in certain ways *the* contemporary counter-position to Adorno. As rigidly schematizing as ever, Badiou divides negation into a purely negative part, which he terms 'destruction'; and an 'affirmative' creative part, which he terms 'subtraction'. In keeping with his general *damnatio* of the avant-garde as an unfortunate amalgam of romanticism and didacticism, he proposes to leave the notion of a purely negativistic negation behind in favour of an affirmative one (Badiou, 2005: 7–8). 'That the very essence of negation is destruction has been the fundamental idea of the previous century. The fundamental idea of the century that is beginning must be that the very essence of negation is subtraction' (Badiou, 2017: 43). It may appear that Agamben's approach is more akin to Badiou than Adorno, since he by all means wants to avoid holding art in the state of a perpetual endgame inside aesthetics, on which Adorno's theory is bent, at least on a standard reading. Yet the rapport between the account developed by Agamben and art's own negativity is markedly different from Badiou's appeal to a new 'affirmationism'.

For the young Agamben, his own, methodological 'destruction' is both a continuation of, and a remedy against, art's self-annihilation, not its affirmative counter-model. Therefore, the readymade and pop are not only cast as an endgame of aesthetics, but as pointing outside of aesthetics, even if 'only negatively' so. (1999a: 66) In their absolute alienation, their transmission of nothingness, only these forms of high negativity inhabit a zone from which it might be possible 'to exit the swamp of aesthetics and technics and restore to the poetic status of man on earth its original dimension' (1999a: 67), as Agamben writes in an idiom that draws perilously close to Heidegger's. In this regard, Agamben is, then, not only far from Badiou and Adorno, but also from Walter Benjamin, the last position that must be mentioned here. Since, for Benjamin, 'the liquidation of tradition in the cultural heritage' — anticipated through the avant-gardes and carried out through film — is but the flip side of a 'positive function' of technology, which Benjamin could still conceive as the 'innervations of the new, historically unique collective' (Benjamin, 2008: 22, 45n). Despite the frequent references to Benjamin in *The Man Without Content*, this optimistic view of technology is radically at variance with Agamben's proposal.

Resisting all of these options, Agamben ties the destruction of aesthetics to the recovery of the original structure of *poiēsis*. By tracing the evolving dominance of *praxis* over *poiēsis*, he discloses the movement through which the understanding

of the artwork crossed from the latter to the former. The important point here is the contrast between the Greek *poiēsis*, where art is the passive passage of something into presence, in line with his understanding of truth as unveiling and an ontology of the event; and *praxis*, central to which is the expression of the artist's will, which captures being in the framing of a subject and its objects. This onto-theological humanism of *praxis* subtends the convergence of creation and destruction in the aesthetic regime and provides the negative foil for Agamben's attempt at thinking *poiēsis* in relation to the 'original structure' of the artwork. Taking a passage from Hölderlin as his point of departure, Agamben elaborates this as 'rhythm', which brings man into contact with his 'authentic temporal dimension' (Agamben, 1991a: 101).⁴ Rhythm, recast as a stoppage and arresting of time, Agamben notes in a dense but ultimately rather vague passage, defines the original structure of the artwork, inasmuch as it is capable of opening the space of man's 'belonging to the world, only within which he can take the original measure of his dwelling on earth' (Agamben, 1991a:101).⁵

If the artwork once opened man's original place, then its self-annihilation is of course no mere plight of aesthetics. The artwork's alienation, Agamben explains, 'is the fundamental alienation, since it points to the alienation of nothing less than man's original historical space' (Agamben, 1991a: 102). Eventually, the proclaimed complicity of art and nihilism reveals itself here as a manoeuvre for investing art — and only art — with the capacity of overcoming the fate of nihilism, turning the *terra deserta* of art into the critical zone of catastrophe and rescue. If, as Rebecca Comay argues, the shared ground between Heidegger and Benjamin is the conviction that 'the task of history is to convert danger into saving' (1992: 159), and if it is this strategy that Agamben most clearly seeks to inherit here, then he still does so in a dangerous vocabulary. Not only in the terminology he risks throughout — original space, alienated essence, unity — but the entire structure of the argument comes close to an arche-teleological closure that sublates the destruction of art into a retrieval of its original essence. This, then, is both the beauty and the limit of overcoming artistic negation through a 'destruction of aesthetics'.

⁴ Note that Agamben possibly construes this section as a dialogue with Blanchot, given that Blanchot (1982: 220–222) glosses the same Hölderlin passage in his meditation on the 'Characteristics of the Work of Art'.

⁵ The theme of stoppage, caesura and interruption is further developed in several works of Agamben, for example in *The End of the Poem* (1999: chap. 8).

Naturally, for the young Agamben, the restoration of the original structure of the artwork is no certainty and it cannot be achieved through any kind of chronological regression. But even so, as nihilism reveals itself as aesthetics' *telos* it points art back towards its *archē*, suggesting the possibility of an exodus from the devastated site of *terra aethetica* to a new *terra poetica*. Appropriately enough, the book's last chapter construes the contemporary situation as being caught between past and future, where the possibility of a different beginning suggests itself in Kafka's abolition of content for the sake of transmissibility. Although Agamben is certainly not nostalgic about any specific pre-modern form of art, his analysis ends with a troubling gloss on the possibility of turning 'history into myth'⁶ (1999a: 114). None of this, however, will appear again in Agamben's texts after the remnants of revelatory reversals have disappeared from it in favour of a thinking of potentiality and inoperativity. Beyond origin and negation, inoperativity names an operation that neither recuperates nor destroys, neither gathers nor disseminates, neither breaks nor unites. Rather, it is a form of privation that holds negation in suspense.

From *Destruction* to *désœuvrement*

In the growing literature on Agamben's work, it has gone all but unnoticed that his second book, *Stanzas*, opens with a *volte-face*, a radical recasting of one of *The Man Without Content*'s main theses. Returning to the very same pages of the *Aesthetics*, Agamben inverts his earlier view, declaring that Hegel's characterization of Romantic irony as 'self-annihilating nothing' — which even serves as the title of a chapter in his first book — is but an 'ill-willed' definition (1993: xvi). For, Agamben now explains, Hegel's entire analysis 'misses the point: that the negativity of irony is not the provisional negative of the dialectic, which the magic wand of sublation (*Aufhebung*) is always already in the act of transforming into a positive, but an absolute and irretrievable negativity that does not, for all that, renounce knowledge' (1993: xvi). The notion of a 'self-annihilating nothing'

⁶ Agamben's comment on myth is in keeping with a more or less obvious strand running through Heidegger's writing on art. According to this view, myth is the most 'archaic' of all *technai*, first, because *technē*, as a mode of unconcealment, is in its essence language and, second, because myth, Sage, is, in language, the originary force of naming and gathering. For more on this, see Lacoue-Labarthe 1990: 84–85. A more favourable reading could see this recourse to myth as an echo of Agamben's early reading of Artaud, cited above. One should, in any event, contrast this comment on myth with Agamben's scathing remarks in *The Open*: (Agamben 2004: 6–7).

is then taken up once more in a discussion of Charles Baudelaire, which returns to Agamben's earlier claim that, in modernity, art is bound to sever its link with the tradition 'in order to make of its own self-negation its sole possibility of survival' (1993: 43). Instead of diagnosing this as nihilism, however, Agamben reads it as art's achievement to make 'the work the vehicle of the unattainable' and hence to restore to 'unattainability itself a new value and a new authority' (1993: 43).

Yet, in the following subchapter, which further develops the reading of modern art as the appropriation of an irreality through negation, Agamben at one point seems to repeat the critique of *The Man Without Content* as he addresses the 'eclipse of the work' in modern poetry. This theme is, again, traced back to a privileging of the creative process, linked to Romantic irony, and exemplified through the Situationists' failed negation of art.⁷ Despite this lingering ambivalence, it is evident that Agamben has discarded the equation of aesthetic negativity and nihilism to consider a different modality of privation in art. After *Stanzas*, he does not explicitly follow up on this hint of an 'irretrievable negativity', but it is not too difficult — and we may recall Blanchot's gloss on Romanticism and *désœuvrement* here — to see it as one step in a series of redeterminations that move from the 'pure potentiality of negation' (Agamben, 1999a: 57) to inoperativity. Henceforth, the concept of negativity doubles in Agamben's text; it is split between its nihilistic determination, which he had already attacked in *The Man Without Content*, and Bartleby's 'Nothing as pure, absolute potentiality' (Agamben, 1999b: 253–254), which can be considered its reconfiguration. Methodologically, the earlier attempt at a 'destruction' of aesthetics to retrieve an original experience of art shifts towards the elaboration of a poetics of inoperativity, which is complemented by an archaeological approach.

Accordingly, Agamben's 'Archaeology of the Work of Art' commences with the thesis that only an archaeology — that is, not a *Destruction* — offers a possibility of understanding the contemporary situation of the artwork (Agamben, 2019a: 1). As in the early work, this analysis is necessitated by the problematic character of art in the present, yet the parameters have shifted, since this problematic now no longer consists, Agamben explains, in a scission between artist and spectator, but in a 'crisis of the work', for which the dominance of performance and conceptual procedures are cited as evidence. And instead of evoking a pre-aesthetic experience of art as a contrast, Agamben details this

⁷ See Agamben, 1993: 50–51, 54–55. Note that Agamben also cites Bataille's notion of negativity as expenditure in this context (fifth scholium).

problematic status of the work of art by referencing an essay by Robert Klein (1983) whose title, ‘Eclipse of the Work of Art’, suggests that Agamben had already read the piece by the time he wrote the almost eponymous scholium in *Stanzas* (‘Eclisse dell’opera’).⁸ In any event, Klein argues that the actual, yet sometimes occluded target of all anti-aesthetic strategies of the twentieth century has not been art as such, but rather the *œuvre*, the artwork as a sedimentation of aesthetic value.⁹ Having thus reframed the point of departure, Agamben contends that if contemporary art presents itself increasingly ‘as an activity without a work’, then this is because ‘the being-work of the work of art had remained unthought’ (Agamben, 2019a: 3). His archaeology proper is then carried out by means of an analysis of three paradigms, where contemporary art in its entirety is presented as the heir of the avant-gardes, with Duchamp occupying a unique position.

At first, Agamben rehearses, in a few dense paragraphs, his reading of Aristotle’s understanding of *energeia* and *dynamis* to establish the parameters of the Greek understanding of the work of art. Crucial for this paradigm is that the work of art belongs to the sphere of *energeia*, and that the end, the *telos* of art, never resides in the artist’s activity, but solely in the work, the finished product: that is to say, it exists independently of the artist and his or her action. Superior to this domain, on this interpretation, is the sphere of praxis, inasmuch as it is a form of *energeia* that does not materialise in a work, but has its *telos* in itself. For Agamben, this differentiation leads to a crucial aporia in Aristotle, splitting, as it does, the human into a being that has two works, one that belongs to him as *ergon* qua human being, and another exterior one that is his qua producer. Where this aporia comes to a head is in the question of whether the human as such has a proper work, or whether the human may be the being without a work, the latter option forming, of course, the basis for Agamben’s thinking of potentiality. Against this backdrop, Agamben posits the hypothesis that, in a slow process starting in the Renaissance, art crossed from the sphere of activities that have their *energeia* outside themselves into the sphere of those that ‘like knowing or praxis, have their *energeia*, their being-at-work, in themselves’ (Agamben, 2019a: 7). This

⁸ In fact, Agamben mentions Robert Klein’s work at several junctures in *Stanzas* and dedicates the third part, ‘Manibus Aby Warburg et Robert Klein, “Der gute Gott steckt im Detail”’; but he does not quote the article in question, which was originally published in 1967 (Agamben, 1993: 61).

⁹ Agamben’s phrasing ‘crisis of the work’ is tacitly adopted from Klein (1983: 409).

analysis returns, clearly, to many of the concerns of *The Man Without Content*.¹⁰ Decisively, however, the claim of an original *poietic* vocation, to which the artwork is related, has disappeared from the framework, or has rather been rephrased as impotentiality. With a characteristic gesture, Agamben focuses on a fracture between *ergon* and *energeia*; but the rapport between the terms has shifted significantly:

The hypothesis that I would suggest at this point is that *ergon* and *energeia*, work and creative operation, are complementary yet incommunicable notions, which form, with the artist as their middle term, what I propose to call the ‘artistic machine’ of modernity. (Agamben, 2019a: 8)

The second paradigm Agamben proposes as an interpretive grid is, perhaps surprisingly, liturgy, a theme he had investigated in the years prior to the writing of the essay, as evinced by the extensive discussion in *Opus Dei* (2013: chapter 2). Focusing on Odo Casel’s work, he argues that the liturgic mystery establishes a purely performative understanding of practice, where liturgy is not the representation of a pre-given signified, but in itself the performance of a sacred event. On this basis, Agamben posits a connection between this understanding of pure pragmatics and contemporary art, for, just as liturgy is in itself the event, contemporary art, he asserts, is defined by the ‘decisive abandonment of the mimetic-representative paradigm in the name of a genuinely pragmatic claim’ (Agamben, 2019a: 11). This eventual notion of work amounts to a hybrid state between *poiēsis* and *praxis*, oscillating as it does between the production of a work and a praxis that has its end within itself: a mechanism that presents artistic activity *as work*, without materialising itself in a self-sufficient work.

While it may at first appear as if Agamben’s reframing of this problem in terms of *poiēsis* and *praxis* was a mere rehearsal of the argument that since modernism the work-status of the work of art has increasingly been eroded, the argument, in fact, directly touches on a pressing issue in theories of contemporary art pertaining to the link between artistic activities and the determination of the work-status. In an analysis of the dialectic between the abandonment of the work-character and the various mechanisms that have emerged to re-establish the institutional functionality of these practices (attributing an author function,

¹⁰ In another recent text, titled ‘Opus Alchymicum’, Agamben even reiterates the characterisation of the artist as ‘a man who no longer has content’ to describe the abolition of the work (2017: 119).

securing the singularity of the work etc.), Martha Buskirk aptly describes the changes in the ontology of the artwork with the phrase ‘the contingent object of contemporary art’ (Buskirk, 2003). According to Buskirk, the absolutely contingent physicality of art increasingly necessitates, on an institutional plane, the reliance on the construction of authorship and work-status by ever more refined means such as certificates, authorial plans, documentations and other supplements. This corresponds to the shift Agamben traces, for it registers the undetermined relation of work, author, and creative activity that are bound together in the ‘artistic machine’ by way of institutional mechanisms.

