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University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Bartleby's Lesson
Giorgio Agamben on potentiality and beyond

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Abstract

Undoubtedly, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has produced over the years a highly original and influential philosophy. At heart of it, the concept of potentiality rigorously grounds and articulates his reflections on the numerous themes of enquiry to which he dedicated his work for the last four decades. Be it through his inspired and innovative interpretation of Aristotle, his meticulous reading of Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin, or his brilliant revisiting of the seminal productions of Guy Debord, Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot, Agamben has managed to build a remarkably pertinent and convincing demonstration of the importance of the notion of potentiality. Beyond the sphere of ontological and modal considerations to which the concept pertains, he contends that the question of potentiality matters in virtually each and every domain of human activity. Essentially, Agamben's thesis proclaims the necessity of a complete revaluation of the question of potentiality and offers a foretaste of the benefits we should expect from such an enterprise. By transforming the way we perceive humanity and its capabilities, such a revision would allow us to elaborate a novel ethics, oppose diverse forms of negativity and alienation, and give us the possibility to rethink our social lives entirely. By deepening our comprehension of power and sovereignty, a new potentiality-based ontology would radically transform the political principles on which our societies are based. In philosophy as in the arts, the profound modification of our relation to language implied by a new conception of potentiality would open the door to new modes of expression and creation. Such is Agamben's ambition and such is the task he ascribes to the philosophy to come.

Introduction

By elaborating an extremely complex, yet elegant and subtle interweaving of linguistic analysis, historical research and genealogical enquiry, Giorgio Agamben has unquestionably produced one of the most astonishing pieces of philosophical scholarship of our present time.

Among the many concepts analysed and developed by Agamben throughout his numerous books and articles published during the last decades, the most essential concept is arguably that of potentiality.

As we shall see, this central notion plays a major role in Agamben's understanding of the entire history of Western philosophy, and in particular of its metaphysics which has traditionally regarded potentiality as subordinated to actuality. Furthermore, Agamben considers that the radical transformations required for the overcoming of the negativity he sees at work in our modern societies can only be achieved through a complete revision of the dominant ontological principles. Only at that cost will it be possible to free humanity from its alienating presuppositions and bring about the flourishing of truly open and inclusive communities.

Starting from these general observations, the aim of the present work will be three-fold. While the primary goal will consist in demonstrating the validity of the aforementioned thesis regarding the importance and centrality of the theme of potentiality in Agamben's thought, the secondary purpose will be to expose and analyse the interconnections through which the concept of potentiality relates to the key notions of each and every major field of enquiry explored by Agamben. The third goal will consist in understanding the way and significance of the contribution that a thorough reassessment of the concept of potentiality could play in achieving the philosophical, anthropological, and social transformations hoped for by Agamben.

Impressively enough, rather than focusing on a few topics or restraining his research to a strictly delimited scope, Agamben deliberately and methodically included in his work an extremely vast array of investigations, that comprises areas of reflection as diverse as metaphysics, ontology and ethics, while neither neglecting anthropology, sociology and politics, nor leaving aside literature and poetry.

Because of this extreme variety of interests and the peculiarities of Agamben's ways of dealing with the most challenging philosophical issues, any project aiming at the exposition and analysis of

the role and importance of a notion as subtle and elusive as that of potentiality may soon reveal itself to be a truly daunting task.

A first difficulty arises at the moment of choosing a suitable way to enter into this vast, dense, intricate, and often obscure conceptual forest. A second one is faced when one has to determine and secure the coherent and trustworthy succession of steps required to reach an otherwise unattainable conclusion. Finally, there is, during this sinuous but hopefully controlled digression, a significant risk of losing sight of the fundamental coherence that underlies Agamben's reflection on the topic.

Fortunately, Agamben's frequent recourse to what Giles Deleuze would have called a '*personnage conceptuel*', in the form of Bartleby, — a character of Herman Melville's eponym novel, *Bartleby, the Scrivener* — offers to his readers and interpreters an archetypal model that completely embodies the concept of potentiality and manifests it in its vertiginous and inspiring deepness. The assessment of what Agamben perceives through his analysis of this fictional character will therefore constitute a precious asset in the evaluation of his approach of potentiality. For, not only does Bartleby exhibit the totality of what Agamben regards as constituting potentiality, he also exemplifies the way by which the transformation of our understanding of potentiality may radically modify both our social and political interactions.

As we shall observe, this possibility of change offered by such a conceptual work on the nature of potentiality is echoed in every single theme of Agamben's philosophical production. This radical reassessment could allow, for instance, the overcoming of the classical western metaphysics in which Being is primarily thought of in terms of actuality. In turn, this new conquest would offer the conditions through which it would become possible to rethink the human condition and to neutralise the negativity and nihilism that, according to Agamben, plague humanity and hold it captive of its presuppositions.

Along with its conditions of possibility, the nature of the impact that Agamben expects from a radical change in the way we consider potentiality will be closely examined in the following chapters. But first, since the concept of potentiality pertains, by virtue of its modal nature, to the domain of ontology, it is essential to identify its origin and understand the genealogy of Agamben's metaphysical investigations.

Metaphysics

Aristotle

Among the multiple sources of reflection on the notion of potentiality offered by Aristotle to Agamben, the analysis of the problem of sensation presented in the *De Anima* is particularly striking.

The difficulty Aristotle deals with in his analysis of sensation is that, given the fact that the soul's senses contain in themselves natural elements such as water, earth, or fire, one would expect them to produce sensations even in absence of any additional factor or external trigger. Yet, this is clearly not the case. In the absence of a proper environmental stimulation, the senses are by themselves incapable of producing any sensation.

According to Aristotle, the reason behind this apparent contradiction is that the faculty of sensation (*aisthēsis*) exists only as potentiality, not as actuality (*ouk estin en energeiai, alla dunamei monon*).¹ Consequently, if a sense organ would by itself be capable of producing a sensation, it would no longer be capable of perceiving anything other than itself.

Yet, Agamben judiciously remarks² that all the Greek words ending in *-sis* are referring to activities, including the word used by Aristotle for sensation (*aisthēsis*). Accordingly, Agamben concludes that instead of describing sensations as *aisthēsis*, like Aristotle did, it may be more appropriate to describe them as *anaisthēsis*, for, instead of referring to something the soul has, we are actually considering something the soul has not. When discussing the faculty of sensation in the Aristotelian framework, we are in fact not dealing with something present in the soul, but with a lack or privation (*sterēsis*).

In other words, to be capable of sensation, the sense faculties need to be capable of their own incapacity. And this is not only true with regards to the senses but concerns anything that carries in itself one form or another of potentiality. This relation to something's own incapacity constitutes for Agamben the very essence of potentiality. As he puts it:

¹ Aristotle, *De anima*, 417 a 2-5.

² Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities, Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. and ed. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 178.

[P]otentiality, maintains itself in relation to its own privation, its own *sterēsis*, its own non-Being. . . . To be potential means: to be one's own lack, *to be in relation to one's own incapacity*.³

The relation Agamben perceives between this privation (*sterēsis*) and non-being is also that which he understands as forming the essential problem that Aristotle attempted to tackle through his analysis of potentiality.

Evoking the idea of privation (*sterēsis*), Aristotle declares in his *Physics*⁴ that it is like a form (*eidos*). So, it can be said that, what his entire reflection on the question of potentiality is really about, is in fact the discovery of the very structure of this form, liberated, so to speak, from the indiscriminate chaos that separates being from non-being.

The position of Aristotle with regards to the relation that links the actual and the potential is presented in Book Theta of the *Metaphysics*. The context is that of an argument directed against the Megarians who held a position radically different from that of Aristotle.

For the Megarians, potentiality only exists when it has passed into actuality. From their point of view, a musician can only be said to have the capacity of playing music while actually playing music. According to their theory, since the existence of potentiality is entirely dependent on that of actuality, there is no possibility to think the former independently of the latter.

Against the Megarians, Aristotle maintains that in order to be capable of thinking change and potentiality, the potentiality to do or to be something must necessarily and simultaneously entail the potentiality not-to-do or not-to-be something. This potentiality not-to-do or not-to-be something is what Aristotle calls *adynamia*. A concept that Agamben translates by *impotenzialità* (impotentiality).

In *Metaphysics* Theta we read: 'Every potentiality (*dynamis*) is impotentiality (*adynamia*) of the same and with respect to the same' (*tou autou kai kata to auto pasa dynamis adynamiai*).⁵ He confirms this a few lines later, where he states that 'what is potential can both be and not be, for the same is potential both to be and not-to-be' (*to ara dynaton einai endekhetai kai einai kai mē einai*).⁶

³ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁴ Aristotle, *Physics*, 193b 19-20.

⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1046a 32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1050b 10.

Indeed, unless Aristotle is right, by virtue of the Megarian's definition, every potentiality would have always already passed into actuality. This would have rendered potentiality and actuality indistinguishable and we would have had no use of the idea potentiality in the first place. Conversely, every potentiality not-to-be or not-to-do would always remain an absolute impossibility. The conjunction of these two consequences would have necessarily resulted in a perpetually unchanging state of affairs. On the other hand, taking into account both *dynamis* and *adynamia* allows potentiality to 'have its own consistency and not always disappear immediately into actuality'.⁷ This is also the reason why Agamben stresses the fact that of the two modalities that coexist in every potentiality, the most important one for Aristotle is that to which he refers to as *adynamia* or impotentiality, and that he describes precisely as *dynamis mê einai*, namely the capacity not-to-be.⁸

But, how exactly does Aristotle understand the concept of potentiality? In the *Metaphysics*, he defines it as follows:

A thing is said to be potential if, when the act of which it is said to be potential is realized, there will be nothing impotential.⁹

For Agamben, the ordinary interpretation of this definition is quite problematic. Indeed, the usual understanding of Aristotle's definition reduces it to a banal statement according to which, something is deemed potential or possible, if nothing makes it impotential or impossible. On that account, Agamben considers quite correctly that Aristotle would have simply uttered a mere tautology.¹⁰

Agamben believes that another reading is possible. A reading that would go beyond the sheer platitude and reveal something more substantial. The key element of this new interpretation lies in the last three words of Aristotle's definition: *outhen estai adynaton* (there will be nothing impotential).

According to Agamben, Aristotle is telling us much more than the obvious fact that what is possible, is that with respect to which nothing can be said to be impossible. What the formula

⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (Homo Sacer I)*, trans. by Daniel Heller Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 45.

⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. by Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993), p. 35. [Translation modified by Kevin Attell, *The Agamben Dictionary*, ed. by Alex Murray and Jessica Whyte (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 160.]

⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1047a 24-26 (ἔστι δὲ δυνατόν τοῦτο ὃ ἐὰν ὑπάρξῃ ἡ ἐνέργεια οὗ λέγεται ἔχειν τὴν δύναμιν, οὐθὲν ἔσται ἀδύνατον).

¹⁰ Agamben, *Potentialities*. p. 183.

outhen estai adynaton gives us in reality, is not the mere condition of possibility of potentiality, but the condition required for potentiality to realise itself into actuality.

On Agamben's reading, the whole point of Aristotle's definition of potentiality is that:

What is potential can pass over into actuality only at the point at which it sets aside its own potential not to be (its *adynamia*).¹¹

But, how then are we to understand this setting aside of impotentiality (*adynamia*)? And what about potentiality itself? Does the passage from *dynamis* into *energeia* eliminate the former? Agamben's answer to these questions is unambiguous: 'To set im-potentiality aside,' he continues, 'is not to destroy it but, on the contrary, to fulfil it, to turn potentiality back upon itself in order to give itself to itself.'¹²

As Aristotle expresses it through his final formula, once the transition from *dynamis* into *energeia* is completed, 'there will be nothing impotential' (*oudem estai adynaton*). Actuality is therefore to be conceived as the complete realisation of impotentiality or, in other words, as the complete expression of the potential not-to-be or not-to-do.

How is it then that actuality results from the modification of the two modes of potentiality and impotentiality that have been so far subsumed under the category of potentiality?

The following passage of Aristotle's discussion on the nature of suffering in *De Anima* has retained Agamben's attention. In the second book of the treatise,¹³ we read:

To suffer [*paskhein*] is not a simple term. In one sense it is a certain destruction through the opposite principle, and in another sense the preservation [*sōtēria*] of what is in potentiality by what is in actuality and what is similar to it. . . . For he who possesses science [in potentiality] becomes someone who contemplates in actuality, and either this is not an alteration — since here there is the gift of the self to itself and to actuality [*epidosis eis auto*] — or this is an alteration of a different kind.¹⁴

By blurring the distinction between *dynamis* and *energeia*, this passage may render the matter quite harder to understand, but as Daniel Heller-Roazen rightfully noticed in his remarkable introduction to Agamben's *Potentialities*:

¹¹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 46.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹³ Aristotle, *De anima*, 417 b 2-16.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *On the Soul. Parva Naturalia, On Breath*, trans. by W. S. Hett (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 98.

If all potentiality is originally impotentiality, and if actuality is the conservation of potentiality itself, then it follows that actuality is nothing other than a potentiality to the second degree, a potentiality that, in Aristotle's phrase, "is the gift of the self to itself."¹⁵

The description Aristotle gives of potentiality as 'the gift of the self to itself' finds in Agamben's analysis numerous echoes, especially, as we shall see, when it comes to the problem of self-reference, which constitutes a key element in his reflection on the experience of language.

As a matter of fact, Aristotle's point of view is completely endorsed by Agamben who restates the *energeia/dynamis* relation in similar terms. Any transition from potentiality to actuality can only occur if *adunamia*, that is, the potential not-to-be or not-to-do is set aside. Far from implying the destruction of *adunamia*, this setting aside constitutes its complete realisation or fulfilment. In other words, it corresponds exactly to what Aristotle, and Agamben after him, refers to as the gift of the self to itself.¹⁶

The problematic indistinction between potentiality and actuality we faced in Aristotle's passage of *De Anima* can now be restated by Agamben from a purely ontological perspective, as when he writes that 'potentiality and actuality are simply the two faces of the sovereign self-grounding of Being',¹⁷ and that 'at the limit, pure potentiality and pure actuality are indistinguishable.'¹⁸

By restating the passing of potentiality into actuality in the ontological terminology of the *pathē tou ontos*, Agamben broadens the scope of his investigation and allows for a new formulation of the modal categories. Further, he reframes his reflection on Being as such, which, beyond its immediate actuality, reveals itself simultaneously as pure potentiality. The apparent aporia produced by the collapse of *energeia* and *dynamis* into an indistinguishable unity is resolved and re-established in its original intelligibility through the recognition that this transformation and the process of self-preservation of which Being is the locus, are one and the same.

Having followed the tortuous track that lead him from the austere grounds of the Megarians' static actualism to the ever-changing luxuriance of Being, Agamben finally rejoined Heidegger's own fundamental intuition of '*die stille Kraft des Möglichen*' (the quiet power of the possible). In his *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger declared:

¹⁵ Agamben, *Potentialities*, p. 17.

¹⁶ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 46.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

When I speak of “the quiet power of the possible” I do not mean the possible of a merely represented *possibilitas*, nor *potentia* as the *essentia* of an *actus* of *existentia*; rather I mean Being itself [...]¹⁹

The primacy of actuality

One of the essential tasks Agamben ascribes to contemporary philosophy is the overcoming of metaphysics in its traditional form, that is, as a metaphysics that depends on an ontology in which actuality systematically prevails over potentiality.

Several reasons have been given for the primacy of actuality over potentiality and Aristotle himself regarded it as obvious. In his *Metaphysics*,²⁰ he exposed several ways in which this problem may be considered. His first explanation consists in an argument from epistemological priority: a potentiality is recognised through the knowledge of the corresponding actuality. An object, for instance, has to be seen in order for it to be declared potentially visible, otherwise this potentiality would have remained unthinkable. Another reason for Aristotle to accept this primacy is akin to his argument that affirms the necessity of an unmoved prime mover in order to avoid the trap of an infinite regress. This approach considers the priority with respect to time. As he explains it:

[W]hat is actually comes to be, by means of what is actually, for example, man from man, musician by means of musician, in each case something bringing about change first; and what brings about change already is actually.²¹

Curiously enough, on Agamben’s reading, Aristotle’s argument remains ambiguous and the question of the *dynamis/energeia* priority remains undecided. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben contends that,

it is never clear, to a reader freed from the prejudices of tradition, whether Book Theta of the *Metaphysics* in fact gives primacy to actuality or to potentiality.²²

This statement is rather problematic and has been clearly identified as such.²³ Unfortunately, beyond this general affirmation regarding the ambiguity of Aristotle’s argument, Agamben offers no explanation or indication regarding the elements of Aristotle’s reasoning that may render his

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper, 2008), p. 220.

²⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1049b.

²¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics: Book Theta*, trans. by Stephen Makin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), p. 10. (1049b, 25-28).

²² Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 47.

²³ Kevin Attell, ‘Actuality’, in *The Agamben Dictionary*, ed. by Alex Murray and Jessica Whyte (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 18.

explanation ambiguous. Agamben's position seems clearly at odds with the contents of the eighth chapter of the Book Theta, in which Aristotle clearly claims that:

Since it has been determined in how many ways prior is said, it is evident that actuality is prior to potentiality.²⁴

Yet, for Agamben, Aristotle's text allows for a different interpretation:

[a]ccording to Aristotle's thought, potentiality precedes actuality and conditions it, but also seems to remain essentially subordinate to it.²⁵

Indeed, being oriented towards the possibility of thinking a coherent potentiality-based ontology independently of any relation to actuality, Agamben's entire project depends on the feasibility of conceiving potentiality as delivered from 'the prejudices of tradition' that granted the ontological primacy to actuality.

For Agamben, as for Gilles Deleuze who reached similar conclusions, whereas the degree of reality of the possible is ontologically inferior to that of the actual, the reality of the potential — that fundamentally differs from the mere possible and to which it cannot be reduced — exceeds that of actuality in the sense that the latter is the differentiated contraction of the former. And, as correctly noticed by Kevin Attell,²⁶ Agamben's effort to reframe western ontology in terms of potentiality is exactly reflected in his privileging of 'I can'²⁷ over 'What is'.

²⁴ Aristotle, *op. cit.*, p. 10. (1049b, 5).

²⁵ Agamben, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

²⁶ Kevin Attell, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

²⁷ Agamben, *Potentialities*, p. 177.

Language

I speak

If Agamben insists on the paramount necessity of directing our questioning towards the meaning of 'I can', he similarly underlines that the fundamental and unifying preoccupation that underpins his various investigations can be summed up as a recurrent questioning regarding language as such. In his preface to *Infancy and History* he writes:

I have stubbornly pursued only one train of thought: what is the meaning of 'there is language'; what is the meaning of 'I speak'?²⁸

Could it then be the case that the meaning of the expression 'I can' is somehow related to that of the expression 'I speak'? Are Agamben's questions not simply two different ways to formulate a same interrogation? Given the fact that 'I can' (*Io posso*, from the verb *potere*) expresses a potential, a positive answer would imply that the question about the meaning of 'I speak' is also a questioning regarding potentiality (*potenzialità*).

As we shall see, Agamben's interest for what he often refers to as the *factum linguae* — the brute fact that language exists — intersects exactly with his reflection on the human nature, on the possibility of thought, and on the problem of subjectivity. Fundamentally, his philosophical anthropology, largely inspired by the work of Benveniste, rests on the principle that 'it is in and through language that the individual is constituted as a subject'.²⁹ On the matter, Agamben could perfectly well endorse Wittgenstein's statement according to which: 'The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.'³⁰

The Voice and the negative grounding of language

Beyond his purely theoretical, and sometimes quite abstract reflection, it should be kept in mind that Agamben's entire work has always radically been oriented towards the neutralisation of the negativity and the nihilism that he identifies as the more pregnant problem of our modern societies. Considering that the origin of this negativity lies for a good part in the metaphysical and

²⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: Essay on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. by Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 1993), p. 5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, trans. by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London and New York: Routledge, 1974). p. 68 (Proposition 5.6).

anthropological preconceptions that have shaped the social and political aspects of our lives for more than two millennia, Agamben scrutinised the philosophical foundations of our conception of language that may have played a role in this tragic evolution. His investigation led him to identify a recurring pattern at work from earliest antiquity to the present days; a pattern that would progressively and durably shape our conception of language, along with that of our human nature on which it depends.

This unfortunate tendency identified by Agamben and which permeates the entire history of the European thought consists in the grounding of language in negativity. By ascribing it to an ineffable, unspeakable, and silent source, language remains conceived as bound to the negativity of an ever-inexpressible origin. In *Language and Death*, Agamben illustrates this persistent negativity at work in Western philosophical tradition from Aristotle to Wittgenstein, through the analysing of key elements in the thought of Hegel and Heidegger, who both maintain a split within language.

In the first chapter of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the negativity is revealed by the demonstrative pronoun '*Diese*' (this) which, through its failure to refer to any sensuous object of experience, inadvertently indicates the universal as the very meaning that cannot be expressed but remains silent. The 'ineffable sentiment' evoked by Hegel, in a poem inspired by the Eleusinian mystery and dedicated to Hölderlin, illustrates precisely this linguistic phenomenon through which 'all speech speaks the ineffable'.³¹

As for Hegel, Agamben sees the source of negativity in Heidegger as directly related to a single word: the adverb '*Da*' (there). On his reading, the negativity is manifested in Heidegger's *Being and Time* by the mute foundation of the *Dasein* and by its characterisation as being-toward-death. Indeed, according to Heidegger's definition of *Dasein*, which is often translated as 'Being-there', death is revealed to humanity as constituting simultaneously its fundamental dwelling place and its most authentic possibility.

Of course, the human species recognises itself and distinguishes itself from other animals through its ability to speak (*zoon logon echón*), but the negation and suppression of the human voice in speech deprives it of any positive content and relegates it to nothingness. And indeed, if the human being has been defined by its capacity to speak, it has also been characterised by its awareness of death. The properly human, that is, that which separates nature from culture, has then been defined

³¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. by Karen E. Pinkus with Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1991), p. 14. Quoting Nicholas of Cusa : « Omnis locutio ineffabile fatur ».

in the negativity of silence and death, and the human community has found its negative foundation in the ritualisation of a symbolic sacrifice meant to cure humanity from the essential ungroundedness that results from these negative presuppositions. Through this sacrifice, life has been made ‘sacred’, a highly important notion for Agamben that will be closely examined later on.

In the face of such a radical negativity, Agamben’s entire philosophy can be regarded as a desperate attempt to prove wrong the grounds on which Heidegger concluded that ‘The essential relation between death and language flashes up before us, but remains still unthought.’³²

To designate the negative ground from which every utterance emerges, Agamben uses the concept of Voice. By capitalising the term, he distinguishes its ontological acceptance from the ordinary sense of the voice as sound – a strategy that reminds that of Heidegger’s well-known distinction between the ontological ‘Being’ and ‘being’ in the ontic sense. The Voice, as the negative articulation (*arthron*) between the mere sound of the animal *phoné* and human *logos*, is the indeterminate gap that separates that which is no longer a voice from that which is not yet meaning.

The ultimate consequence of this damaging negativity is the generalised nihilism that, according to Agamben, plagues our time and civilisation. But this is not a fatality, for another way of conceiving our relation to language is possible. About this alternative, Agamben tells us that ‘with the disappearance of the Voice, the “essential relation” between language and death that dominates the history of metaphysics must also disappear.’³³ Rather than being preceded by an unspeakable origin, every utterance implies in reality a positive ground, a *factum linguae* or *factum loquendi* manifested in all speech.

During his exile in Paris, the Romanian-born poet Paul Celan wrote that ‘*La poésie ne s'impose plus, elle s'expose*’ (Poetry no longer imposes itself; it exposes itself)³⁴ and it can be said that Agamben ascribes to philosophy a similar task, that of exposing the *factum linguae*, the pure event of language, freed from any presupposition.

³² “Das Wesensverhältnis zwischen Tod und Sprache blitzt auf, ist aber noch ungedacht.” Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1959), p. 215), quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. by Karen E. Pinkus with Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1991), p. xi.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

³⁴ Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. by Beda Allemann and Stefan Reichard with Rolf Bücher (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983), Vol. 3, p. 181.

Deixis and Platonic Idea

In addition to the role played by Heidegger and Hegel in his investigation of negativity and nihilism, especially because of the scission in language they maintain — the discussion of which constitutes the larger part of *Language and Death* —, Agamben's analysis of their use of 'Da' and 'Diese' respectively, allows him to tackle the aporia of self-reference and revisit the Platonic question of the thing itself.

As explained by Benveniste, pronouns work as virtual signs whose significance depends entirely on specific instances of discourse. Similarly, the meaning of what Roman Jakobson describes as 'shifters', such as 'there' or 'now', is relative to the context in which they are uttered. This linguistic phenomenon by which an element of discourse (*shifter*) refers to discourse itself is thematised by Agamben as *deixis*. This linguistic fact is of highest importance as it forms, for Agamben, the suture between language and Being, that is, precisely where the question of reference becomes problematic. By putting in a joint perspective, the problem of reference and the notion of *deixis*, Agamben reconceptualises the former as a purely intra-linguistic phenomenon depending directly on the actualisation of language in the form of *deixis*.