As the third and last point in his archaeology, Agamben returns to Duchamp. Four decades after his first book, he revises his interpretation of the readymade. It appears no longer as an unrestrained negation, nihilistic in essence and destructive in intent, but, on the contrary, as a ‘deactivation’ of the ‘artistic machine’ of modernity, which ‘in the liturgy of the avant-garde had reached its critical mass’ (Agamben, 2019a: 12). Hence it is, again, Duchamp who turns against a certain development of art, but the readymade is, crucially, no longer a form of negation; rather it is a form of deactivation. Here we have, then, the direct shift from negation to deactivation. However, Agamben posits that the readymade cannot in any sense be considered as a form of *poiēsis*, since there is nothing that comes into presence. Still, what comes to light with it is ‘the appearing of the historical conflict, decisive in every sense, between art and work, *energeia* and *ergon*’ (2019a: 13), a phrase that is evocative of, and invites comparison with, Lyotard’s characterization of Duchamp’s work as ‘*opus expeditum*’ (Lyotard, 1990: 11).¹¹ At this point, however, Agamben’s analysis ends abruptly.

On the one hand, Agamben criticizes a perceived ignorance of this conflict in contemporary art; on the other, he seems confident that Duchamp has definitely deactivated the ‘artistic machine’. Suggesting that this development should be affirmed, Agamben urges that we abandon with it ‘the idea that there is something like a supreme human activity that, by means of a subject, realises itself in a work or in an *energeia* that draws from it its incomparable value’ (Agamben, 2019a: 13). Beyond the *dispositif* of creation, Agamben suggests, the artist must be understood as a living being that constitutes a form of life. The contrast to the earlier hope of a re-founding of the original structure of the artwork is striking, but perhaps even more so is the rapport that this conclusion establishes

¹¹ Also see Emmanuelle Ravel’s attempt to link Blanchot’s notion of ‘*désœuvrement*’ to Duchamp and the readymade (2007: chap. 4–5).

with Agamben's theory of art as an activity of rendering inoperative, which is here clearly alluded to, but not developed.

The Absence of Work

In *Creation and Anarchy*, Agamben's most programmatic text along these lines — 'What is the Act of Creation?' — appears directly after this archaeology. Despite this apparent continuity, however, there is a tension, not to say a contradiction, between the approaches underwriting these respective essays. Whereas the archaeology of the work of art diagnoses the rise of an 'artistic machine' that is in need of deactivation, the theory of inoperativity offers a generic theory of art as *poiēsis*, apparently immune to the historical determinants which the archaeology has just brought to light. Only under that condition, it seems, can Agamben write, returning to the claim about man as a being without pre-determined work or essence, that art and politics are 'neither tasks nor simply 'works': they name, rather, the dimension in which linguistic and bodily, material and immaterial, biological and social operations are deactivated and contemplated as such' (Agamben, 2019b: 27).

However, this definition — according to which art in general is a form of rendering inoperative — seems foreclosed through the archaeological analysis that shows how the understanding of art is governed, in the Greek paradigm, by the production of an *ergon* and, in the modern paradigm, by an increasing obsession with the creative activity of the artists, presented as, or substituted for, the work. Both, it seems, elaborate historical mechanisms that prevent art from functioning as a practice of inoperativity. But is this seeming contradiction the only possible interpretation open to us at this point? Although the link is nowhere sufficiently developed by Agamben, the dissociation of the link between 'art' and 'work' opens up another interpretive possibility. The hypothesis I would like to present is that a comparison of the texts against the backdrop of the earlier analysis of negativity shows that they can be seen as elaborating a reworking of aesthetic negativity. This can also clarify the oblique way in which Agamben has implicitly differentiated here a problematic idea of art as 'activity without work', where praxis is simply taken as a substitute for a work; and the definition of artistic inoperativity as a true 'absence of work'.

In 'What is the Act of Creation?' Agamben takes as his point of departure Deleuze's definition of art as a form of resistance, a view Deleuze further

elaborates in *Abecédaire* as the freeing of a potential of life (Deleuze, 2007).¹² With a by now familiar gesture, Agamben shifts Deleuze's affirmative accents towards privation in order to detail the link which joins together potentiality and resistance. As we know, on Agamben's heterodox reading of Aristotle, potential depends on impotential, which establishes the primacy of non-exercise over actualisation. By that token, actualisation appears as a derivative of impotential, a compromising (or a simple negation) of the specific modality of impotential — an indeterminate and non-relational negativity, a privation that holds itself in suspense. In a passage crowded with privative prefixes and negation particles, Agamben outlines this specifically 'negative' modality of impotentiality: 'The living being, who exists in the mode of potential, is capable of his own impotential, and only in this way does he possess his potential. He can be and do because he preserves a relation with his own not being and not doing. In potential, sensation is constitutively anaesthesia; thought is non-thought, work is inoperativity' (Agamben, 2019b: 18). In keeping with this theory of a generic impotentiality that holds itself in suspense, Agamben argues that, in art, the passage to the act is only possible if this potential-not-to is, in a certain way, transferred into action, retained in actualisation such that it interrupts a direct transition from potential to act.

As he elaborates on this issue, one can see how Agamben is carefully, if obliquely, reworking notions of aesthetic negation to establish the specificity of this modality of privation. Decisively, he has recourse to Benjamin's concept of the expressionless — which, as the shattering of unity and totality in the artwork, is at the heart of his early anti-aesthetics — to unfold his thesis that 'resistance acts as a critical instance' that withholds potential from being resolved in the act (Agamben, 2019b: 19).¹³ And in further explaining this aspect, Agamben is bound to stress, again, that 'the potential-not-to does not negate potential and form, but, through this resistance, somehow exhibits them' (Agamben, 2019b: 21). This aspect is even further heightened if we recall that the germ of this entire theory can be found in Agamben's analysis of Guy Debord's films. In this text, Agamben already has recourse to Deleuze's definition of the act of creation as resistance and insists on the privative aspect of 'decreation', which he identifies with the hard breaks in the cinematographic montage, obviously the moment of negation

¹² Agamben's text also continues his engagement with Deleuze's notion of potentiality, the earlier scenes of which are perceptively discussed in Watkin, 2014: 160–176.

¹³ On the negativity of the expressionless, see Rauch, 2018: 332–336.

in film, for Debord (Agamben, 2002: 318).¹⁴ Throughout, the elaboration of a poetics of inoperativity thus relies upon, references, and recodes notions of aesthetic negation. This can be quite clearly shown by juxtaposing Agamben's early and later comments on Debord. In *Stanzas*, he writes that the situationists 'who, in the attempt to abolish art by realizing it, finish rather by extending it to all human existence' (1993: 54); by contrast, in the 'Marginal Notes' on Debord's work, included in *Means Without End*, one reads: 'The situation is neither the becoming-art of life nor the becoming-life of art. [...] The "Northwest passage of the geography of the true life" is a point of indifference between life and art, where *both* undergo a decisive metamorphosis *simultaneously*' (2002: 77). From attempting a failed form of negation, the practice of the Situationists appears, as was the case with Duchamp, in terms of inoperativity and decreation.

The point of tracing these links is not to reclaim the theory of inoperativity as a traditional thinking of negation, but to show how it transforms the very idea of negativity in art, how it offers us a different vocabulary, establishing a notion of negativity that cannot be framed in the oppositions bequeathed to us from the 1960s. If Agamben's early work hinged on an ambivalence towards artistic negations, then the theory of inoperativity offers a way to think about such practices outside the poles of origin and negation. No originary, pre-aesthetic experience is accessed; no negation is enacted; no alienation demands the recuperation of unicity. Rather Agamben claims that 'the properly human praxis is that which, by rendering inoperative the specific works and functions of the living being, makes them, so to speak, run on idle and in this way opens them to possibilities' (2019b: 27). Here, 'rendering inoperative' or 'deactivation' have, again, formally taken the place of negation or destruction, while the restoration of an 'original structure' has been transformed into the vindication of the 'properly human praxis', which has precisely nothing to do with the proper, essence or origin, but simply denotes non-relational potentiality as the absence of any pre-given end. Critical artistic practices of negation are, then, no longer cast as that ambivalent site where nihilism reigns supreme and from which it might be surpassed. Rather they designate, alongside politics, activities where an 'absence of work' is vindicated (2019b: 27).

¹⁴ The term 'decreation' suggests yet another crucial reference point in Agamben's rethinking of negativity: Simone Weil — arguably an implicit interlocutor throughout Agamben's work — defined 'decreation', in opposition to the 'nothingness' of destruction, with the formula 'to make something created pass into the uncreated' (Weil, 2003: 32).

Where does all of this leave Duchamp? Agamben seems to resist granting the Duchampean form of ‘deactivation’ a privileged position in his general theory, since he disqualifies it, as a form of *poiēsis*. Yet, it is Duchamp who carries out, according to Agamben’s own analysis, the decisive ‘deactivation’ of the historically operative ‘artistic machine’. Duchamp, he argues, effects a deactivation of the ‘artistic machine’, only to add that the readymade has been transformed into a work of art once again, establishing the pre-condition for the afterlife of the ‘artistic machine’ in contemporary art. But this afterlife — with its manifold resurrections of the fictions of the artwork, creativity, genius and value — has proved persistent indeed and shows little sign of coming to a halt. Given this situation, one more step in the argument becomes possible, namely extending the scope of inoperative practices in contemporary art beyond the Duchampean paradigm.

In light of this, different forms of the deactivation of institutional mechanisms that stabilize and sustain the various fictions of the ‘artistic machine’ should be considered in terms of inoperativity. In fact, the diagnosis that Agamben puts forward in *The Use of Bodies* could serve as the definition of a crucial tension that many artistic practices are trying to *solve* rather than perpetuate: ‘*The truth that contemporary art never manages to bring to expression is inoperativity, which it seeks at all costs to make into a work*’ (Agamben, 2015: 247). The next step in the analysis developed here would be to investigate a whole array of practices as a response to this aporia, paying close attention to the different forms in which institutional and discursive mechanisms are deactivated in the practice of several contemporary artists. Think, for instance, of Sturtevant’s appropriation of Duchamp, undertaken at a time when his readymades had been fully integrated into the museum apparatus as numbered editions. Responding to the domestication of Duchamp’s gesture, Sturtevant’s exact repetition of several readymades sought to restore their deactivating force over and against their canonization as works. Or consider Philippe Thomas, who tried to escape completely from those mechanisms that constitute what Agamben termed the ‘artistic machine’. To this end, in 1987 Thomas founded the agency, ‘readymades belong to everyone’, which turned anyone who acquired a work automatically into its author — a gesture through which Thomas simultaneously sought to expose the mechanisms of the art world and to evade them as far as possible. And, finally, think of Claire Fontaine, who declared herself a ‘readymade artist’. Refusing to respond to the demands of originality and received ideas of criticality, Claire Fontaine has, over the last few years, attempted a kind of Agambenian ‘study’ of preceding forms of appropriation. Through a series of decisive artistic and discursive interventions,

they developed what may be one of the most effective attempts at turning the powerlessness of current political art — its empty centre — into a form of impotentiality and decreation: ‘Thinking against ourselves will mean thinking against our identity and our effort to preserve it, it will mean stopping believing in the necessity of identifying ourselves with the place we occupy’ (Claire Fontaine, 2013: 55).

If it is true that the ‘contemplation of a potentiality can only be given in an opus’, then such liminal practices, which can only gesture towards in closing, should be considered as paradigms for understanding how ‘the opus is deactivated and made inoperative’ (Agamben, 2017: 137). Doing so would not only allow for a finer differentiation of these critical practices from conventional understandings of avant-garde negation, in terms of which they are too often understood, whether in a laudatory fashion as renewal or a derogatory one as stale repetition. It would also make it possible to bridge the gap between Agamben’s generic theory of art as inoperativity and an archaeology of the historical determinants, which make art hostage to the apparatus of ‘activities without work’ and prevent it from enacting the demand of inoperativity — the ‘absence of work’. For the vindication of such a suspended form of negativity, the deactivation of works and the contemplation of impotential should not be thought of as something definitive, final and pure; rather, it can only ever exist in and as the plurality of these artistic abandonments.



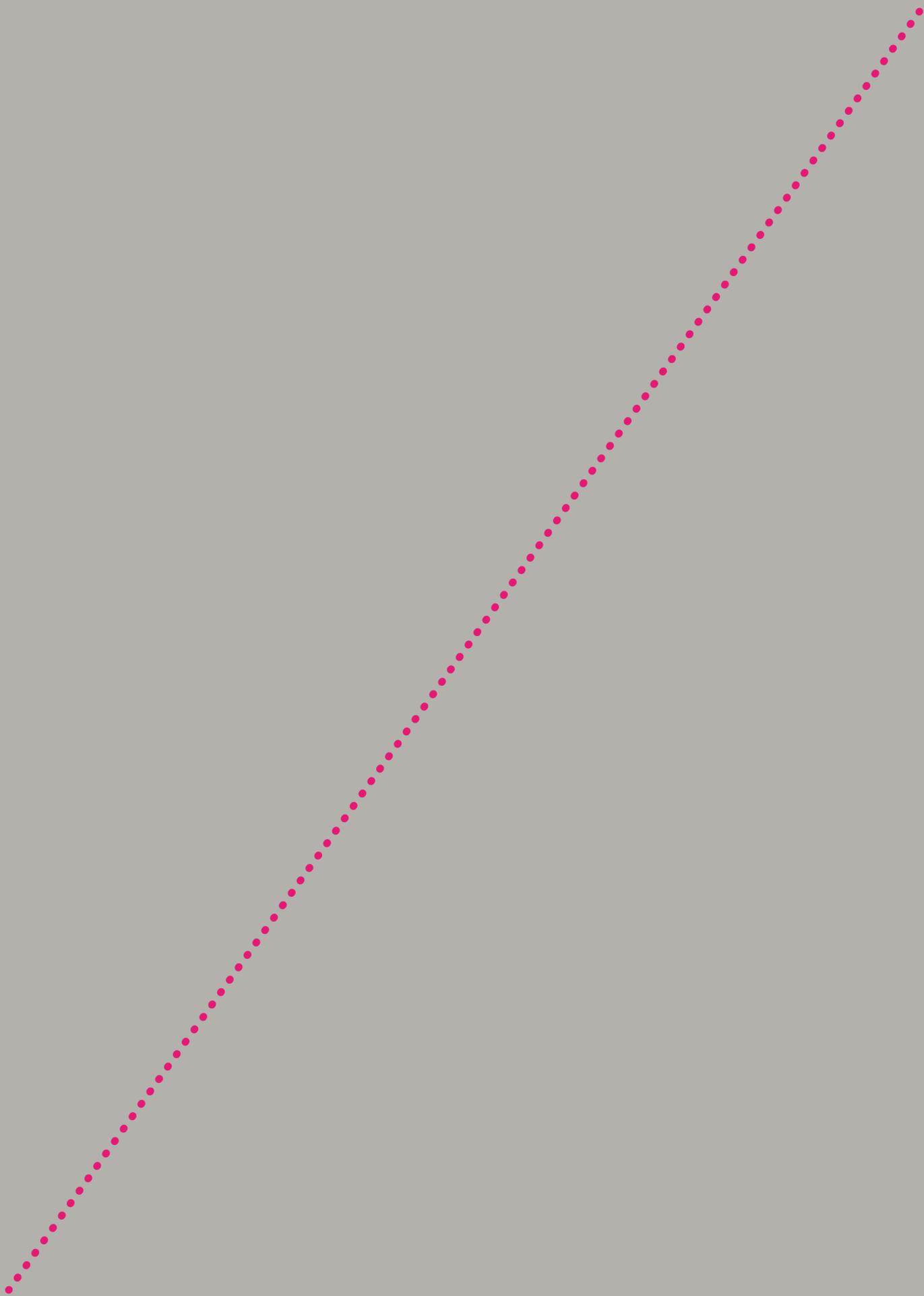
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Form-of-life and Use in Homo Sacer¹

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The notion of “form-of-life” acquires increasing relevance and concreteness in Agamben’s thought by getting gradually entangled with the idea of “use”. The relation between the two notions is the thread connecting the last two volumes of the Homo Sacer series: *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Forms-of-Life* (*Homo Sacer*, IV, 1, 2013a [2011]) and *The Use of Bodies* (*Homo Sacer*, IV, 2, 2015 [2014]). The purpose of this fourth section of Agamben’s political researches, according to the author, is to think ‘a form-of-life, a human life entirely removed from the grasp of the law and a use of bodies and of the world that would never be substantiated into an appropriation’ (2013a: xiii). In Agamben’s line of inquiry, the ‘grasp of the law’ is produced through a separation of the two spheres, which become subordinated to each other (as *bios* and *zoē*, norm and fact, sovereignty and life, etc.). Since its beginning, the Homo Sacer investigation has shown how this double movement of separation and conjunction can occur only starting from a threshold of central indiscernibility, which the apparatuses of power try to dissimulate, but which they preserve within them as their most precious core. If the syntagma ‘form-of-life’, with its dashes, tries to reveal this indiscernibility of the two notions, then “use” is a “third term” in relation to them that, however, does not present itself as a “substantial” domain, since it indicates nothing other than the reciprocal transformation which form and life undergo in this relation.