Agamben's understanding of the Platonic Idea relies on a similar approach. When referring to the Idea (*eidos*) of something, Plato simply uses an expression involving the anaphora *auto* (itself). For instance, the Idea of Good is referred to as *auto to agathon* (the Good Itself). So, this auto-reference from a term to itself seems sufficient for Plato to designate the Idea of that which is evoked in a discourse. This is possible, according to Agamben, only because the thing itself is nothing other than the manifestation of the potentiality of language in its taking place. The surprising conclusion that may be drawn from this interpretation is that, while transcending language, the thing itself is only possible in language and is, so to speak, the thing of language.

From a metaphysical point of view, the event constituted by the taking place of language can be regarded as its ontological mode of being, whereas the signifying and the signified contents of the corresponding discourse constitute its ontic modality. That is why Agamben does not hesitate to express this relation in terms of a radical transcendence of the taking place of language as an event with regards to its idiosyncratic manifestation, or, as he puts it, in terms borrowed from Saussure, as the transcendence of *langue* with respect to *parole*.

While Agamben's capacity to establish sophisticated analogies often permits him to bring forward under-investigated questions or well-known issues presented under a new light, it nonetheless

sometimes leaves his reader under the impression of a ‘conceptual slippage’, as legitimately noted by Catherine Mills³⁵ regarding the parallels drawn by Agamben on this rather abstract topic in which he conflates linguistic and metaphysical considerations. Yet, it may be argued that if this risk is inherent to Agamben’s method, which he describes as both archaeological and genealogical, what may appear at one point as a tension resulting from an unwarranted statement or conclusion, finds itself often resolved, or rather, dissolved, in the fundamental unicity of his overarching vision, which, as we shall see, is arguably the case with his treatment of the transcendence of language with regards to subjectivity.

Infancy, transcendental subject, and experimentum linguae

Agamben’s survey on the evolution of the conception of subjectivity since Descartes’s *cogito* and his analysis of the implications of Husserl’s statement according to which ‘we have no names’³⁶ to describe our internal experience of time, lead him to introduce the notion of infancy, the concept of which is for a good part inspired by Hölderlin’s *ursprüngliche Kindheit*³⁷ and which constitutes an important topic not only in *Infancy and History* but also in other writings such as *Language and Death* and *Idea of Prose*.

Rather than referring solely to the child’s inability to speak, the term infancy (often spelled in-fancy to mark the difference) denotes a condition of experience deprived of language. Because the normal acquisition of language requires a continuous and intense exposition to speech during childhood, Agamben reverses the commonly accepted conception of man:

Contrary to ancient traditional beliefs, from this point of view man is not the ‘animal possessing language’, but instead the animal deprived of language and obliged, therefore, to receive it from outside himself.³⁸

As for animals, not only are they not denied language, they absolutely dwell in language in the sense that their communication occurs immediately, that is, without any recourse to the sign nor leaving any gap between the semiotic and the semantic. They express what Mallarmé called ‘*la voix sacrée de la terre ingénue*’³⁹ (the sacred voice of the unknowing earth). A voice which, contrary to the human one, remains ‘*une and non-décomposée*’⁴⁰ (one and indivisible). The mediation and

³⁵ Catherine Mills, *The Philosophy of Giorgio Agamben* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008), p. 16.

³⁶ Agamben, *Infancy and History*, p. 37.

³⁷ Originary infancy.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

separation that takes place within human languages lead Agamben to refer to Wittgenstein's well-known image according to which 'man exists in language like a fly trapped in a bottle: that which it cannot see is precisely that through which it sees the world.'⁴¹

Agamben's attempt to understand this relation between the experience and its expression, as illustrated by the Cartesian *ego cogito* as *pronuntiatum* (grounding) and by Dilthey's *Erlebnis* (lived experience) as *innere Erfahrung* (inner experience), brought him to ask the following question:

[D]oes a mute experience exist, does an infancy [in-fancy] of experience exist?
And, if it does, what is its relationship to language?⁴²

The relevance of this interrogation is double. First, it reframes as a question of language the central problem of *Infancy and History* as announced by its subtitle: *Essays on The Destruction of Experience*. Second, it allows Agamben to restate the issue of subjective experience in a similar direction. On the conditions that prevented the correct understanding of the status of transcendental subject, we read:

It is Kant's basing the problem of knowledge on a mathematical model that prevented him, as it did Husserl, from discerning the original place of transcendental subjectivity within language and therefore from clearly tracing the boundaries separating the transcendental and the linguistic.⁴³

Endorsing on the one hand Benveniste's reflections on the relation between language and subjectivity, based on his study of pronouns, and on the other hand Hamann's critique of the transcendental subject, Agamben reaches a radically counter-intuitive conclusion. As per his understanding, the roots of subjectivity lie not in the direct experience of being a sort of ineffable psychic substance but rather in the linguistic I that emerges from the speaker's own ability to present him or herself as a singularity manifested in the transcending dimension of ordinary discourse.⁴⁴

For Agamben, language is therefore not only the medium through which something like a human community becomes possible, it is first and foremost the dwelling place of the subject. As he tells us in *Remnants of Auschwitz*:

⁴¹ Giorgio Agamben, 'Un'idea di Giorgio Agamben', *Reporter*, ed. by Adriano Sofri (November 9-10, 1985) pp. 32-33, p. 33.

⁴² Agamben, *Infancy and History*, p. 37.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

Subjectivity and consciousness, in which our culture believed itself to have found its firmest foundation, rest on what is most precarious and fragile in the world: the event of speech.⁴⁵

Obviously, the implications of the concept of infancy go much further than the mere problem of language acquisition. As Agamben declares: ‘only if man is not the animal with logos, the animal that knows to speak, but the infant animal . . . is it possible to enter into a region in which, perhaps for the first time, an overcoming of metaphysics becomes possible.’⁴⁶

The actual bearing of the concept of infancy gets clearer once it becomes obvious that it designates nothing but potentiality itself, the concept of which will progressively replace that of infancy in his ulterior works.

Having both established infancy as a mute condition of experience and identified the transcendental subject as a subject whose experience is constituted in language, Agamben is able to characterise this *experimentum linguae* as an experience of the pure potentiality of language itself (*la lingua stessa*).

As he insists in *Infancy and History*, the *experimentum linguae* is never an experience of this or that particular element of language. Instead, Agamben tells us that ‘it concerns not a state but rather an event of language.’⁴⁷ It is the experience of ‘the pure fact that one speaks, that language exists’ (*del puro fatto che si parli, che vi sia linguaggio*).⁴⁸

Evoking the *experimentum linguae* and contrasting it with Jacques Derrida’s work of deconstructive hermeneutics, Agamben declares that it does not ‘authorize an interpretive practice directed toward the infinite deconstruction of a text, nor does it inaugurate a new formalism. Rather, it marks the decisive event of matter, and in doing so it opens onto an ethics.’⁴⁹

As we shall see, the exact nature of this opening to an ethics and its concrete articulation with the *experimentum linguae* is essentially manifested in Agamben’s reflection on the theme of

⁴⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive (Homo Sacer III)*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone, 2002), p. 122.

⁴⁶ Giorgio Agamben, ‘La parola e il sapere’, *Aut-aut*, 179–80, (September–December 1980), pp. 155–66. Quoted in Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben, A Critical Introduction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 91.

⁴⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2000), p. 115.6.

⁴⁸ Agamben, *Infancy and History*, pp. 4–5.

⁴⁹ Agamben, *Potentialities*, pp. 218–19.

Eigentlichkeit/Uneigentlichkeit (the proper and the improper) and in his critique of the alienation from language that characterises what Guy Debord designates as ‘*la société du spectacle*’.

The Idea of Matter and the limits of language

How can we then understand the nature of the experience of *reine Sprache* (pure language) as Benjamin called it? In what exactly consists this experience of the *factum loquendi*, that is, of fact that language exists as pure exteriority (*la pura esteriorita della lingua*)?⁵⁰ The answers to these questions lie in what Agamben refers to as ‘the idea of matter’, which is the first ‘*idea*’ discussed in the *Idea of Prose*. As it is often the case with Agamben’s most fundamental reflections, a return to Aristotle will give us a useful and valuable hint of the direction in which Agamben’s reflection on the idea of matter is leading us.

Indeed, in *De Anima*,⁵¹ Aristotle defines matter in terms of potentiality, and it is exactly in that sense that Agamben conceives it with regards to language. But Agamben will not limit his interpretation to this first relation. Instead, he contends that, if we are entitled to consider that potentiality constitutes the matter of language (*la materia della parola*), we must equally recognise that potentiality is also and more fundamentally, the true matter of our lives. Consequently, as an essential aspect of our most immediate and intimate reality, Agamben sees this matter of language as diametrically opposed to the negative ground presupposed for language. This is precisely why Agamben is keen to mark the contrast between this authentic ground of being and the phantasmatic and damaging presupposition he constantly denounces and opposes. This is also why he insists on this materiality in a quasi literal sense:

Where the language stops is not where the unsayable occurs, but rather where the matter of words begins. Those who have not reached, as in a dream, this woody substance of language, which the ancients called *silva* (wildwood), are prisoners of representations, even when they keep silent.⁵²

If we recall how self-reference in language constitutes the ‘*idea*’ in the Agambenian sense, then the idea of matter appears as the self-grounding of potentiality in which consists the very nature of authentic sovereignty — a theme that will be discussed later on. The matter of language therefore resists and opposes all forms of dis-appropriation and alienation of which the ubiquitous spectacle that characterises our modern societies is the most telling symptom.

⁵⁰ Agamben, *Infancy and History*, p. 6.

⁵¹ Aristotle, *De Anima*, 412A17.

⁵² Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, trans. by Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 37.

As correctly noticed by Leland de la Durantaye,⁵³ Agamben's view regarding the appropriate relation we should entertain with language resembles remarkably the one adopted by Heidegger. This striking similarity appears at the end of Heidegger's essay entitled '*Die Sprache*' (Language), where we read that 'Nothing lies in advancing a new notion of language. Everything lies in learning to dwell in the speaking of language.'⁵⁴

In the same way as for the *experimentum linguae*, the matter of language is also the matter of thought, which is another way of saying that our potentiality to think and our potentiality to speak are one and the same. It is an experiment conducted on the matter or on the potentiality of thought itself (*la materia stessa o la potenza del pensiero*). Its object is our power to think, or to put it in the words of Spinoza, it is an experiment '*de potentia intellectus, seu de libertate humana*' (on the potentiality of the intellect, or human liberty).⁵⁵

Damascius' aporia

In *Idea of Prose*, Agamben illustrates his point by telling us the inspiring story of Damascius, the last head of Plato's Academy. While in exile at the court of Khosrau Nushirvan, King of Persia, where he fled to escape the persecutions of Emperor Justinian, Damascius decided to retire from public affairs and devote his time and energy to the writing of a treatise entitled *Aporias and Solutions Concerning First Principles*.

Having dedicated three hundred days and nights to his project, Damascius finally reached a problem he could not overcome. Apparently, all these tireless efforts and privations had been done in vain. This final aporia led to him to despair. Hopelessly, he reconsidered one last time the first principles he tried so hard to discover, and wrote in his manuscript:

It is so unknowable that it doesn't even have the nature of being unknowable, and it is not by declaring it unknowable that we can delude ourselves that we know it since we do not even know whether it is unknowable.⁵⁶

⁵³ Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben, A Critical Introduction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009) p. 137.

⁵⁴ "Nichts liegt daran, eine neue Ansicht über die Sprache vorzutragen. Alles beruht darin, das Wohnen im Sprechen der Sprache zu lernen". Martin Heidegger, '*Die Sprache*', in *Gesamtausgabe, Band 12: Unterwegs zur Sprache (1950–1959)*, ed. by F.-W. von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985), pp. 7-30, p. 30.

⁵⁵ Title of the fifth part of Spinoza's *Ethics*. Agamben, *Means Without End*, p. 115.6.

⁵⁶ Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, p. 37.

Suddenly, having lifted his hand away, looking down at his writing tablet, Damascius recalled a passage of Aristotle's treatise *On the Soul* in which a tablet, similar to his own, but on which nothing had been written yet, was compared to the mind's capacity to think. How can we conceive the potentiality of the intellect, asked Aristotle, independently of any actuality of thought?

As Agamben remarks, the ultimate limit that thought can attain is neither a being nor a thing, but its own fundamental potentiality. This supreme frontier of thought is that of 'the pure potentiality of representation itself.'⁵⁷ With the understanding that the first principles he was looking for are none other than the matter of thought itself, its pure potentiality, Damascius realised that what he regarded as an *aporia* concealed in reality the *euporia* he was desperately looking for.⁵⁸

This *euporia*, or resolution, consists in the acknowledgment that the expected revelation regarding ultimate truths can never be received as an object, a message, or any particular thing, for it would immediately become a thing amongst the many other things of the world. Instead, a true unveiling must consist in a revelation of openness and possibilities, a revealing of the inherent potentiality of language and thought. On that very moment, when he looked down at his tablet, Damascius actually read what Benjamin calls 'the book of life'⁵⁹, or to put it in the words of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, he became suddenly capable of 'reading what was never written' and through this novel manner of reading, he experienced the substance of thought, its authentic matter as pure potentiality.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁵⁸ de la Durantaye, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

⁵⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, ed. by P. Demetz (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 89.

Anthropology

The work of Man

As we have seen, Agamben's investigations on what makes us human and on the nature of our subjective experience are articulated around Aristotle's definition of the human being as a being of language (*zōon logon echón*). These reflections lead him to consider language as the proper ethos of humanity, its authentic dwelling place. But Aristotle's influence on Agamben's philosophical anthropology is not limited to this definition. Aristotle's considerations regarding the possibility of defining beings through the investigation of the good (*tagathon*) and the well (*to eu*) with respect to their proper activity (*praxis*) or work (*ergon*), provided Agamben with an additional basis for developing his approach of the relation between the anthropological question and that of potentiality.

The idea Agamben perceives behind Aristotle's approach, as exposed in *The Nicomachean Ethics*,⁶⁰ is that the specific potentiality of a being can be identified by its proper activity or work (*ergon*). As we saw, this idea also serves as an argument for the primacy of actuality over potentiality. A mason, for instance, is defined by the activity of building walls, a musician, by playing music, etc. In an essay entitled *The Work of Man*,⁶¹ Agamben indicates that, in all likelihood, Aristotle used the word *ergon* (work), and the derived adjective *energos* (working, active), to coin the term *energeia* as the counterpart to *dynamis*.

This reflection on *ergon* becomes even more interesting for Agamben when it addresses, not the human being as a specific person, but *qua* human being as such, that is, when we ask ourselves what is the work of man (*to ergon tou anthropou*).

Regarding the importance of matter, Agamben declares:

The question concerning the work or absence of work of man therefore has a decisive strategic importance, for on it depends the possibility not only of assigning him a proper nature and essence, but also, as we have seen, of defining his happiness and his politics.⁶²

⁶⁰ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b, 22ff.

⁶¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Sovereignty and Life*, ed. by Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 1-10, p. 1.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Confronted to the impossibility of identifying the proper work (*ergon*) of man as man, the human being seems endowed, not with any specific aptitude for this or that *praxis* or *tekhne*, but with a generic capacity that characterises it as a being of pure potentiality (*energeia*).

In the same way that Agamben perceives the importance of understanding Aristotle's definition of potentiality as implying impotentiality, he notices the profound significance of Aristotle's use of the term '*argia*' to characterise the fundamental inoperativity or inactivity of man as the only conceivable work of man. As for the impotentiality, this inoperativity (*inoperosità*) does not designate any form of passivity or incapacity, but the possibility for a *dynamis* not to pass into a specific *energeia* or *ergon*. As we read in *The Coming Community*:

Only a power that is capable of both power and impotence, then, is the supreme power. If every power is equally the power to be and the power to not-be, the passage to action can only come about by transporting (Aristotle says "saving") in the act its own power to not-be.⁶³

Usually translated as inoperativity or inoperativeness, Agamben's notion of *inoperosità* indicates the distinctive capacity not-to-do or not-to-be of man, considered independently of any specific actualisation. As stated in *Homo Sacer*, it is a non-specific mode of potentiality which is not consumed by the '*transitus de potentia ad actum*' (the passage from potentiality to actuality).⁶⁴

From the perspective of man's essential (im)potentiality, every action follows not solely from the simple actualisation of a capacity but results from an act (*ergon*) of impotentiality (*adynamia*)⁶⁵ as well. Man's inoperativity therefore consists in 'a working that in every act realizes its own shabbat and in every work is capable of exposing its own inactivity and its own potentiality.'⁶⁶

The idea of inoperativity takes multiple forms in Agamben's work and each of these forms expresses the relation that links it to a particular source of inspiration and reflection. On occasions, Agamben uses the term *shabbat* as a direct reference to Kojève's '*shabbat de l'homme*' (the shabbat of man). More frequently, he favours the french word '*désœuvrement*', in direct reference to Raymond Queneau's '*voyou désœuvré*' (lazy rascal), but maybe more specifically inspired by Georges Bataille. The *désœuvrement* is also a way for Agamben to further the debate on the questions of inclusion and violence that started in 1983 by the publication of an essay by Jean-Luc

⁶³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. by Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1993), p. 36.