In this study we will investigate the link between “form-of-life” and “use”, drawing in particular on *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Forms-of-Life*. The text elaborates a study on the first monastic movements and Franciscanism, through an analysis of the documents of the cenobitic life that the tradition classifies as *regulae*. Agamben shows how the birth of monasticism coincides with a contestation of the ecclesiastical liturgy — in which the office of the priest is separated from his factual life — which is formulated by binding the efficacy of

¹ Original text: Bonacci, Valeria (2019), ‘Forma-di-vita e uso in «Homo sacer»’. In *Giorgio Agamben. Ontologia e politica*, ed. Valeria Bonacci. Macerata: Quodlibet, 481–511.

² The translators would like to thank the author for her invaluable comments and advice on this translation, and Michael Lewis for his editorial support with the finishing touches.

the cultural practice to its realisation through the monk's very life. According to the author, it is crucial that this inversion of the liturgy brings to light a threshold of indiscernibility between "rule" and "life", in which these terms 'lose their familiar meaning in order to point in the direction of a third term' (*ibid.*: xii, translation altered) that Franciscans thematise as a *usus pauper* of things and of the world. The central thesis of the book is that the monks come close to the realisation of a communal form-of-life that, however, they ultimately fail to grasp, precisely because they cannot entirely think and practice use as a third term, as a middle between norm and life, in which the rule cannot be distinguished from cenobitic experience in terms of a separate sphere. Reconstructing the text's line of reasoning will allow us to understand what are, according to Agamben, at once the power and the limits of monasticism, and to define the role of *The Highest Poverty* in his philosophical and political project.

In the first part of the present work, in order to contextualize *The Highest Poverty* within the Homo Sacer project overall — in particular regarding the topic of "government" — we shall address the volume that the author presents as its premise: *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty* (*Homo Sacer*, II, 5, 2013b [2012]). This text will allow us to investigate Agamben's attempt to lead form-of-life back to use in relation to his meditation on the notion of "potentiality". At the same time, it will serve to demonstrate how such an attempt corresponds to the intention to neutralize the opposition between potential and act through a middle, a third term between them, that the investigation refers to as "habit".

In the conclusion, we shall try to reconstruct the original way in which Agamben develops the themes of form-of-life and use discussed in *The Highest Poverty* by analysing some passages from *The Use of Bodies*, and in particular his investigation of the notion of "habitual use", where we can identify the convergence of the inquiries into the Franciscan *usus* and of those on "habit" in *Opus Dei*.

Archaeology of Duty

In the *Preface* of *The Highest Poverty*, Agamben writes: 'what has appeared to present an obstacle to the emergence and comprehension of this third thing [in which, following the excerpt cited above, the traditional distinction between "rule" and "life" disappears] is [...] the liturgy. [...] Hence this study, which proposed initially to define form-of-life by means of the analysis of monasticism, has had to contend with the [...] task of an archaeology of duty [*ufficio*] (the results of which

are published in a separate volume, with the title *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty*)’ (2013a: xii). Before examining the conflict between the Church and the monks, as it is reconstructed in *The Highest Poverty*, we will take up the description of the functioning of the liturgical device presented in the volume that precedes that text in the *Homo Sacer* series.

In the Latin of the catholic Church, the term “liturgy” designates the exercise of the sacerdotal function. However, such an acceptance of the word appears only around the seventeenth century, whereas, starting from the fourth century, throughout the process of the institutionalisation of the Church, the term employed to designate the praxis of the priest is mostly *‘officium’*. The remarkable spread of the term “duty” and “office”³ in contemporary society can be explained, according to Agamben, by the fact that the elaboration of the sacerdotal *officium* — together with, as we shall see, that of the patristic doctrine of the *oikonomia* — is the laboratory where the ontological-political paradigms of modernity are forged. If, in the formulation of the *officium*, what is at stake is to guarantee ‘the independence of the objective effectiveness and validity of the sacrament from the subject who concretely administers it [...] beyond any subjective conditions that could render [the sacrament and the priestly action] null or ineffective’, in modern apparatuses of government ‘it is a matter of distinguishing the individual from the function he exercises, so as to secure the validity of the acts that he carries out in the name of the institution’ (Agamben, 2013b: 21). How, then, through the separation from its factual life, is the human being’s praxis articulated as government?

The study on the constitution of the governmental paradigm in the liturgical *officium* constitutes the development of the ‘theological genealogy of economy and government’ that is found in *The Kingdom and the Glory (Homo Sacer, II, 4, 2011 [2007])*. This text conducts an investigation into the doctrine of *oikonomia* through which, between the second and the fifth centuries, the Early Church Fathers elaborated the dogma of *incarnation*: that is to say, the Trinitarian paradigm. Agamben shows how the articulation of *oikonomia* takes as its point of departure the crisis that marks the end of the classical world, when “ancient fate” breaks apart, and being and praxis appear as irreconcilable planes. In Christianity, this scission had given rise, on the one hand, to monistic positions,

³ Translators’ note: the Italian term *ufficio* is alternatively rendered as “duty” or “office” in published translations of Agamben’s texts. We have here used either or both renditions, according to each specific context, trying to emphasise role-bound personal responsabilisation and the bureaucratisation of political life respectively, while recognising that these are both key aspects of Agamben’s thinking on the apparatus of *ufficio*.

such as that of the “monarchians”, who denied the reality of Christ, and, on the other hand, to dualistic ones, such as the gnostic doctrine, in which the separation between being and praxis led to a thinking of *oikonomia* as a proliferation of figures of divine acting, and thus opened the way for a relapse into polytheism. The claim of the Trinitarian doctrine is to elude this opposition, that is, to *accept* and at the same time *resolve* the ontological and political problem of this scission, thinking the *separation* between God and the human not as what compromises divine unity but, on the contrary, as what allows its realisation, because it underpins their *articulation* in the Son — through *government*. In this doctrine, the *division* between the being of God and the action of the human is instrumental for their *articulation*, to their incessant reorganisation through an administrative paradigm, namely, that of *oikonomia*. According to Tertullian’s expression, to which Agamben also returns in *Opus Dei*, many ‘are fearful because they assume that *oikonomia* means plurality and that the ordinance [*dispositio*] of trinity means a division of unity, whereas unity, deriving trinity from within itself, is not destroyed but administered by it [*non destruat ab illa sed administratur*]’ (cited in Agamben, 2007: 56, our translation).

In *Opus Dei*, Agamben notes that the sacerdotal vocabulary was absent in Christian literature at its origins, in fact appearing around the second century in those same authors who elaborate the Trinitarian doctrine. The “archaeology of office” reconstructs the way in which the sacerdotal function is articulated in history and language, returning to the first treatise dedicated to the topic, Ambrose’s *De Officiis Ministrorum*, a work on the clerics’ “virtues” through which *officium* comes to name the priest’s praxis, and in which we can identify the paradigmatic functioning of the liturgical apparatus. Ambrose splits the praxis of the “minister” into two distinct spheres: *officium* — the particular action of the priest, that he presents ‘in terms of humility and imperfection’ —, and *effectus* — the effectivity of the sacrament, ‘which actualizes and perfects the first, [and] is divine in nature’ (Agamben, 2013b: 81).

In the liturgical apparatus — as in the doctrine of *oikonomia* — the *separation* between God and the human does not compromise the divine unity but is precisely what enables their *conjunction* in the sacrament, so that ‘[t]he liturgy as *opus Dei* is the effectiveness that results from the articulation of these two distinct and yet conspiring elements’ (*ibid.*: 24). The liturgical apparatus, Agamben argues, can articulate *officium* and *effectus* only by presupposing their difference — or else the sacrament could not *become* effective through the particular praxis of the priest — but it can acquire such a difference only by undoing it — otherwise the

contingent praxis of the minister would compromise the *validity* of the sacrament.⁴ ‘The divine *effectus*’ — we read in the text — ‘is determined by the human minister and the human minister by the divine *effectus* [...]’. *This means, however, that officium institutes a circular relation between being and praxis, by which the priest’s being defines his praxis and his praxis, in turn, defines his being.* In *officium*, ontology and praxis become undecidable’ (*ibid.*: 81). The investigation into the functioning of the liturgical apparatus reveals how the office, since it presupposes a separation that must always be articulated, preserves within itself a *threshold* of undecidability between divine effect and human act, being and praxis. In fact, if the liturgical apparatus separates the two poles to subordinate one to the other, it cannot maintain itself otherwise than through this threshold of central indiscernibility, in which each time they are *at once* divided *and* articulated. Without this threshold of indiscernibility, as it has been argued, the effectivity of the sacrament would absorb the *officium*, while, at the same time, the contingent praxis of the priest would compromise the *effectus*, so that the act of government would not be able to take place.⁵

But then, if the apparatus of office contains in its centre a threshold of indiscernibility between being and praxis, ‘[w]hat are the stakes’ — asks the archaeology — ‘in the strategy that leads to conceiving human action as an

⁴The priest, writes Agamben, appears as a ‘paradoxical subject’, because within him the *officium* can coincide with the *effectus* ‘only on condition of being distinguished from it and can be distinguished from it only on condition of disappearing into it.’ (Agamben, 2013b: 25) ‘The typical operation of metaphysics is therefore not only to conjoin what is separated, but also of presupposing such separation. Agamben’s contribution to the critique of metaphysics is indeed that of thinking these two movements — disjunction and conjunction — as a single operation, as a single apparatus’ (Gentili, 2016: 52–53). If God and the minister – or the sovereign and the government – are at once divided and articulated, and in this way refer to one another, ‘the greatest illusion of political thought is the belief that [...] essence [of power] could be isolated [from power] by way of whatever kind of leap, deploying speculative resources, starting from that of dialectic. In other words, power is not embodied in the double figure of government and sovereign, nor does it result through a subsumption of their contradictory unity: rather, it emerges as the effect of a disposition (*agencement*), whereby each of the two poles fulfils its function while never ceasing to secretly refer to the other. The difficulty of thinking politics depends on the lack of an external domain starting from which it may be possible to explain the meaning of this very disposition’ (Karsenti, 2009: 360, our translation).

⁵Likewise, the studies of *The Kingdom and The Glory* (Agamben, 2011: 122) come to show how the *oikonomia* maintains within itself a threshold of central indiscernibility, described as ‘a bipolar system that ends up producing a kind of zone of indifference between what is primary and what is secondary, the general and the particular’, which constitutes ‘the condition of possibility for government, understood as an activity that, in the last instance, is not targeting the general or the particular, the primary or the consequent, the end or the means, but their functional correlation’.

officium?’ (Agamben, 2013b: 91). Agamben argues that Ambrose’s *De Officiis Ministrorum* replicates both the title and the structure of Cicero’s *De Officiis*, a classical rereading of the doctrine of virtues, and considers how, in the relation between *officium* and *effectus*, the liturgical literature reformulates the ancient theory of action, the link between *potentiality and act*: ‘[n]ot only does *effectus* translate the Greek *energeia* in the earliest versions, but in the missals and sacramentaries the divine *effectus* completes and perfects (*perficiatur, impleatur, compleatur* ...) each time what was in some way in potential in the priest’s action’ in *officium* (*ibid.*). Agamben suggests that the correspondence between the pairs *officium/effectus* and *dynamis/energeia*, the circular structure of office in Ambrose and its presentation as a *theory of virtues*, can be explained — through Cicero — in relation to Aristotle’s doctrine of virtues: the notion of virtue (*aretē*) assists the Greek philosopher precisely in the effort to resolve *the circularity between dynamis and energeia*, the aporias that their distinction introduced into his theory of action. Agamben’s attention is captured by an element that performs a decisive function in the Aristotelian doctrine of virtues, but that — like the sacerdotal office — appears properly ascribable neither to potential nor to act — an *undecidable* element between them, whereby the two poles separate and conjoin, and that in this way allows the action to configure itself —, but which Aristotle, like Ambrose, tries to “resolve” by subordinating it to the act and to *aretē*: this element is *hexis* (from *echō*, to have), in Latin *habitus*, a term that the text translates as *habit* or *habitude* (*abito* o *abitudine*). The archaeology of office must then address the notions of *hexis* and *aretē*, at the intersection between ethics and ontology in Aristotelian texts.⁶

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines virtue (*aretē*) as ‘that *hexis* “from which [*aph’ēs*] one becomes good [*agathos gignetai*] or will do one’s function well [*eu*

⁶ The link between *officium* and *effectus* cannot overlap with that between *dynamis* and *energeia*. If in ancient thought potential and act are two homogeneous categories within being, *officium* and *effectus* are rather two distinct dimensions within a circular relation that prefigures modern ontology, which Agamben describes as “effective” (cf. the second chapter of *Opus Dei*, particularly pp.45–47). Aristotle, on the other hand, by introducing a separation between potential and act, and interrogating the issue of their articulation, allows the appearance of a circularity between the two notions in which is prefigured their subsequent “effective” link. On Aristotle’s “ambiguous” position in the history of philosophy, see Agamben 2013b: 46; 2011: 82–84; 2015: 74–75; 2018: 45–47. In *Homo Sacer*, Aristotle therefore does not emerge as the “matrix” of Western thought. The frequent recourse to Aristotle, as we shall see, is ultimately to be explained by the fact that, in his studies, the philosopher lets a *middle term* appear, a *threshold*, through which he accomplishes the separation *and* conjunction of potential and act, demonstrating the possibility of neutralising the conceptual opposition that characterises, even if in a different fashion, both ancient and modern thought.

to *heautou ergon apodōsei*]” (1106a 24, cited in Agamben, 2013b, 92). How are we to understand, asks Agamben, that Aristotle elaborates the notion of virtue starting from that of habit? He identifies a theory of habits in book *Theta* of the *Metaphysics*, in which *hexis* is the element that ‘defines and articulates the passage of potential from the merely generic [...] to the effective potential of the one who [...] can therefore put it into action’ (Agamben, 2013b: 93). Aristotle further explores the role of *hexis* in particular in the *De Anima*, in which he distinguishes “generic” potentiality — in his example, the human’s capacity to learn how to write — from “effective” potential — proper to those who have already learnt grammar and can thus enact it — and determines their relation as follows:

whereas the one becomes so in actuality by means of learning, after frequent changes from a *hexis* to its contrary [that is, to privation, *sterēsis*, which for Aristotle is the opposite of *hexis*], the other passes by a different process from having [*echein*] sensation and grammar without exercising it in act, to exercising it in act [*eis to ergein*]. (Aristotle cited in Agamben, 2013b: 93, translation altered by the author).⁷

Aristotle thinks generic potentiality as the learning of a capacity — in terms of a repeated passage from habit (*hexis*) to its privation (*sterēsis*) — and effective potential as a translation into act of this capacity — as a separation from habit (from having without enacting) and passing into action. *Hexis* can perform this double function by virtue of its constitutive link to *sterēsis*, privation. Indeed, this link defines *hexis* as an ambivalent concept: on the one hand, habit of a privation — potentiality — and, on the other hand, privation of a habit — passing into action.⁸ The notion of habit thus allows us to reformulate the passage from generic potentiality to effective potential, to think a capacity in relation to its actualization without subordinating the former to the latter: ‘[t]he strategic meaning of the concept of habit is that, *in it, potential and act are separated and nonetheless maintained in*

⁷ Author’s note: it is clear to the Italian reader that Agamben’s interpretation — or, indeed, his destitution — of a metaphysical text often coincides with his novel translation of that same text (a translation we have attempted to replicate in this citation). Consequently, it is important to revise the official English translations of Agamben’s sources so as to appropriately follow his interpretive gesture.