⁶⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 62.

⁶⁵ Agamben, *Potentialities*, p. 183.

⁶⁶ Agamben, *Sovereignty and Life*, p. 10.

Nancy entitled *La Communauté désœuvrée* (The Inoperative Community), and by Maurice Blanchot's response, published the same year under the title *La Communauté inavouable* (The Unavowable Community). Inoperativity is undoubtedly and above all a political matter that has to be investigated as such. Endorsing Dante's conclusions drawn from the reading of Aristotle and Averroes on the articulation of the logos (*intellectus*) and the community (*multitudo*), Agamben identifies precisely in this worklessness of mankind the essential nature of the political fact.⁶⁷

What is important to keep in mind concerning the development of Agamben's reflection on the inoperativeness of man around these numerous philosophical and literary references, is that he never loses from sight the essential link initially established by Aristotle between the question regarding the work of man and that which addresses the good life. Undeniably, Agamben takes great care to maintain this preoccupation for the *eudemonia*, the happy life, at the centre of his political reflection.

The Human animal and the anthropological machine

Instead of grounding human subjectivity in a mental or psychological substance, we have seen that Agamben understands it in terms of language and (im)potentiality. Accordingly, his idea of what constitutes a happy life finds its expression relatively to the same categories that will either grant the subject's autonomy and its integration into the world, or its alienation from itself and its environment.

The mechanism by which this constant estrangement takes place is designated by Agamben as the '*anthropological machine*'. Its quasi permanent functioning produces a split or rupture of the fundamental unity of the world. It isolates the human from its own animality, separates nature from culture, and promotes countless forms of exploitations and devastations. Only by suspending the functioning of the anthropological machine, can we bring about the flourishing of what Agamben calls a form-of-life.

Such possibility of stopping this recurrent and disastrous alienation is illustrated by Heidegger's discussion on 'the clearing'. Inspired by Rilke's eighth *Duino Elegy*, this possibility of openness expresses exactly for Heidegger the ontological state in which the fundamental co-belonging of the World and Being is experienced. This authentic experience of unity with the world is also manifested in the phenomenon of boredom and the kind of suspension it produces and which

⁶⁷ Agamben, *Means Without Ends*, p. 140.

Heidegger compares to the state of stupefaction experienced by the animal in the open.⁶⁸ For Agamben too, boredom offers an interesting opportunity to understand our relation with potentiality. Inasmuch as it brings to our awareness not solely the capacity to act, but the vertigo of the pure potentiality not-to-act, Agamben regards the experience of boredom as a terrible ordeal.

Only when the essential unity of Being and the World is recovered and the frontier between the animal and the human is dissolved, can we consider that the anthropological machine has been effectively neutralised.⁶⁹

Vocation

A different angle of approach adopted by Agamben through his anthropological and ethical investigation requires to formulate the problem of human nature in terms of vocation, or lack thereof. Along with the concepts of the open, infancy, work of man and form-of-life, the notion of vocation contributes to Agamben's critique of nihilism and to his attempt to overcome it. For the same reason that there is no such thing as a work of man, no particular vocation is ascribable to man as such. This idea of a lack of vocation, and the radical freedom it implies, is specifically discussed throughout the study of artistic productions such as Dürer's *Melancholia I*, Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* and Titian's *The Nymph and the Shepherd*.

Beyond the characterisation of human beings as beings without vocation, Agamben regards this absence as a necessary condition for ethics. As he declares 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.⁷⁰

The lack of vocation is also intimately related to the notion of infancy. As exposed in *The Idea of Prose*, infancy, like the absence of a predetermined calling, makes it possible to preserve a free opening to the world by offering the required resistance against all alienating injunctions regarding predetermined actualisations. Agamben illustrates this point by describing the axolotl's neoteny⁷¹ that allows him to remain in an indeterminate state by postponing any otherwise irreversible

⁶⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans by André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992). p. 152.

⁶⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. by Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 79.

⁷⁰ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 43.

⁷¹ Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, p. 95.

actualisation. The rejection of all vocation is also manifested in Agamben's analysis of the theological meaning and implications of the concept, in particular in the form of the Paulinian notion of *kletos* (calling). Here Agamben defines the possibility of a *messianic vocation* that would precisely consist in the abrogation of all vocations.

As we can see, the reflection on the absence of vocation offers to Agamben an additional way to show the essential (im)potentiality that dwells in every human life and to expose how essential it is to preserve its free use from any social, economic or political appropriation or exclusion.

Biopolitics

What we set out to learn was in fact nothing less than why mankind, instead of at last entering into a truly human state, is sinking into a new form of barbarity.⁷²

Theodor W. Adorno

Arendt, Foucault and the roots of bio-power

Agamben's political thought can be described as revolving essentially around the four main concepts of sovereignty, state of exception, bare life and *homo sacer*. It can also be said that four major political thinkers have played an essential role in the development of Agamben's reflections on the European political history and on the contemporary political state. These four influential thinkers are Hannah Arendt, Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault.

Published in 1976, Foucault's *History of Sexuality* is certainly the most important reference regarding Agamben's later works in which the concept of biopolitics has become the main point of convergence. Beyond Agamben's criticism of Foucault and Arendt, it clearly appears that one of his first objectives is to further their work by correcting what he identified as erroneous and complementing what he regarded as lacking in both approaches. Firstly, Agamben tries to bring together, in a global perspective, that which appears to him as two surprisingly disconnected fields of investigation in the works of Arendt, namely, her reflection on the biological life, as exposed in *The Human Condition*, and her analysis of totalitarian power.⁷³ Secondly, Agamben offers a reading of Western political history that refutes Foucault's identification of the biopolitical fact as characteristic of modern societies. Against Foucault, Agamben argues that modern politics is not defined by a gradual transformation of our political environment into a disciplinary society, but rather, following Carl Schmitt, by the ever more systematic recourse to the state of exception. Finally, Agamben's effort tends to offer a complement to that which he identifies as a conspicuous

⁷² Diese Beschäftigung bleibt an die zentrale Fragestellung gebunden, „warum die Menschheit, anstatt in einen wahrhaft menschlichen Zustand einzutreten, in eine neue Art von Barbarei versinkt“. Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1989), p. 7.

⁷³ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, pp. 3-4.

absence in the thought of Foucault, that is, his failure to take into account the importance of the concentration camp as the key paradigm of modern biopolitics.⁷⁴

Bare life

The thesis according to which we should regard the camp as ‘the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West’⁷⁵ is certainly the most controversial and misunderstood claim of Agamben’s political thinking. Beyond its historical dimension, the camp has to be construed ‘as the hidden matrix and *nomos* of the political space in which we still live.’⁷⁶ It circumscribes a space in which the political power takes the unmediated biological life as its primary object.

La nuda vida (bare life), is Agamben’s Italian rendition of Walter Benjamin’s concept of *bloße Leben* that we find in both his *Critique of Violence* and *Destiny and Character*. As the central topic of *Homo Sacer*,⁷⁷ the concept of bare life integrates, in Agamben’s thinking, a series of considerations that gravitates around the distinction made by the ancient Greeks between *zoē* and *bios*. Essentially, the bare life denotes the human life reduced to its purely biological dimension. In the words of Geulen,

Naked or bare (and bared) life is not a prior substance, but instead what remains after the withdrawal of all forms.⁷⁸

As illustrated by Aristotle’s use of the term in *De Anima*, *zoē* designates, without any further distinction between animal or human, the simple fact of being alive. As such, it constitutes a general, undifferentiated category, akin to that of being, and is used consequently in the singular form only. In contrast, the word *bios* refers to any specific manner or way of life, as expressed in any individual. The relevance of this distinction for our understanding of the concept of bare life lies in the fact that within the Greek political framework, the sphere of the *zoē* was an exclusively domestic matter. In other words, every action or decision involving the purely biological aspect of life had to be decided at the level of the *oikos* (home). On the other hand, everything that had to do with the *bios*, that is, any individual peculiarities such as character traits, habits or tendencies, was regarded as the legitimate concern of the *polis* (city).

⁷⁴ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 6.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁷⁶ Agamben, *Means Without Ends*, p. 37.

⁷⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 8.

⁷⁸ Eva Geulen, *Giorgio Agamben zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2005), p. 82.

Homo sacer

In the works of Agamben, *homo sacer* refers to both the title of his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, first published in Italy in 1995, and to the series of nine volumes⁷⁹ that form the main project on which Agamben worked for almost twenty years.

The category of *homo sacer*, or sacred man, finds its meaning in the Roman Law which so defines an individual who, having perpetrated a crime, is deprived of all his rights and juridical protections. Even though such an individual should not be put to death, whoever kills a *homo sacer* does not commit a crime. Furthermore, the *homo sacer* cannot be sacrificed to the gods. As we read in Agamben's citation⁸⁰ of Festus' *De verborum significatione*:

The sacred man is the one whom the people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide.⁸¹

In virtue of a principle according to which, whoever violates the law is declared 'sacred',⁸² the condemned individual is removed from the domain of profane law and put under the authority of the divine law. In other words, this individual life is 'sacrificed'. Yet, at the same time, this individual is made improper to any religious sacrifice (*immolatio*). Consequently, the execution of this ruling results in the exclusion of the condemned individual from both the legal and divine domains.

What is particularly noteworthy about this rule of law is that it clearly reveals the amphiboly of the notion of sacredness. This dual aspect is indeed embedded in the Latin word *sacer* which, in its positive sense, designates something offered or reserved to the gods, hence something grand and honourable, whereas in its negative use, its meaning is equivalent to that of vile, ignominious or contemptible.

From a social point of view, the *homo sacer* is stripped from its *bios*. Everything that initially defined the particular individual as a member of a community or a city (*polis*) has been denied and all that is left is a pure, depersonalised *zoē*, a mere bare life. This illustrates why Agamben, contra

⁷⁹ Please refer to the bibliography for the titles of the nine books that compose the *Homo Sacer* project.

⁸⁰ Agamben, *Potentialities*, p. 136.

⁸¹ "At homo sacer is est, quem populus iudicavit ob maleficium ; neque fas est eum immolari, sed, qui occidit, parricidi non damnatur [...]" Sextus Pompeius Festus, *De verborum significatione*, ed. by Wallace M. Lindsay (Stuttgart-Lipsia: B.G. Teubner, 1997), p. 424.

⁸² "qui legem violavit, sacer esto".

Foucault, identified biopolitics — the process that separates *bios* from *zoē* — not as a modern paradigm but as intrinsically related to the sacrificial foundations on which ancient cultures and civilisations have been established.

Against this sacralisation of life, Agamben opposes a purely profane life that resists all forms of exclusion and violence entailed by a life made sacred. A community that would be truly inclusive and open to all forms of singularities can only be conceived if the distinction between the sacred and the profane is made inoperative. And to grasp the conditions of possibilities of such a community, one has to understand the nature of the relation that links power and potentiality.

State of exception and the paradox of sovereignty

What we are told in *Homo Sacer*, is that the true nature of the connection between power and potentiality is revealed by the way constituting power relates to constituted power. Political thinkers, such as Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau have tried to solve this conundrum that lies at the core of any serious reflection regarding the foundation of the modern nation state. The difficulty arises as soon as one tries to precisely identify the moment of transition and offer a clear and satisfactory justification and legitimisation of the process by which this transition has been conducted.

In Agamben's case, this subject forms a central part of his reflection on the question of sovereignty, or, more precisely, on the 'paradox of sovereignty', of which the state of exception is the most emblematic expression. But, in what exactly does this paradox consists? To answer this question, we first need to understand how Agamben conceives sovereignty.

In his *Political Theology* (1922), Carl Schmitt characterises the sovereign as the individual who can decree the state of exception (*Ausnahmezustand*).⁸³ This concise definition corresponds exactly to Agamben's way to approach the question of sovereignty. For him too, sovereignty is defined essentially by the capacity to decide on the state of exception (*stato di eccezione*). What then distinguishes the state of exception from the ordinary state of affairs? For Leleand de la Durantaye, it could be defined as 'the point at which the juridical stops and a sovereign unaccountability begins'⁸⁴ or as Judith Butler puts it, as 'a paralegal universe that goes by the name of law'.⁸⁵ As

⁸³ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology, Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. by George Schwab (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. xi.

⁸⁴ de la Durantaye, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

⁸⁵ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004), p. 61.

Agamben remarks, there is a constant tension between law and politics which results from the fact that, while the first is a priori understood as autonomous, the latter conceives itself as a power capable of suspending the juridical order. The state of exception, to which Agamben sometimes refers to as a state of emergency (*stato de emergenza*), is then at the same time a contraction and a suspension, which means that the distinction between the political and the legal order disappears and that the interruption of the law coincides with the infinite extension of the legal sphere. This is why the sovereign can proclaim, as we read in *Homo Sacer*: ‘I, the sovereign who am outside the law, declare that there is nothing outside the law.’⁸⁶ A statement that perfectly illustrates the paradox of sovereignty that contradictorily combines, in a double dynamics, both inclusion and exclusion.

The phenomenon of contraction also corresponds to the decomposition of the link that binds force and law — which ordinarily relates to each other as means to ends — and their final collapse into an ‘anomalous’ singularity; a stage Agamben refers to by way of the hyphenated expression *forza-di-legge* (force-of-law),⁸⁷ likely inspired by the title of Derrida’s book on the foundations of authority: *Force de loi*.⁸⁸ Agamben’s typographic trick⁸⁹ allows him to stress the fact that the state of exception is a situation in which, what remains when the legitimate ‘force of law’ is severed from its legal roots, is precisely this undue *forza-di-legge*.

For Agamben, it would be wrong to consider that the state of exception corresponds to a temporary situation and is therefore a truly exceptional circumstance about which it could be said that the exception confirms the rule. On the contrary, it is here the exception that seems to ground the rule, for the state of exception is in reality ‘the hidden foundation of the law.’⁹⁰ As Carl Schmitt writes in his *Political Theology*, ‘the rule as such lives off the exception alone.’⁹¹ A point of view shared by Benjamin for whom fascism can only be opposed if our vision of history integrates the fact that the rule under which we live is that of the state of exception. Agamben’s conclusion on the matter appears not to differ. Hence, his sad but assured statement that Benjamin’s diagnosis has unfortunately ‘lost none of its relevance.’⁹² For both thinkers, the acknowledgment of the all too ordinariness of the state of exception is the necessary condition for the emergence of a *real state of*

⁸⁶ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 17.

⁸⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception (Homo Sacer II, 1)*, trans. by Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 39.

⁸⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Force de loi. Le « Fondement mystique de l'autorité »* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1994).

⁸⁹ Agamben goes even as far as to criss-cross the word *legge* in *forza-di-legge*.

⁹⁰ Agamben, *Potentialities*, p. 162.

⁹¹ “die Regel lebt überhaupt nur von der Ausnahme”. Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie. Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (Munich-Leipzig: Duncker and Humboldt, 1922), p. 22. For the English translation: Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. by George Schwab (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), p. 15.

⁹² Agamben, *Means Without Ends*, p. 6.

exception (*wirklichen Ausnahmезustands*) that would preserve, between law and power, the open space required for the full expression of human potentiality.

Beyond the strictly political dimension of the destructive dynamics at work between force and law in the state of exception, Agamben perceives a radical separation of potentiality and act that is concomitant with the blurring of *logos* and *praxis* into a single indistinct entity. What he sees in such a situation, dominated by the force-of-law and the violence it necessarily produces, is a sort of fictional, self-replicating, and viciously circular attempt to circumscribe the anomia itself.⁹³

There is no doubt in Agamben's mind that the solution to the issue raised, on the one hand by the relation of constituting to constituted power, and on the other hand by the paradox of sovereignty, will require a thorough criticism of the still dominant actuality-based ontology. This necessity is made manifest by the obvious homology he notices between 'the topology of sovereign power'⁹⁴ on one side, characterised by the contradictory capacity to simultaneously include and exclude itself from the legal sphere, and, on the other side, the structure of potentiality, defined by its seemingly contradictory ability to preserve itself while vanishing into actuality. A clear hint about Agamben's deepest thoughts regarding this structural similarity, along with the parallel he draws from Aristotle's reflection on potentiality, is unequivocally expressed in *Homo Sacer* where we read, as we already saw, that 'potentiality and actuality are simply the two faces of the sovereign self-grounding of Being.'⁹⁵

That to which Agamben alludes when he declares that 'a principle of potentiality is inherent in every definition of sovereignty'⁹⁶ can then be made explicit and restored in its complete intelligibility:

Potentiality (in its double appearance as potentiality-to and as potentiality-not-to) is that through which Being founds itself sovereignly, which is to say, without anything preceding or determining it (*superiorem non recognoscens*) other than its own ability not to be.⁹⁷

⁹³ Agamben, *State of Exception*, p. 40.