⁸ Aristotle clarifies the link between *hexis* and *sterēsis* in the *Metaphysics*: ‘So a thing is potential in virtue of having a certain habit, and also in virtue of having the privation [*esterēsthai*] of that habit ... and if privation [*sterēsis*] is in a sense habit ..., then everything will be potential by having [*echein*] a certain habit or principle and through having the privation of it, if it can “have” a privation’ (Aristotle cited in Agamben, 2013b: 94, translation altered).

relation' (Agamben, 2013b: 94 emphasis added). The unresolvable link between *sterēsis* and *hexis* enables Aristotle to understand the possession of a capacity in an essential way, in its not being exercised, but also to grasp its connection to the act; in other words, it allows him to think how a potential comes to constitute itself through a particular mode of acting — as a habit or habitude — and how, conversely, every habitual gesture configures itself in relation to a capacity that exceeds it, to its capacity not to realise itself. *Hexis* is then a *third term* between potential and act, a *middle* between passivity and activity, which however does not arise as a substantial domain, because it does not appear save through their indiscernibility, as the sphere in which the two poles are reciprocally constituted.

However, this implies that *hexis* makes the realisation of the act independently of its capacity to not give itself — from its potentiality — difficult to think, thus being configured as an aporetic concept in Aristotelian thought. 'While assigning to habit an essential place in the relation between potential and act' — Agamben notes — 'and in this way situating *hexis* in a certain sense beyond the opposition potential/act, Aristotle never stops repeating, however, the supremacy of the *ergon* and the act over simple habit' (*ibid.*, 95). In order to resolve the indiscernibility between *dynamis* and *energeia* of the *hexis*, Aristotle tries to separate *hexis* from act, as "mere" potential, and to subordinate the former to the latter:⁹ "the end of each thing", he writes in the *Eudemian Ethics*, "is the *ergon*, and from this, therefore, it is plain that the *ergon* is a greater good than the habit" (1219a9-10).

In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle tries to resolve the duplicity of *hexis* from the opposite side, separating it from potential and identifying it with virtue. Virtue is thus the apparatus that must allow us to think the completion of the act without having recourse to *dynamis*, attributing it to habit as *aretē*, understood as "acting well". This way, in the *Metaphysics*, virtue is defined as a "a certain habit" (*hexis tis*: *Metaphysics* 1022b14) and at the same time something that, in habit, renders it capable of passing into action and of acting in the best way' (*ibid.*, 96). However, Agamben argues that this definition shows how Aristotle is unable to resolve the intimate duplicity of *hexis* in *aretē*. Aristotle's gesture is indeed twofold: he characterises the passing from *ergon* to *hexis* as virtue, as an action directed to the good; however, in order to articulate this passing, he must always refer back to

⁹ It is in this sense that we can interpret Agamben's assertion in an interview with Aliocha Wald Lasowski: 'Once the human is split into potential and act, a third term is needed in order to allow passing from one to the other. The *hexis* fulfils this function. However, conversely, it could be claimed — and this would not be a mere *boutade* — that it is to explain the mystery of *habitus* that Aristotle had to devise the dyad potential-act' (Wald Lasowski, 2010: 42, our translation).

hexis in its irreducibility to *aretē* — to *hexis* as potential — without being able to avoid this oscillation. The doctrine of virtue can only be articulated starting from a threshold of central indiscernibility between potential and act, from *hexis* in its constitutive link to *sterēsis*, which Aristotle tries to hide by subordinating it to *aretē*, but which he lets emerge from within as a central inoperativity of the action, that characterises it as *habit*: ‘The theory of the virtues is the response to the problem of the inoperativity of habit, the attempt to render governable the essential relation that links it to privation and potential-not-to?’ (*ibid.*, emphasis added).¹⁰

Identifying the notion of *hexis* as the *archē* of the apparatus of office or duty, the archaeological investigation allows us to answer the question regarding what might be ‘the stakes in the strategy that leads to conceiving human action as an *officium*’ (*ibid.*, 91). If the liturgical apparatus separates human action into two distinct spheres, constantly subordinating one to the other, *it is because it situates itself on the threshold of habit* — in which potential and act are both united and separated, and thanks to which it can be articulated —, *but at the same time tries to govern it*, because habit reveals them to be indiscernible. This way, the archaeology of office exposes the liturgical apparatus as the capture of another possible praxis, in which being and acting are revealed as indiscernible, a praxis in which potentiality is generated through a singular acting, as habit, and at the same time it exceeds it, exhibiting its constitutive passivity.¹¹

This culmination of the research on *officium* enables us to highlight the meaning and legitimacy of Agamben’s archaeological method. If, as we shall demonstrate, it does not aim to connect the office to a concrete historical origin, nor does it try to unveil an *archē* beyond its own history: in line with the Foucauldian assumption of archaeology as “the only access to the present”, the investigation aims to reconstruct the way in which the separation/articulation between form and life operated by the office has been produced in history and language, eventually finding a *threshold* at which this is displayed as the capture of *another possible praxis* in which life is *indiscernible* from its form; a threshold that, although hidden in the Aristotelian text, manifests *in the present* the possibility of a

¹⁰ For an analysis of the role of *hexis* in Agamben’s work, and his appraisal of the Heideggerian interpretation of Aristotle, see Cavalletti, 2019.

¹¹ The relation between *officium* and habit is analogous to that which, in *State of Exception*, runs between the Schmittian “force-of-law” and violence as a “pure means” in Benjamin, which allows us to think the force-of-law as the attempt to prevent ‘another use of the law’ — that is, to appropriate the pure mediality of acting while dissimulating it (cf. Agamben, 2005: 52–64). For an analysis of this relationship see Bonacci, 2020a, in particular pp. 156–160; and Bonacci forthcoming [2020b], § 7.

form-of-life as ungovernable action.¹²

Monastic Rules

Agamben is interested in monasticism precisely because, through its contestation of the separation between law and life operated through liturgy, it brings to light this threshold of indiscernibility between being and praxis, form and life. In *The Highest Poverty*, the author summarises the investigation of *Opus Dei*, in which the liturgical apparatus emerged as ‘a field of forces charged by two opposed tensions, one bent on transforming life into liturgy and the other tending toward making a life out of liturgy. [...] If the life of the priest is here presented as an *officium*, and if the *officium* institutes, as we have seen, a threshold of indifference between life and norm and between being and practice, the Church at the same time decisively affirms the sharp distinction between life and liturgy, between individual and function, that will culminate in the doctrine of the *opus operatum* and the sacramental effectiveness of the *opus Dei*’ (Agamben 2013a: 116–117). Whereas the sacerdotal praxis is articulated starting from a threshold of undecidability between *officium* and *effectus* (in liturgical literature, *effectus* corresponds to the *opus operatum*), the Church tries to dissimulate this central indiscernibility, establishing the separation between the two poles in terms of the subordination of one to the other.

Agamben shows how the proliferation of monastic movements in Europe between the fourth and the fifth centuries coincides precisely with the contestation of this distinction between the office of the minister and his factual life: ‘To a life that receives its sense and its standing from the Office, monasticism opposes the idea of an *officium* that has sense only if it becomes life. *To the liturgicization of life, there corresponds here a total vivification of liturgy*’ (*ibid.*, 117). Monasticism operates an inversion of the liturgy — in which the minister’s acting is subordinated to divine sacrament — that is formulated by connecting the efficacy of the rite to its realisation by way of the monk’s very life. The monastic practice of *meditatio*, through which the recitation of the scripture comes to accompany every little manual task — the idea that the office is punctuated by the daily activities of the cenobium — results in the liturgical praxis coinciding with every gesture of the monk. Agamben endeavours to demonstrate how the most significant aspect of this inversion is given by the fact that it enables the emergence of a threshold of

¹² For the notion of the “ungovernable”, see Agamben, 2011: 64–65.

indiscernibility between law and life; what is indeed a '[monastic] rule,' — the study asks — 'if it seems to be mixed up with life without remainder? And what is a human life, if it can no longer be distinguished from the rule?' (*Ibid.*, 4–5)

The *regulae* are the texts through which monastic communities are constituted, to which the monks must conform in order to join the cenobium. Agamben shows how, already in the scholastic tradition, we find an unresolved debate on the statute of the ancient rules that divides scholars between those who confer upon them a juridical nature and those who instead interpret them as mere admonitions or advice. The first rules are indeed rather heterogeneous, which makes it difficult to ascribe them to a defined literary genre. At times, they consist of a meticulous series of precepts regarding every single detail of life in the monastery; in other cases, they involve the faithful transcription of a dialogue between monks — which could concern the way in which to organize the community or the interpretation of the scriptures; or, more often, they exclusively record the historical narration of the founding monk's life. 'What type of texts are the rules, then, if they seem to performatively realize the life that they must regulate?' (*Ibid.*, 69) Agamben argues that, if it is evident that rules cannot be considered as laws, lists of general "norms" that the monk should then apply to reality, they cannot even be considered as mere indications or advice: their purpose is certainly to organize life in the monastery, and "following the rule" is the necessary condition for the monk to be accepted into the cenobium. The difficulty in defining the rules stems from the fact that, in monasticism, rule and life cannot be defined separately. Indeed, just as the text of the rule cannot be identified as a list of normative precepts, so life in the cenobium cannot be considered as a sequence of contingent facts; within it, 'every gesture of the monk, all the most humble manual activities become a spiritual work and acquire the liturgical status of an *opus Dei*' (*ibid.*, 83). If in the documents of monastic life, rule and life cannot be distinguished, writes Agamben, it is because what is at stake in them is not 'what in the rule is precept and what is advice, nor the degree of obligation that it implies, but rather a new way of conceiving the relation between life and law, which again calls into question [*revoca in questione*]¹³ the very concepts of observance and application, of transgression and fulfillment' (*ibid.*, 54). Drawing attention to the *relation* between norm and life, the investigation shifts

¹³ Agamben's '*revocare in questione*' is not a mere questioning, as 'calling into question' may suggest; it is not simply identifying and raising a doubt surrounding an aporia: rather, the phrase is meant to indicate a more radical shift in how that aporia is being approached and, ultimately, rendered inoperative.

the debate regarding rules onto a plane on which its aporias are neutralized. Following a rule is neither an attitude which may be ascribed to the completion of distinct acts determined by the norm nor, obviously, a mere praxis, but, rather, the adherence to a *mode of life*: in other words, it concerns precisely “how” the *relation between* rule and life is conceived and lived. In this respect, the text refers to a passage of the *Summa*, in which Aquinas considers how ‘in certain religious orders precaution is taken to profess, not the rule, but to live according to the rule’ (Aquinas cited in Agamben, 2013a: 55), and recalls how already Bernard of Clairvaux asserts that ‘[n]o one at profession [*cum profitetur*] really promises “the Rule” [*spondet regulam*], but specifically, that he will act “according to the rule”’ (of Clairvaux cited in Agamben, 2013a: 54–55). Agamben argues that the use of the term *form* in Bernard, which anticipates its acceptance in the Franciscan syntagma *forma vitae*, points to a dimension in which rule and life become inseparable, thus becoming united into a form-of-life. But how is it possible to further clarify this acceptance of the term “form”, in terms of the link that binds it to life?

Agamben’s study reveals how already in relation to the use of the syntagma *forma vitae* in the work of authors such as Cicero, Seneca and Quintilian, the *Thesaurus* lists the meanings of *imago*, *exemplar*, and *exemplum* for the term “form”, and how in the Vulgate *forma* translates *typos* — sometimes also rendered as *exemplum* — and is used accordingly in the patristic tradition. Therefore, in the *regulae*, the relationship binding the monks together, because it stands in opposition to the sphere of law, is often defined through the terminology of the example and of exemplarity — as in the affirmation of the master of Pachomius: ‘be their example [*typos*], not their legislator’ (*Apophthegmata patrum* cited in Agamben, 2013a: 29).

But what is an example, and in what way can it help us to grasp the relationship between rule and life in the expression *forma vitae*? Agamben frequently lingers over the concept of example in his writings, already in *The Coming Community*, but the broadest discussion that he dedicates to the notion is contained in an essay close to *The Highest Poverty*: namely, *The Signature of All Things* (2009 [2008]). As we read in this text, the example or paradigm ‘is a singular case that is isolated from its context only insofar as, by exhibiting its own singularity, it makes intelligible a new ensemble, whose homogeneity it itself constitutes’ (Agamben, 2009: 18). The example is a form of knowledge that does not proceed by articulating universal and particular, because it challenges their dichotomist opposition: in paradigmatic logic, it is the very exhibition of singularity that

defines the rule, thus constituting a set.¹⁴ It is in this sense that we can think how a *regula*, which consists only in the narration of a monk's life as exemplary, could be the document through which the monks isolate themselves from the normal context and constitute a new community. In such a community, the display of the singularity of one's actions turns these into examples of communal life, thus constituting the condition for belonging to the whole. In the monk's life, just as in the example, it is impossible to separate its 'paradigmatic character — its standing for all cases — from the fact that it is one case among others' (*ibid.*, 20). As a result, Agamben notes, even 'the firm distinction between the monk and the priest, who can be hosted in the convent under the title of a pilgrim (*peregrinorum loco*), but cannot live there permanently or pretend to any form of power within it', as it is explained in the *Rule of the Master* (2013a: 83–84). Not even the founding monk can evade the rule and take a leadership position, being instead bound by it — that is to say, required to display his own singularity as exemplary.¹⁵

Particularly meaningful, according to Agamben (*ibid.*, 56), is Suárez's reflection on the rule's 'vow', as something that 'does not obligate one, like the law, simply to fulfil determinate acts and keep away from others, but produces in the will a "permanent and, as it were, habitual bond" (*vinculum permanens et quasi in habitu*)'.¹⁶ The study observes that the monk's vow 'is, so to speak, objectively empty and has no other content than the production of a *habitus* in the will, whose ultimate result will be a certain form of common life' (*ibid.*, 57, translation altered). The rule emerges here as *habitus* insofar as it is a dimension that is generated by life and which remains inseparable from it, thus calling into question [*revocando in*

¹⁴ The example is, in other words, a "threshold" between the general and the particular, a "third term" between them that, however, does not constitute a substantial entity, since it does not appear if not through their indiscernibility. Regarding the figure of the analogy in Enzo Melandri's *La linea e il circolo*, Agamben writes in the text: 'But in what sense and in what way is the third given here? Certainly not as a term homogeneous with the first two, the identity of which could in turn be defined by a binary logic. Only from the point of view of dichotomy can analogy (or paradigm) appear as *tertium comparationis*. The analogical third is attested here above all through the disidentification and neutralization of the first two, which now become indiscernible. The third is this indiscernibility, and if one tries to grasp it by means of bivalent caesurae, one necessarily runs up against an undecidable' (2009: 20).

¹⁵ The theme of rules also appears in *The Signature of All Things*: 'the rule does not indicate a general norm but the living community (*koinos bios, cenobio*) that results from an example and in which the life of each monk tends at the limit to become paradigmatic — that is, to constitute itself as *forma vitae*' (Agamben, 2009: 22). In this study, Agamben considers how the example 'is the symmetrical opposite of the exception: whereas the exception is included through its exclusion, the example is excluded through the exhibition of its inclusion' (*ibid.*, 24).

¹⁶ The reference here is to Francisco Suárez's *De voto* in *Opera Omnia*, t. xiv (Suárez 1896).

questione]¹⁷ the very consistency of the *regula* as a “norm” that may or may not be applied to life.¹⁸ The “habit” is thus established as a domain beyond the opposition between norm and fact, collective and individual, returning in the author’s study as a “third term” that displays another possible configuration of law and life, in which these are mutually constituted.

According to Agamben, however, the shortcoming of the first monastic movements is indeed their failure to grasp the dimension of the cenobium — example and habit — as a third field with regard to rule and life, eventually preventing them from calling into question the very existence of the rule as a text distinct from life. If, as we have seen, the liturgical apparatus hinges on the habit — as a threshold in which form and life are indiscernible — but attempts to govern it by separating its poles into two distinct spheres, only claiming the cenobium as a third term, irreducible to either rule or life, could have made it possible to resolve the separations established by the liturgy, and to revoke the idea that the monks’ activity consists of nothing but an incessant celebration of the Divine Office. The Church instead managed to capture the novelty of monasticism, i.e., the intensification and capillarisation of the liturgy carried out in the rules, so as to apply it in terms of a ‘total liturgicization of life’ (*ibid.*, 82). This process was stabilised starting from the Carolingian era, when the bishops and the Roman Curia opted to support the Benedictine rule — the most juridicised monastic regime, which bound the monk to respect particular precepts — eventually imposing it, between the ninth and the eleventh centuries, as the rule that every new monastic order had to adopt.

Form-of-life and Use

Yet, the last section of *The Highest Poverty* demonstrates that, despite the progressive exertion of control of the curia over the monasteries, the tension between the

¹⁷ Translators’ note: following up on a previous footnote, ‘*revocare in questione*’ is a technical expression in Agamben’s work, which he develops by way of his reading of Heidegger and Hölderlin, that plays on the etymological tension between *vocazione* (vocation) and *revoca* (removal) in relation to the human, the being whose vocation (*vocazione*) is in fact nothing but the removal (*revoca*) of all vocations — which is of course to say, an inoperative being. While sharing with the more common phrase ‘*mettere in questione*’ the sense of ‘calling into question’, the author’s choice of adopting Agamben’s expression adds this further layer of complexity to the operation of the *regula*.

¹⁸ Agamben argues that the same trajectory is followed by Wittgenstein’s considerations in the *Philosophical Investigations*, ‘according to which it is not possible to follow a rule privately, because referring to a rule necessarily implies a community and a set of habits’ (Agamben, 2013a: 58).

Church and the monks never entirely withered away, but in fact intensified to such an extent that an open conflict with both Franciscanism and the religious movements erupted between the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries. According to Agamben, the radicality of Franciscanism consists in upholding the centrality of life within the religious experience to the point of challenging the significance of the rule as a separate domain. Agamben's study shows how the Franciscans, asserting the inseparability of life from rule, bring to light a "third" domain, a middle in which they are mutually transformed, which — 'albeit without succeeding in defining it with precision' (*ibid.*, 71) — they define as "use".

The investigation takes its cue from a consideration of how Francis restored the spirit of the ancient rules, which had less to do with following mandatory precepts than with abiding by a mode of life. Francis radicalises this requirement through an extreme contraction of the rule's text, which can be summarised as an exhortation to *vivere secundum formam Sancti Evangelii* — that is to say, living in accordance with the life of Christ as itself considered to be exemplary. The fact that he did not want to compile a new rule so much as to attribute exemplary value to the neo-testamentarian narration shows how, for Francis, the point is not to do with 'applying a form (or norm) to life, but of *living* according to that form, that is of a life that, in its sequence, makes itself that very form, coincides with it' (*ibid.*, 99). In the logic of the example that we have already analysed, the rule is not a generalisation that pre-exists and can then be applied to individual cases: 'Instead, it is the exhibition alone of the paradigmatic case that constitutes a rule, which as such cannot be applied or stated' (Agamben, 2009: 21). Following an example thus means displaying one's own singularity as the condition for belonging to a whole, a gesture in which form and life are indiscernible, the form of which could not be detached from this singular display. Francis always refers to the rule as indissolubly *regula et vita*, conjoining and, *together*, disjoining the two terms, 'as if the form of life that he has in mind could be situated only in the space of the *et*, in the reciprocal tension between rule and life' (Agamben, 2013a: 101).¹⁹ This way, the Franciscans' claim does not involve a new rule, or a new exegesis

¹⁹ Agamben reflects on the way Franciscan theologian Peter John Olivi affirms, regarding this indiscernible use of the two terms, that Francis, 'calling [the rule] not only rule, but also life, intended to clarify the sense of the rule, which is a right law and form of life and a life-giving rule that leads to the life of Christ', also adding that such a rule 'does not consist in a written text (*in charta vel litterae*), but "in the act and the operation of life" (*in actu et opere vitae*) and does not dissolve "into an obligation and profession of vows [*insola obligatione et professione votorum*], but rather consists essentially in an operation of word and life and in the actual exercise . . . of the virtues' (Olivi cited in Agamben, 2013a: 107).

of the Scriptures, but a *novum vitae genus*. If in monastic life it was not so much life itself but its regulation that was at stake, here it is life that serves as the paradigm of rule, so that rule is turned into a *forma vivendi*.

Although Francis resorts to the term *form*, associating it with *living*, the notion of *forma vitae*, widely used in the subsequent Franciscan literature, does not yet appear as a technical locution in his texts. The principle that summarises the Franciscan preaching is that of *paupertas*, which is to say, the assertion, *vivere sine proprio* in the *abdicatione omni iuris*: renouncing any possessions and rights. In Agamben's analysis, poverty appears to coincide with a form entirely emptied of any predetermined content, and which disavows any general meaning so as to be nothing but the exhibition of a singular living — or, perhaps more appropriately, it coincides with a threshold in which form and life come into contact in their very separation, and in this way reveal themselves to be inseparable.²⁰ This implies that the kind of poverty upheld by the Franciscans is not configured as mere renunciation, nor does it compel the Franciscans to constitute themselves as an order detached from society (at first, the monks were but groups of vagrants); in other words, 'it does not represent an ascetic or mortifying practice to obtain salvation as it did in the monastic tradition, but it is now an inseparable and constitutive part of the "apostolic" or "holy" life, which they profess to practice in perfect joy' (Agamben, 2013a: 92). As a consequence, poverty does not define life negatively with respect to property and right; what makes it possible is the Franciscan experience of inseparability of rule and life, which comes to language as a different *use* of things and the world: '*Altissima paupertas*, "highest poverty," is the name that the *Regula bullata* gives to this extraneousness to the law (Francis 1, 2, pp. 114/182), but the technical term that defines the practice in which it is actualized in the Franciscan literature is *usus* (*simplex usus, usus facti, usus pauper*)' (*ibid.*, 122).²¹

For the Franciscan theologians, the *usus pauper* indicates the legality of availing oneself of goods without having any property rights over them: what Ockham defines as 'the act of using some external thing — for example, an act of dwelling, eating, drinking, riding, wearing clothes, and the like' (cited in Agamben

²⁰ For this acceptance of "touch", of "contact" through a cut, a *caesura*, cf. Agamben, 2015: 237, 272–273. In this sense, in *Creation and Anarchy*, Agamben (2019: 35) defines Franciscan poverty as the '*relation with an inappropriable; to be poor means: to maintain oneself in relation with an inappropriable good*'.

²¹ Agamben notes how Olivi claims 'that "poor use is to the renunciation of every right as form is to material"... and that, however, without *usus pauper*, the renunciation of the right of ownership remains "void and vain"' (Agamben, 2013a: 128).

2013a: 133, translation altered); or, in Bonaventure's words, the shared use 'of equipment or books and other such goods' (cited in Agamben 2013a: 125, translation altered) which is not configured as a property, neither common nor private. The study evidences how, in the literature of that time, use is established as a dimension ascribable neither to a liturgical nor to a juridical vocabulary, and yet it is rarely defined in itself. The context where use receives a 'first, tentative elaboration' (Agamben, 2011: xi) is the doctrinal dispute that sets the Curia and the Franciscans in direct opposition around the thirteenth century; yet, Agamben notes, this is also the moment when the same concept ends up being defined in opposition to law and, consequently, being subsumed under it. The investigation shows how the harshness of this conflict was indeed a result of the fact that what was at stake in the *usus pauper* 'was not a dogmatic or exegetical contrast so much as the *novitas* of a form of life, to which civil law appeared applicable only with difficulty' (Agamben, 2013a: 93) — which is to say, the claiming of use as a praxis devoid of any juridical implications, over which the Church could not have any control.

The first document on the conflict between the Franciscans and the Church is Pope Nicholas III's 1279 papal bull *Exiit qui seminat*: this amounted to an ostensible recognition of Franciscanism, since it affirmed that the monks, by renouncing any rights, whether to property or to use, maintained a mere *usus facti* of things. The conflict reached its tipping point in 1322 with the bull *Ad Conditorem Canonum*, in which Pope John XXII claimed that the "de facto use" of goods such as food and clothes, because corresponding to their consumption, presupposes their property and cannot be separated from it. However, the bull compelled the Franciscan to try and define the specificity of use in its distinction from possession, thus marking the occasion on which the notion arrived at a first characterisation. Francis of Marchia, for example, wrote in response to the Pope that just as the being of consumable things corresponds to their transformation, so is use always *in fieri* — it consists in its becoming — and therefore cannot be reduced to property, thus elaborating, as Agamben comments, 'a true and proper ontology of use, in which being and becoming, existence and time seem to coincide' (*ibid.*, 132). Bonagratia instead indicated the *usus pauper* as the praxis that originally defines the community of human beings, because only the use of things, and never their possession, can be common, since the latter derives solely from law. The other strategy that allowed the Franciscan theologians to neutralise John XXII's argument is defined in the text as an 'inversion of the paradigm of the state of necessity' (*ibid.*, 114). In the 1329 bull *Quia Vir Reprobus*, the Pope questioned the possibility of separating the right to use from the Franciscans' mere permission to

use. Ockham, in the *Opus Nonaginta Dierum*, resuming the juridical principle according to which ‘each has by natural right the faculty of using the things of others’ (*ibid.*) in cases of extreme necessity, wrote in response to the Pope that the Franciscans preserve a right to things only in cases of necessity, whereas in normal circumstances they retain a mere permission to use. Agamben (*ibid.*, 115) posits that the suspension of law, which for other humans constitutes the exception, for the monks reveals a different relationship between law and life, coinciding with *usus pauper*, yet they recover a relation with ‘natural, not positive law,’ only in cases of extreme necessity.²²

However, Agamben argues, the prevalent strategy of the Franciscan theologians was to invoke the “*de facto* use” of things granted to them by Nicholas III’s bull, which is to say to prove the legitimacy of the separation of the *usus facti* from property, this way relapsing into an adversarial relationship with the law that eventually determined their defeat. This indeed meant, as we read in the study, ‘disregarding the very structure of law’, which presupposes a difference between *factum* and *ius* that makes it possible to incessantly re-articulate them, so that the ‘[t]he factual character of use is not in itself sufficient to guarantee an exteriority with respect to the law, because any fact can be transformed into a right, just as any right can imply a factual aspect’ (*ibid.*, 138–139). If the liturgical apparatus, as we have seen, hinges on the threshold of habit — in which form and life are indiscernible — but it splits this into two opposed poles so as to allow the subordination of the one to the other, having identified use as a merely factual praxis, set in opposition to the law, did not allow the Franciscans to claim it as a third domain, in which the separations of liturgy could be neutralised, and determined their defeat in the conflict with the Curia. The investigation concludes with a passage that is extremely meaningful for our investigation, which we shall quote in full:

The exclusive concentration on attacks [of the Curia], which imprisoned use within a defensive strategy, prevented the Franciscan theologians from putting it in relation with the form of life of the Friars

²² Translators’ note: in other words, through the *usus pauper*, the monks’ relationship with the law and its exceptionality is inverted, so to speak, given that this very relationship, based as it is on necessity and therefore established as natural law, is itself the exception. Agamben writes: ‘Necessity, which gives the Friars Minor a dispensation from the rule, restores (natural) law to them; outside the state of necessity, they have no relationship with the law. What for others is normal thus becomes the exception for them; what for others is an exception becomes for them a form of life’ (Agamben, 2013a: 115).

Minor in all its aspects. And yet the conception of *usus facti* as a successive being that is always *in fieri* in Francis of Ascoli and its consequent connection with time could have furnished the hint for a development of the concept of use in the sense of *habitus* and *habitudo*. This is exactly the contrary of that put forth by Ockham and Richard of Conington, who in defining *usus facti* once again by opposing it to law, as *actus utendi*, break with the monastic tradition that privileged the establishment of *habitus* and (with an obvious reference to the Aristotelian doctrine of use as *energeia*) seem to conceive the life of the Friars Minor as a series of acts that are never constituted in a habit or custom — that is, in a form of life. [...] Instead of confining use on the level of a pure practice, as a fictitious series of acts of renouncing the law, it would have been more fruitful to try to think its relation with the form of life of the Friars Minor, asking how these acts could be constituted in a *vivere secundum formam* and in a habit. Use, from this perspective, could have been configured as a *tertium* with respect to law and life, potential and act, and could have defined — not only negatively — the monks' vital practice itself, their form-of-life. (*Ibid.*, 140–141)

In the study of Franciscanism, as in the archaeology of office, we can glimpse a new possible configuration of form and life as *habitus* and *usus* that — even if not entirely grasped and indeed having rapidly disappeared from the Franciscan experience — can be resumed and developed. Such a task is deferred at the end of the text to the last volume of *Homo Sacer*: '[i]t is the problem of the essential connection between use and form of life that is becoming undeferrable at this point. How can use — that is, a relation to the world insofar as it is inappropriable — be translated into an ethos and a form of life? And what ontology and which ethics would correspond to a life that, in use, is constituted as inseparable from its form?' (*Ibid.*, 144) In the closing section of this study we shall explore the way in which *The Use of Bodies* tries to answer these questions, without undertaking a detailed analysis of the text, but limiting ourselves to identifying some of the places where Agamben resumes the themes of *The Highest Poverty* and *Opus Dei*, and indicating the direction in which he develops them.

Habitual use

The Use of Bodies takes its title from the first chapter of the volume, which may be considered as an addendum to the archaeology of office or duty developed in *Opus Dei*. In the latter study, Agamben dwelled at length on Aquinas' definition (cited in Agamben, 2013b: 22) of the minister as an 'animate instrument' [*instrumentum animatum*]: someone who exercises a praxis that is his own only insofar as he is performing someone else's action, someone who, precisely because he is separate from God, acts on his behalf. In order to define the paradoxical status of the minister's action, in which the agent is actually Christ, Aquinas likens it to an instrument, an axe, that does not act 'by the power of its form', but which can still fulfil its 'instrumental action save by exercising its proper action, which consists in cutting' (cited in Agamben, 2013b: 25, translation altered). In the first chapter of *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben shows that the expression "animate instrument" derives from Aristotle's *Politics*, where the philosopher resorts to the syntagma 'ktēma ti empsychon' [animate equipment] (1253b 30) to define the nature of the slave (2015: 10).²³

The analysis of the relationship between master and slave can be found at the beginning of the *Politics*, and it has a strategic role in the economy of the treatise. As noted by Hannah Arendt, in the Greek *polis* human beings attempt, through slavery, to liberate themselves from the necessities of life (*zoē*) and from labour, in order to be free to partake in political life (*bios*). However, the separation between the dimension of the *oikos* and the political sphere, between *zoē* and *bios*, does not mark a threshold between the outside and the inside of the *polis* — or else, the human's natural life would compromise its *bios politikos*, while the latter

²³ Aquinas himself writes, 'the minister comports himself in the mode of an instrument [*habet se ad modum stramenti*], as the Philosopher says in the first book of the *Politics*' (q. 63, art. 2)' (cited in Agamben, 2015: 74–75). In the first part of the *Summa*, Aquinas defines this paradoxical action as 'dispositive operation:' 'The secondary instrumental cause ... does not participate in the action of the principal cause, except inasmuch as by something proper to itself [*per aliquid sibi proprium*] it acts dispositively [*dispositivè operatur*, acts as an apparatus (It., *dispositivo*)] to the effect of the principal agent' (cited in Agamben, 2015: 71). Agamben's commentary establishes a definition of the word "apparatus", a key technical term throughout his work: '*Dispositio* is the Latin translation of the Greek term *oikonomia*, which indicates the way in which God, by means of his own trinitarian articulation, governs the world for the salvation of humanity. From this perspective, which implies an immediate theological meaning, a dispositive operation (or, we could say without forcing, an apparatus [*dispositivo*]) is an operation that, according to its own internal law, realizes a level that seems to transcend it but is in reality immanent to it' (Agamben, 2015: 71–72). The term "apparatus" indicates a governmental operation whereby transcendence and immanence, being and praxis, incessantly separate and recompose.

would in turn repeal its *zoē* — but rather comes to define the very functioning of the political apparatus, which — just like the liturgical — separates the two poles in order ceaselessly to subordinate one to the other.²⁴ This way, at the beginning of the *Politics*, the definition of the relationship of command (*despotikē*) between master and slave must serve as the paradigm of the bond between *bios* and *zoē*, *physis* and *nomos*, through which the *polis* is structured. Still, the description that Aristotle offers of their link merely presupposes the despotic relation that it should have established: he writes that, just as it is necessary for the soul to command the body like an instrument, so it is for the master to command the slave, and he considers how, insofar as these differ from one another in the same way that the soul differs from the body, and the human from the animal, the slave is the one whose work is “the use of the body” (*hē tou sōmatos chrēsis*)’ (Aristotle cited in Agamben, 2015: 3).

However, according to Agamben, it is this very definition of the slave’s work as a “use of the body” that — even though not further elaborated in Aristotle’s treatise — reveals the strategic function of the relation between master and slave for the constitution of the *polis*. In order to illustrate its meaning, Agamben turns to the characterisation of the slave that immediately precedes it, in which appears the expression later taken up by Aquinas: Aristotle (cited in Agamben, 2015: 10) defines the slave as ‘animate equipment (*ktēma ti empsychon*),’ not of the kind of productive instruments (*organa*), from which something is produced other than their use — such as, for instance, the spool and the plectrum — but rather belonging to practical instruments — such as clothing or a bed, from which is generated only *use* itself. The relation between master and slave is so close that the philosopher exploits the double meaning of the term *organon*, instrument and body part, defining the slave as an ‘integral part of the master’ and in a ‘community of life’ with him (Aristotle cited in Agamben, 2015: 13–14). In the definition of the slave as the being whose work is the “use of the body” the genitive cannot be interpreted solely as objective: as Agamben writes, the body of the slave ‘is in use’ in the sense that, ‘[b]y putting in use his own body, the slave is, for that very reason, used by the master, and in using the body of the slave, the master is in reality using his own body (Agamben, 2015: 14). The syntagma “use of the body” represents a point of indifference not only between subjective

²⁴ ‘What has been separated and divided off (in this case, nutritive life) is precisely what permits one to construct the unity of life as a hierarchical articulation of a series of faculties and functional oppositions, whose ultimate meaning is not only psychological but immediately political’ (Agamben, 2015: 200).

genitive and objective genitive but also between one's own body and that of another'. In this way, the role of the "use of the body" of the slave in the *Politics* is revealed. The slave is a human being but differs from the latter like the animal does, and is thus neither *bios* nor *zōē*; the slave is an instrument, albeit a living one, and thus belongs neither to *nomos* nor to *physis*, insofar as the use of the body is a *threshold* on which these dimensions are reciprocally constituted, which Aristotle places at the centre of his *polis* because it allows him to articulate its polarities, but that he tries at the same time to separate into the spheres of slavery and command, because the slave makes them appear undecidable. If the apparatus of separation and subordination of *bios* and *zōē* can be articulated only starting from a threshold in which the two poles are indiscernible, the "use of bodies" is that threshold, which the *polis* tries to govern through a relation of command, but that it preserves as a central undecidability within itself. But then again, if the slave makes political life possible, Agamben writes, '[i]t is necessary to add ... that the special status of slaves — at once excluded from and included in humanity, as those not properly human beings who make it possible for others to be human — has as its consequence a cancellation and confounding of the limits that separate *physis* from *nomos*' (*ibid.*, 20).

As in *Opus Dei*, the archaeology of command uncovers a threshold of central indiscernibility, wherein *bios* and *zōē*, passivity and activity, are indiscernible, and which reveals it as the capture of another possible praxis in which the partitions of the governmental apparatuses emerge as neutralised: Agamben writes, 'precisely insofar as the use of the body is situated at the undecidable threshold between *zōē* and *bios*, between the household and the city, between *physis* and *nomos*, it is possible that the slave represents the capture within law of a figure of human acting that still remains for us to recognize' (*ibid.*, 23).²⁵ The archaeological investigation, reaching the threshold of the use of the body, comes to testify to a

²⁵ 'In use, the subjects whom we call master and slave are in such a "community of life" that the juridical definition of their relationship in terms of property is rendered necessary, almost as if otherwise they would slide into a confusion and a *koinonia tēs* that the juridical order cannot admit except in the striking and despotic intimacy between master and slave' (Agamben, 2015: 36). It is thus possible – the passage continues (*ibid.*, emphasis added) – to 'form the hypothesis that the master/slave relation as we know it represents the capture in the juridical order of the use of bodies as an originary prejudicial relation, on whose exclusive inclusion the juridical order finds its proper foundation'. The connection of the inclusive-exclusive link between *bios/zōē* in the *Politics* to the threshold of the slave's "use of the body" constitutes an important development from *Homo Sacer I*, in which the inclusive-exclusion remained thought as a double reference between *bios* and *zōē* — or between sovereign power and bare life in the state of exception — without the emergence of a central *threshold* from which a different configuration of their relation could become thinkable.

different configuration of form and life — within and beyond their difference as much as their identity —, to another possible praxis that, although hidden in the Aristotelian investigation, may be retrieved and developed.²⁶

Agamben notes how, in the description of the relation that the slave has with the master, Aristotle hesitates when faced with the possibility of attributing to the slave's work the concept of virtue: since the slave's action is always at the same time someone else's action, it is not possible to think that acting well is in itself the slave's end, according to the paradigm of *praxis* that defines the virtuous acting of the free human being; still, as we have seen, the work of the slave cannot be thought starting from an external *telos*, in line with the framework of *poiēsis*. Aristotle only provides an ambiguous response to this problem: insofar as 'useful for the necessities of life' (*ibid.*, 21) — we can read in the *Politics* — the slave 'needs some small virtue' (Aristotle cited in Agamben, 2015: 21). This same hesitation characterises, in the *Magna Moralia*, the question regarding whether a virtue of vegetative or nutritive life could be thinkable, which Aristotle answers hastily by saying that, 'if it even exists, there is no being-at-work of it' (cited in Agamben, 2015: 22). According to Agamben, this indecision manifests the possibility of a different dimension of acting, released from the primacy of the act, that he formulates in terms of '*aretē* that knows neither *ergon* nor *energeia* and nevertheless is always in use' (Agamben, 2015: 22). Such a suggestion is developed in the text

²⁶ The next chapter in the book tries to formulate a different possible "use of the body" through the analysis of the Greek term *chrēsthai*, which belongs to verbs in the *middle* diathesis, neither active nor passive. Agamben shows how in expressions such as "to use language", "to use the *polis*" (that is, to partake of political life), but also "to use anger", or the "use of return" — with which the Greeks expressed the feeling of nostalgia — the verb operates as the middle of a process in which subject and object render each other indeterminate. As Émile Benveniste had already highlighted (Benveniste cited in Agamben, 2015: 27), verbs in the middle diathesis — in addition to "to use", for example, "to be born", "to suffer", "to sleep", or, in Latin, "to talk", "to enjoy" — do not indicate a process that is accomplished starting from the subject but, rather, 'a process that takes place in the subject', in which he accomplishes something that at the same time is accomplished in him. These verbs are not in the accusative, but in the dative and the genitive, because in them what comes to the fore is not an action carried out by the subject on an external object, *but the affection that the subject receives from the action, thus becoming patient*. The one who experiences nostalgia, for example, "uses the return", in the sense that he 'has an experience of himself insofar as he is affected by the desire for a return' (Agamben, 2015: 29). These reflections lead the author to define the expression *sōmatos chrēsthai*, 'to use the body', as the '*the affection that one receives insofar as one is in relation with one or more bodies*. Ethical — and political —', he writes, 'is the subject who is constituted in this use, *the subject who testifies to the affection that he receives insofar as he is in relation with a body*' (*ibid.*, emphasis added). Use thus indicates a political dimension wherein a "subject" can never understand itself as separated from an "object", so as to be able to possess or govern it, because 'to enter into a relation of use with something, I must be affected by it, constitute myself as one who makes use of it' (*ibid.*, 30).

by connecting the notion of use with that of habit — *hexis, habitus* — in the paradigm of a *habitual use*, a praxis that never takes the form of a determinate act, and yet without being configured as a merely passive or potential dimension. Situating use in the dimension of the habit — we read in the chapter of *The Use of Bodies* dedicated to *Habitual Use* — is indeed not equivalent to defining it in a negative mode with respect to the *ergon* and the work. This would mean relapsing into the aporias that characterise the Aristotelian discussion of *hexis*, and which mark the later tradition too, as we have seen in the case of the Franciscan theologians, where they prevent the latter from developing a conception of use and *habitus* that would not be exclusively defined in opposition to the act (that is, to property and law). Thinking against Aristotle and the tradition that follows after him, Agamben writes, is equivalent to returning use ‘to the dimension of habit, but of a habit that, insofar as it happens as habitual use and is therefore always already in use, does not presuppose a potential that must at a certain point pass into the act or be put to work’ (*ibid.*, 58). Even the conception of potential as that which is able ‘not to pass to the act’, that which is preserved as such within the act, for Agamben remains internal to the Aristotelian apparatus of separation: ‘Only if we think habit not only in a negative mode’, we read in the text, ‘beginning from impotential and from the possibility of not passing into the act, but rather as habitual use, is the aporia, on which the Aristotelian thought on potentiality foundered, dissolved. *Use is the form in which habit is given existence, beyond the simple opposition between potential and being-at-work*’ (*ibid.*, 60, emphasis added, translation altered).

The formulation of the paradigm of a habitual use imparts a crucial spin to the meditation on the notion of potentiality that runs throughout the author’s work from the very beginning. Just as, in *Opus Dei*, habit made it possible to indicate the way in which potentiality is constituted starting from a singular acting, use now allows us to think a praxis that is configured in relation to its own passivity, so that, in habitual use, potential and act show themselves as indiscernible. But how can use allow us to think the existence of habit, Agamben asks, ‘how is a habit used without causing it to pass over into action, without putting it to work? It is clear’ – the passage continues – ‘that this does not mean inertia or simple absence of works but a totally other relation to them. The work is not the result or achievement of a potential, which is realized and consumed in it: the work is that in which potential and habit are still present, still in use; it is the dwelling of habit, which does not stop appearing and, as it were, dancing in it, ceaselessly reopening it to a new, possible use’ (*ibid.*, 62).

In these considerations, potentiality does not appear as something that is

exhausted in the act, nor, however, should it be thought as a dimension exceeding it, that appears negatively in its specific configuration, showing its sheer possibility or contingency. If habit exceeds or revokes the act, it is only to return it to use: that is, to show it in a configuration in which potential and act are held in irresolvable tension through a dynamic link whereby they are reciprocally transformed. It is in this sense that *The Use of Bodies* cites a passage from *De Rerum Natura* in which Lucretius, resuming the Epicurean critique of teleology, affirms that no organ was invented in anticipation of an end or a function, neither the eyes to see, nor the tongue to speak, nor the ears to hear, but rather, ‘[w]hatever thing is born generates its own use [*quod natum est id procreat usum*]’ (cited in Agamben, 2015: 51). In his analysis, Agamben describes use — that here inseparably stands for habit — as ‘what is produced in the very act of exercise as a delight internal to the act, as if by gesticulating again and again the hand found in the end its pleasure and its “use”, the eyes by looking again and again fell in love with vision, the legs and thighs by bending rhythmically invented walking’ (Agamben, 2015: 51).²⁷ The study later identifies this “delight” internal to the act, in reference to Spinoza’s expression *acquiescentia in se ipso*, as a “contemplation”: ‘Acquiescence in oneself,’ indeed writes the philosopher, ‘is the pleasure arising from a person’s contemplation of himself and his potential for acting’ (Spinoza cited in Agamben, 2015: 62). To contemplate “joyfully” one’s own potential to act means not being separated from it like a particular individual from its transcendental subjectivity but, rather, experiencing potentiality as what is generated in use, and the self or subjectivity in terms of ‘what is opened up as a central inoperativity in every operation, as the “livability” and “usability” in every work’ (Agamben, 2015: 63). In light of this investigation, it is possible to understand how, for Agamben, the “subject” as it is intended in modern thought ‘does not precede habit, but arises from it’ (Wald Lasowski, 2010: 42, our translation); that is to say, it derives from an attempt to separate being and praxis so as to establish their unity starting from the self, in a dialectic that, however, cannot be articulated without starting from the central threshold of the habit, in which the two polarities are joined in an undecidable link. The study finds this connection between habit and subjectivity in the conclusion of *What is Philosophy?*, in which Deleuze defines the subject’s being as a ‘contemplation without consciousness’ — or a ‘passive creation’ (cited in Agamben, 2015: 63) — which, through *sensation* and *habit*, Agamben (*ibid.*, 63-64) claims to exemplify a dimension

²⁷ The original passage is also contained in Agamben’s essay, ‘Lucrezio, appunti per una drammaturgia’ (2008: 16), contained in Virgilio Sieni, *La natura delle cose*.

that ‘is not something like a mystical fog in which the subject loses itself but the habitual dwelling in which the living being, before every subjectivation, is perfectly at ease’ (*ibid.*, 63–64).²⁸

The conclusion of the chapter on *Habitual Use* returns to the analysis of *Opus Dei*: ‘The most proper characteristic of habit as *ethos* and use-of-oneself was covered and rendered inaccessible by the medieval theory of virtue’ (*ibid.*, 64). In that study, Agamben showed how the Aristotelian separation of *hexis* from potential and its resulting likening to virtue are taken up by Scholasticism, and he commented on a passage of the treatise on virtues in the *Summa Theologica* in which Aquinas reformulates the *hexis* as *habitus operativus*, identifying it as the element that guarantees the fulfilment of “virtuous” action. The investigation then had retraced the way in which the theory of virtues and the liturgical doctrine of the office get bonded in modernity, when the term *officium* translates the notion of “duty”, which is to say the apparatus through which the subject’s “virtuous” action is no longer subordinated to God but to the law as such. Against this tradition, the archaeology uncovered the *hexis* as the place wherein a doctrine of the subject could have been rethought anew, beyond the opposition between being and praxis, norm and life. In *The Highest Poverty*, this new dimension of acting was found in the Franciscan *forma vitae* through a novel contraction of rule and life, which released them from the separations of liturgy and law so as to open them in the dimension of the *usus*, a middle space between activity and passivity, at once common and singular. However, precisely because it is not grasped as this middle, or as this third term, use relapsed into an oppositional dynamic with the law. These two lines of inquiry now converge in the idea of a habitual use whereby any possibility of separating form from life vanishes, and form, as habit, appears as a dimension that is ‘generated by living’, and likewise life, as use, appears as a

²⁸ Andrea Cavalletti, in his study *Il filosofo inoperoso*, describes Agamben’s operation as a ‘paradigmatic ontology, which withdraws any possible determination of the subject by withdrawing the primacy of the act. It uncovers the *hexis*. If, as was shown, this is distinguished (along with potential) from the act so that it can refer to something like a subject, the essence of this subject will be nothing but *habitus*. No privileges whatsoever, then, are attached to any mode of subjectivity [...]. Perhaps we are here close to empiricism, in its Deleuzian variant, which is to say to the radical empiricism in which power [...] emerges in the history of thought “from the moment it defines the subject: a *habitus*, a habit, nothing but a habit in a field of immanence, the habit of saying I” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2009: 48). [...] But a further clarification is required. Indeed, for Agamben the question is to look even beyond this root to the point where, being the act inseparable from potential, the *hexis* will no longer be able to separate itself and refer to something else; the question is to reach beyond any relationship, to tap into the still unexplained mystery of a habit without Ego, which is to say of a self not yet subjective’ (2019: 412–413, our translation).

‘habit of living’ (*ibid.*, 221).²⁹ Thinking ‘a potential that is never separate from act, which never needs to be put to work, because it is always already in use’ (*ibid.*, 58), an *aretē* that is without *ergon* because it is only to be used, thus means ‘breaking the vicious circle of virtue’, as the author writes at the end of the chapter (*ibid.*, 65), and:

to think the virtuous (or the virtual) as use, that is, as something that stands beyond the dichotomy of being and praxis, of substance and action. The virtuous (or the virtual) is not opposed to the real: on the contrary, it exists and is in use in the mode of habituality; however, it is not immaterial, but, insofar as it never ceases to cancel and deactivate being-at-work, it continually restores *energeia* to potential and to materiality. Use, insofar as it neutralizes the opposition of potential and act, being and acting, material and form, being-at-work and habit, ... is always virtuous and does not need anything to be added to it in order to render it operative. Virtue does not suddenly develop into habit: it is the being always in use of habit; it is habit as form of life. Like purity, virtue is not a characteristic that belongs to someone or something on its own. For this reason, virtuous actions do not exist, just as a virtuous being does not exist: what is virtuous is only use, beyond — which is to say, in the middle of — being and acting. (*Ibid.*)

These words evoke the conception of action as “pure means” in the Benjaminian treatise *Zur Kritik der Gewalt (Critique of Violence)* (1996: 239), which emerges in the dense epilogue of *The Use of the Bodies* as one of the key elements on which the destitution of the governmental apparatus attempted in *Homo Sacer* hinges. The long and patient archaeological work releases, at the core of such an apparatus, the paradigm of a habitual use in which bodies, words, and actions, ‘are never oriented towards an end, do not have a *utilitatis officium* [...] but are always gestures and pure means, the proper use of which consists in the display of their very mediality’ (Agamben, 2008: 16, our translation).

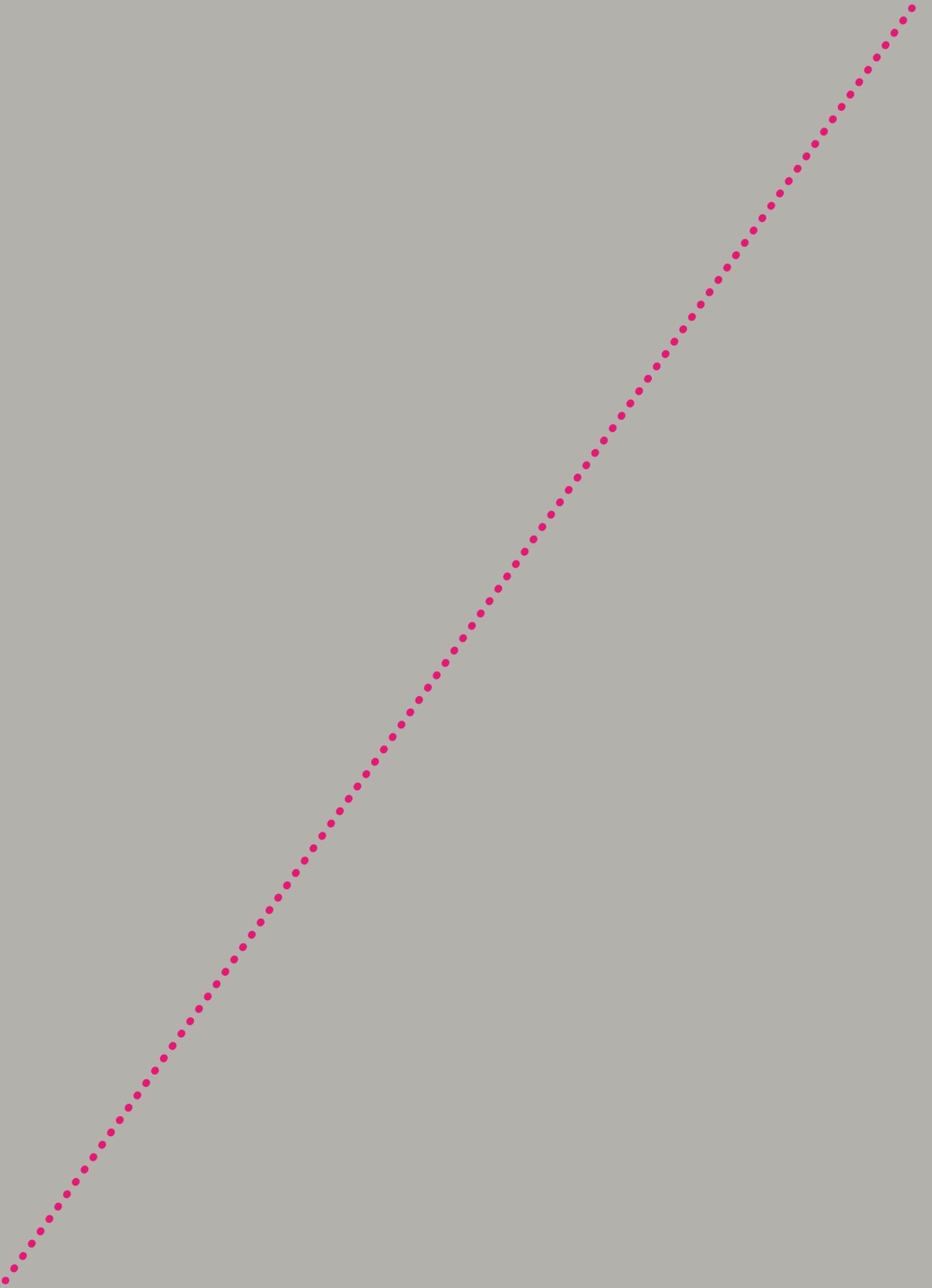


²⁹ According to Gaius Marius Victorinus’s formulation, which is reported in Agamben’s text: ‘Indeed, life is a habit of living [*vivendi habitus*], and it is a kind of form or state generated by living [*quasi quaedam forma vel status vivendo progenitus*]’ (cited in Agamben 2015: 221).

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Bataille and the Paradox of Sovereignty

Giorgio Agamben

Translated by Michael Krimper¹

Foreword

Giorgio Agamben's essay "Bataille and the Paradox of Sovereignty," published in an Italian language volume from 1987 devoted to the political and sacred in Georges Bataille's thought, has remained up to this point untranslated into English and rarely cited,² despite its early elucidation of an itinerary that he would pursue at length in writing to come. At various junctures, Agamben had previously touched on aspects of Bataille's nonsystematic work, critically examining his notion of unproductive expenditure in *Stanzas* (1993 [1977]: 54) or his discussion with Alexandre Kojève concerning unemployed negativity in the series of lectures gathered together under the title *Language and Death* (2006 [1982]: 49–53). But these few pages on the ontological and political stakes of sovereignty constitute Agamben's most sustained and sympathetic reading of Bataille, even while the latter would continue to make occasional appearances throughout the *Homo Sacer* series, but evoked for the most part to be discredited or at other times simply omitted.

Consider for example how the title of this essay, "Bataille and the Paradox of Sovereignty," resembles the title given to the first chapter of *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995) on "The Paradox of Sovereignty," except that the proper name of Bataille has been excised. His name returns elsewhere too, where it is explicitly put under erasure, such as in the excursus treating the end of history and the State closing the chapter on the 'Form of Law'. There Agamben revisits Bataille's arguably failed attempt, once again alongside Kojève, to confront the problem of sovereignty from the standpoint of the end of history. Including the names of Maurice Blanchot, Raymond Queneau, and Jean-Luc Nancy within this constellation, Agamben maintains that they all share a concern for the theme of *désœuvrement*, or inoperativity, as designating the idle self-actualisation and inaction of humanity upon the completion of history. But he proceeds to discount each approach (see Agamben, 1998: 61–2), whether Bataille's "sovereign and useless form of negativity," Blanchot's "absence of work," or Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* (*La Communauté désœuvrée*, 1986), which places at the heart of its analysis Blanchot's untranslatable usage of the word *désœuvrement* —a play on words in the French signifying at once "idleness" and "the undoing of the work" (*œuvre*). Leaving

¹ Original text: Giorgio Agamben, 'Bataille e il paradosso della sovranità' in Jacqueline Risset (ed.), *Georges Bataille: Il politico e il sacro* (Napoli: Liguori Editore, 1987) 115-19.

² One of the few exceptions in English language criticism is Nadine Hartmann's introductory entry on Bataille in *Agamben's Philosophical Lineage* (Hartmann, 2017).

aside the use of *désœurement* in Blanchot's literary-philosophical criticism and fiction, Agamben claims to locate the origin of its genealogy in Kojève's illustration of the figure of the "lazy rascal" (*voyou désœuré*) in a review of Raymond Queneau's three novels concluding with *The Sunday of Life* (1951). 'Everything depends on what is meant by inoperativeness [*inoperosità*]', Agamben insists, as he begins to submit the French word to translation and modification within the trajectory of his own research as *inoperosità* in the Italian. 'The only coherent way to understand inoperativeness [*inoperosità*] is to think of it as a generic mode of potentiality that is not exhausted', he specifies, alluding to Aristotle's reflections on *dynamis*, 'in a *transitus de potentia ad actum*' (Agamben, 1998: 62). And Agamben will go on to reiterate inoperativity as a neutralization of the passage from potential to the act in the course of his writing, leading up to its more developed formulations in *The Use of Bodies* (2014).

The argument that Agamben puts forward in "Bataille and the Paradox of Sovereignty" helps to situate his proximity to a filiation of French writers from which he simultaneously distances himself, ever more so in later writing. Without elaborating on 'inoperativity' as such in this essay, Agamben nevertheless sketches the theoretico-practical terrain in which his own reconfiguration of the term around the notions of use, potential, destituent potential, and the messianic, as well as methodological strategies of deactivation or rendering inoperative, will unfold. He thus investigates the impasses of Bataille's study of ecstasy, sovereignty, and the sacred, as glossed by Nancy and Blanchot in their respective books on community, which foreground his own contribution to this sequence with *The Coming Community* (1990).³ At this stage of his inquiry into community, though, Agamben already aims to call into question the metaphysical structure of sovereignty which underlies an extensive range of fascisms and totalitarianisms, in addition to the individualism corresponding to capitalist democracy, all the while trying to broach another prospect for community today. He contends, however, that writers like Bataille and Blanchot, linked back to Friedrich Nietzsche, merely push the paradox of sovereignty away from the dominant pole of action towards the extreme opposite of passion and passivity, without dismantling the bond that holds together the entire machine of Western philosophy and subjectivity. What might let us break out of the circle, Agamben suggests, elusively, is the task of thinking potential anew.

Michael Krimper



³ Agamben does not cite Nancy's expanded book from 1986 but its initial version as an essay, "La Communauté désœuvrée", published in the journal *Aléa*, no.4, in 1983; as well as Blanchot's response *La Communauté inavouable* (*The Unavowable Community*) which also appeared in 1983.

The following reflections take their cue from an anecdote that was told to me several years ago by Pierre Klossowski. I went to visit him in his little studio on Rue Vergniaud to hear him speak about his encounters with Walter Benjamin. After forty years, Pierre remembered him perfectly, “a boy’s face with a moustache stuck on it”. Among the images that still remained etched in his memory, there was one of Benjamin, hands raised in a gesture of reproach (Klossowski, while recounting it, had stood up to imitate him), saying over and over again, about the activities of Acéphale and in particular the ideas presented by Bataille in his essay on “The Notion of Expenditure” (which had appeared three years earlier in the journal, *Critique Sociale*): “*Vous travaillez pour le fascisme!*” [You are working for fascism!]

I have often wondered what Benjamin could have meant by this sentence. He was neither an orthodox Marxist nor a rationalist afflicted by *coniunctivitis professoria*, who, as was the case in Italian culture for some years after the war, would have been scandalised by the themes traversing Bataille’s thought. The “anthropological materialism,” the outline of which he had attempted to trace in the 1929 essay on surrealism, does not actually seem very far — at least, at first glance — from the Bataillean project of extending the theoretico-practical horizon of Marxism (consider how the theme of “drunkenness” plays a central role in this text). Benjamin, moreover, was well acquainted with Bataille’s tenacious aversion to fascism, which was precisely explained during those years in a series of extremely penetrating articles and analyses. If he targeted undoubtedly neither the themes nor the content of Bataille’s thought, what could Benjamin have intended by his reproach?

I do not believe myself to be in a position to provide an immediate response to this question. But since I am convinced of the persistent relevance of the problems that occupied the great minds of that epoch, I would like to try and expand the historical framework in which the Benjaminian reproach is inscribed and ask this: in what way could we say today that we too, without knowing it, are working for fascism? Or rather, turning the question around: how could we claim with certainty that we are not currently working for the benefit of what Benjamin designated by that term?

To be able to pose this question better, I would like first of all to situate it in relation to the most rigorous attempts to measure the theoretical heritage of Bataille’s thought and to treat it in the direction of a theory of community. I am referring to the important essay by Jean-Luc Nancy on “*La Communauté désœuvrée*” (published in *Aléa*, 4, 1983) and to the text by Blanchot, *La Communauté inavouable* (Paris, 1983), which constitutes in a certain way its reprise and prolongation.

Nancy and Blanchot each begin by bearing witness to a radical crisis and dissolution of community in our epoch and interrogate accordingly the possibility—or impossibility—of a communal thought and experience. It is from this perspective that they both turn to Bataille’s thought. They agree in recognising within Bataille the refusal of any positive community founded on the realisation of, or participation in, a common presupposition.

The communal experience implies, for Bataille, the impossibility of communism as an absolute immanence between men, the unrealisable character of fusional communion in a collective hypostasis. Against this conception of community, Bataille opposes the idea of a negative community whose possibility stems from the experience of death. The community revealed by death does not establish any positive bond between subjects, but draws on their disappearance, on death in the sense of that which can in no way be transformed into a substance or common work [*opera comune*].

The community in question here therefore has an absolutely singular structure; it assumes the impossibility of its own immanence, even the impossibility of communal being as the subject of community. Community rests somehow on the *impossibility of community*, and the experience of this impossibility founds the sole possible community. It becomes evident that, in this view, community can only be the “community of those who do not have community”. And this will indeed be the model of the Bataillean community: be it the community of lovers which he often evoked, the community of artists, or, more insistently, the community of friends which he sought to realise with the group *Acéphale*, of which the *Collège de Sociologie* was the exoteric manifestation; in each case, this negative structure is inscribed at the centre of community.

But how can this community be attested? In what type of experience can it manifest? The privation of the head, the acephality that sanctions participation in the Bataillean group, provides an initial response: the exclusion of the head does not signify only the elision of rationality and the exclusion of a leader, but above all the self-exclusion of the members of the community, who will become part of it solely through their own decapitation, that is, their own “passion” in the strict sense of the term.

And this is the experience that Bataille defines with the term “*extase*”, ecstasy. As Blanchot sharply observed, even if it was already implicit in the mystical tradition from which Bataille while taking distance borrowed the term, the decisive paradox of *ekstasis*, of this absolute being-outside-of-itself of the subject, is that anyone who has the experience of ecstasy disappears at the instant

of undergoing it; the subject must be missing at the very instant in which it would need to be present in order to have such an experience.

The paradox of Bataillean ecstasy is therefore that *the subject must be there where it cannot be*, or the other way around, that it *must be missing there where it must be present*. Such is the antinomic structure of this inner experience that Bataille sought to grasp throughout his life and whose accomplishment constituted what he called an “*opération souveraine*,” or “*la souveraineté de l’être*,” the sovereignty of being.

It is certainly not by chance that Bataille came to prefer the expression “*opération souveraine*” to every other definition. With his acute sense of the philosophical significance of terminological questions, Kojève, in a letter to Bataille conserved at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, explicitly points out that the most appropriate term for the problem that occupies his friend cannot be anything other than “sovereignty”. And Bataille, at the end of the chapter entitled “*Position décisive*” in *L’Expérience intérieure*, defines the sovereign operation in this way: “*L’opération souveraine, qui ne tient que d’elle-même son autorité, expie en même temps cette autorité*” [The sovereign operation, which draws its authority solely from itself, expiates at the same time that authority].

What, then, is the paradox of sovereignty? If the sovereign is, according to Carl Schmitt’s definition, the one who has the legitimate power to proclaim the state of emergency and to suspend in this way the validity of the juridical order, the paradox of sovereignty can be articulated thus: “the sovereign is at the same time within and without the [juridical] order”. The nuance, “at the same time,” is not superfluous: “indeed, the sovereign, having the *legitimate* power to suspend the validity of the law, *legitimately places itself outside the law*”. For this reason, the paradox of sovereignty can also be formulated in this way: “the law is outside of itself, it is outside of the law;” or: “I, the sovereign, who am outside the law, declare that there is no outside of the law”.

This paradox is very ancient, and if one looks closely it is implicit in the oxymoron that explains it: the sovereign subject. The *subject* (etymologically, what is below) is *sovereign* (what is above). Perhaps the term ‘subject’ (conforming to the ambiguity of the Indo-European root from which the two contrary Latin prefixes, *super-* and *sub-*, derive) signifies nothing besides this paradox, this dwelling there where it is not.

If this is the paradox of sovereignty, then could we say that Bataille, in his passionate attempt to think community, managed to break out of the circle? Seeking to think beyond the subject, seeking to think the *ecstasy* of the subject, in truth he thought only its internal limit, its constitutive antinomy: the *sovereignty of the subject*, the being *above* of that which is *below*. Bataille himself is certain to have

noticed this difficulty. One could even say that the entirety of *L'Expérience intérieure*, perhaps his most ambitious book, attempts to think this difficulty, which he formulates at one point as an attempt to stand “on the tip of a needle”. But — and the impossibility of bringing the prospective work on sovereignty to completion proves as much — he was unable to do so. And it is only by becoming aware of this essential limit that we can hope to register the most proper exigency of his thought.

A difficulty of the same kind was faced many years earlier by another thinker of ecstasy, the Schelling of the *Philosophy of Revelation* who had assigned to ecstasy and to the stupor of reason the function of thinking this Immemorial that always already anticipates the thought which positions it. The problem that is posed here is in fact even more ancient than its formulation as the paradox of sovereignty. It can be traced back to a duality that is implied in the way that Western philosophy sought to think being (in this sense, Bataille was perfectly right to speak of the “sovereignty of being”: being as subject, ὑποκείμενον, matter, and being as form, εἶδος, being that it always already pre-supposed and being that is given fully in presence. This antinomy is thought by Aristotle as a duality of potential [*potenza*], δύναμις, and act, ἐνέργεια. We are used to thinking potential in terms of force or power [*potere*]. But potential is above all *potentia passiva*, “passion” in the sense of suffering or passivity, and only in a second moment *potentia activa* and force.

Of these two poles, through which Western philosophy has thought being, modern thought, from Nietzsche onward, has constantly focused on the pole of potential. This is the reason why, in Bataille, as in thinkers like Blanchot who are closest to him — what is decisive is the experience of passion, this *déchainement des passions* [unleashing of passions] in which he glimpsed the ultimate meaning of the sacred. And this passion has to be understood in the sense of *potentia passiva*, as pointed out once more by Kojève, indicating a key passage in *L'Expérience intérieure* where it is said that “*l'expérience intérieure est le contraire de l'action*” [inner experience is the contrary of action].

But just as the thought of sovereignty cannot escape the limits and contradictions of subjectivity, the thought of passion still remains the thought of being. Contemporary thought, in the attempt to surpass being and the subject, sets aside the experience of the act, which for centuries constituted the summit of metaphysics, but only in order to exacerbate and push to the extreme limit the opposite pole of potential. In this way, though, contemporary thought does not go beyond the subject, but rather thinks the most extreme and exhausted form of

it, the pure being-below, the *pathos*, the *potentia passiva*, without managing to break the bond that ties it to its polar opposite.

The bond that holds potential and act together is not, in fact, something simple, but has its indissoluble knot in the “giving of the self to itself (ἐπίδοσις εἰς αὐτὸ) that an enigmatic passage of Aristotle (*De Anima*, 417 b) puts in these terms: “To suffer (πάσχειν) is not something simple but is on the one hand a certain destruction (φθορά) by the contrary, and on the other hand a conservation of what is in potential by that which is in act (...) and this is not a becoming other than oneself, since here there is giving of the self to itself and to the act”.

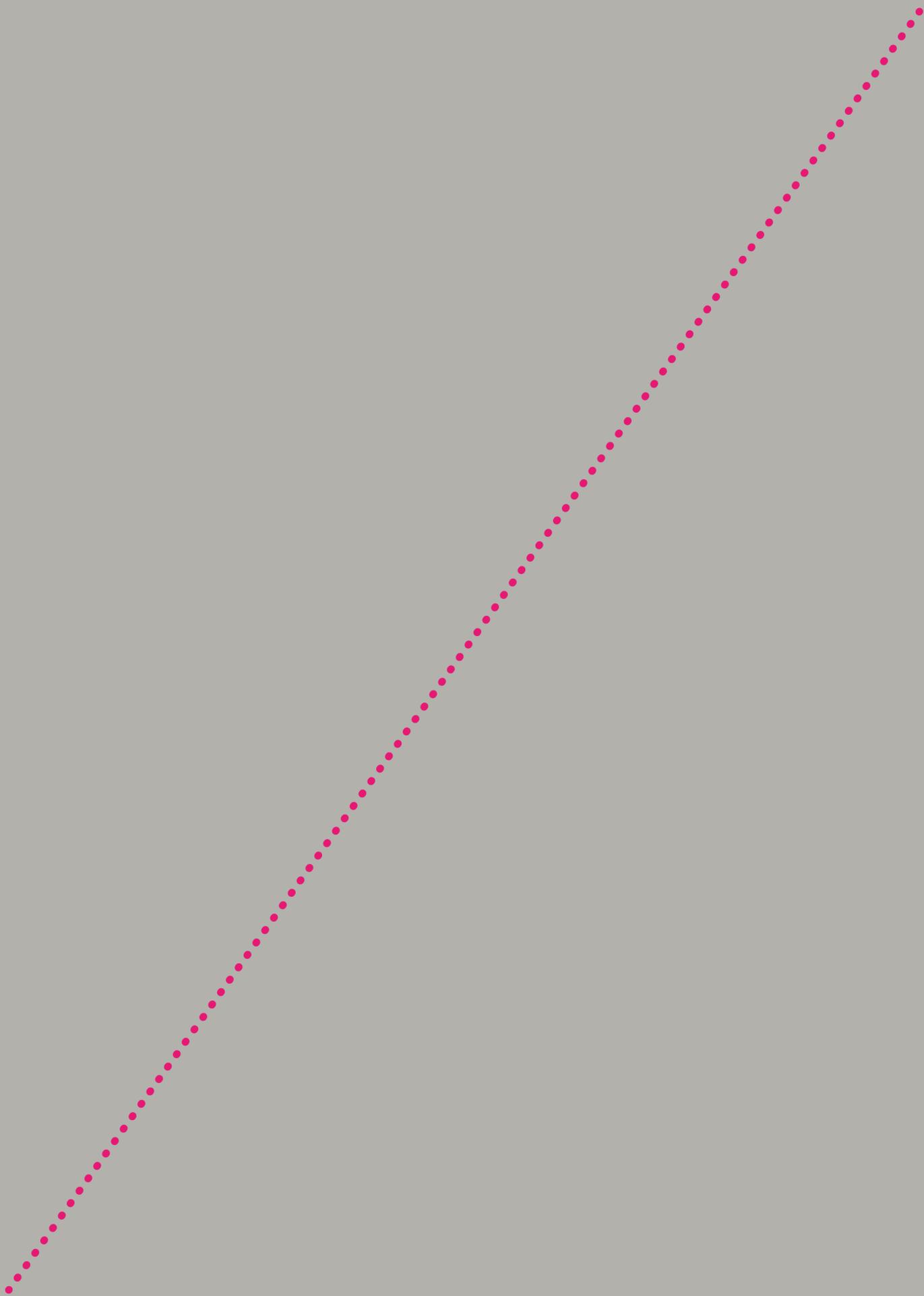
If we now return to the Benjaminian anecdote that served as our point of departure, can we say that, insofar as we are dwelling on this thought of passion and potential, if we are not certain of working outside of fascism, then at least can we be certain of working outside the totalitarian destiny of the West that Benjamin might have had in mind with his reproach? Can we say that we have dissolved the paradox of sovereignty? In what way can the thought of passion break away from both act and potential? Would passion without subject really be located beyond pure subjectivity as the potential of itself? And what community that is not simply a negative community does this passion allow us to think?

Until we can respond to these questions — and we are still far from being able to do so — the problem of a human community freed from presuppositions and devoid of sovereign subjects cannot even be posed.



References (Foreword)

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