⁹⁴ David Bleeden, 'One Paradigm, Two Potentialities: Freedom, Sovereignty and Foucault in Agamben's Reading of Aristotle's "*δύναμις*" (*dynamis*)', *Foucault Studies*, 10, (2010), 68-84., p. 76.

⁹⁵ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 47.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Bartleby

Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!⁹⁸

Herman Melville

The virtues of inoperativeness

In 1856, Putnam's Monthly Magazine published *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. Written by Herman Melville, the story revolves around a freshly hired law-copyist who, after a few days of work in his new law firm, starts to reply to any request that he 'would prefer not to'.

Over the years, Agamben has developed an original reading of Melville's character. His interpretation of the figure of Bartleby has been most extensively discussed in two essays: *Four Glosses for Kafka* and *Bartleby, or On Contingency*. Additionally, the topic has been widely considered in *The Coming Community* and *The Idea of Prose*.

For Agamben, as for Gilles Deleuze, whose essay *Bartleby, or The Formula* was issued together with that of Agamben, Bartleby embodies a form of subtle resistance to the system, a manner of elusive sabotage that disrupts the ordinary functioning of the state apparatus. As noticed by Deleuze, the weirdness of Bartleby's formula is due to the fact that, being neither an acceptance nor a refusal, it produces a zone of indistinction which leaves his interlocutors completely helpless. In addition to positioning himself stubbornly between affirmation and negation, he aggravates the incomprehensibility of his conduct by providing no justification for it.

Both thinkers agree that, in a rather peculiar fashion, Bartleby incarnates a novel prototype of civil disobedience that possesses the ability to evade the constraints dictated by the ruling power, while not directly infringing any single law. This possibility of conceiving a new relation to the judicial system brought Agamben to draw an interesting parallel between Bartleby putting a hold to his copying of legal documents and the messianic theme of abolition of the law. As Deleuze, who saw in Bartleby a new Christ, Agamben declares that Bartleby carries, like a Messiah, a promise of liberation.

On Agamben's reading of Melville's story, the character of Bartleby then represents the possibility of an emancipation from sovereign violence.⁹⁹ But, Bartleby exemplifies this potentiality in a way

⁹⁸ Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-street* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), p. 49.

that totally differs from that to which we are used. Indeed, the specificity of the potentiality illustrated by Bartleby consists in that it expresses it exactly, if we accept Agamben's interpretation, in conformity with the definition of potentiality proposed by Aristotle. What exemplifies Bartleby's recurring formula is not a potentiality to be or to do but a potentiality not-to-be or not-to-do, or in Agamben's words, an impotentiality. By preferring not to actualise his potential, Bartleby actualises his impotentiality. When Agamben writes that Bartleby 'writes nothing but his potentiality to not write',¹⁰⁰ he simply underlines the fact that what is manifested by Bartleby is a potentiality that does not pass into actuality but remains pure potentiality.

As Agamben noticed, Bartleby's laconic reply recalls a much older formula that came to epitomise the epistemological stance adopted by the Sceptics, namely, the *epokhē* or suspension.

The use of this formula that consists in the two words *ou mallon*, which can be translated as 'no more than', is illustrated in Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, where he writes that:

The Sceptics use this expression neither positively [thetikōs] nor negatively [anaitetikōs], as when they refute an argument by saying: 'Scylla exists no more than [ou mallon] a chimera'.¹⁰¹

By actually predicating nothing, both formulae express nothing but the pure potentiality of expression itself. To paraphrase Agamben's comment on the Sceptic's attitude towards the phenomenon and its related affect, one could say that the announcement of the pathos *without* opinion prefigures the announcement of the pathos *with* opinion. Indeed, as we read in a passage of his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* where Sextus Empiricus explains the formula:

The most important thing is that in uttering this expression, the Sceptic says the phenomenon and announces the affect without any opinion [*apaggellei to pathos adoxastōs*].¹⁰²

In turn, Sextus Empiricus's statement allows Agamben to draw our attention to the fact that the verb *apaggellō* indicates the task of the message whose function consists in carrying an information without adding anything to it. Similarly, by limiting every discourse to simple announcements, the

⁹⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 48.

¹⁰⁰ de la Durantaye, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

¹⁰¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. by R. D. Hicks, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 488.

¹⁰² Sextus Empiricus, *Pyrrōneiōn hypotypōseōn*, I, 7, 15. Quoted in Agamben, *Potentialities*, p. 257.

Sceptic systematically refrains ‘from predicating something of something (*legein ti kata tinos*).’¹⁰³ Given that the Sceptics understood the concept of potentiality (*dynamis*) as an ontological tension between the sensible and the intelligible, it follows that by neither positing nor negating, and thus leaving the discourse in a state of suspension, what was experienced through the *epokhē* was nothing other than potentiality itself.

Bartleby’s formula, like its Sceptic counterpart, expresses the impotential aspect of potentiality and manifests its empowering and liberating nature. This is why we read in *On What We Can Not Do*, the fifth chapter of *Nudities*, that:

Nothing makes us more impoverished and less free than this estrangement from impotentiality. Those who are separated from what they can do, can, however, still resist; they can still not do. Those who are separated from their own impotentiality lose, on the other hand, first of all the capacity to resist.¹⁰⁴

Taking into account impotentiality as constituting human freedom, Agamben’s reasons for characterising inoperativeness (*inoperosità*) as the specific potentiality of man and for imagining, as he does in *The Coming Community*, a future politics based on inoperativity become obvious. ‘Not work’, as he puts it, ‘but inoperativeness is the paradigm of the coming politics’. His motivations get even clearer if we recall how much Agamben’s concept of inoperativity owes to Bataille’s *désœuvrement*, including its more radical implications in terms of response or resistance against the ever more homogenising, if not totalising, tendencies at work in the techno-political machinery of our modern societies. And it becomes equally evident that the suspension of Bartleby’s activity (*energeia*) manifests for Agamben the quintessence of the work of man (*ergon*) which is the work of inoperativity (*adynamia*).

Passivity?

Some may wonder if Bartleby’s attitude could not be more accurately described as a simple form of passivity, or even as a sort of perpetual flight. Of course, Agamben denies that Bartleby’s behaviour simply exhibits weakness or passivity, in the most ordinary sense of the word.

¹⁰³ Agamben, *Potentialities*, p. 257.

¹⁰⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 45.

In Book Theta of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle states that:

What is potential [*dynatos*] is capable [*endekhetai*] of not being in actuality.
What is potential can both be and not be, for the same is potential both to be and not to be [*to auto ara dynaton kai einai kai me einai*].¹⁰⁵

The word *endekhetai* used in this definition can equally justify a translation according to which potentiality will be said to be the ‘welcoming’ of non-being. It is precisely in virtue of this ‘welcoming of non-being’ that Agamben conceives potentiality as a ‘fundamental passivity’. The grounds for Agamben’s refutation of any interpretation that would make Bartleby into a figure of mere passivity becomes clearer if we keep in mind this important connection. Far from advocating any form of political passivity or disengagement, Agamben invites us to reflect on the radical power of disruption, change, and emancipation that carries pure potentiality, which is always the integral combination of potentiality and impotentiality. Being neither active, nor passive, Bartleby suspends the passage from potential to actual and remains in what Blanchot calls the ‘pure patient passivity’¹⁰⁶ of Being.

But, Agamben goes even further, regarding the ontological positioning of potentiality. As he declares it over and over again, the task of the coming philosophy will be to overcome the present ontology in which Being prevails over Non-Being and actuality over potentiality. What Melville’s protagonist does when he positions himself in the ‘rather’, is that he opens a space of indifference between Being and Non-Being, a third possibility delivered from any reason that could determine him one way or the other. Agamben can thus reformulate Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason by stating that ‘the fact there is no reason for something to exist rather than not to exist is the existence of something no more than nothing.’¹⁰⁷ Whether expressed as a ‘rather’ or as a ‘no more than’ (*ou mallon*), the suspension produces a third term than transcends those of classical ontology. In this observation lies the very seed of an ontology of indifference, that is, of an emancipated ontology based on potentiality.

¹⁰⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1050 b10. Quoted in Agamben, *Potentialities*, p. 182.

¹⁰⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 71.

¹⁰⁷ Agamben, *Potentialities*, p. 259.

The coming community

There is a particular concept that binds together the new political and ontological perspectives that have been made possible by the irruption of Bartleby's third way. This concept is that of form-of-life (*forma-di-vita*) which Agamben defines in *Means without Ends* as 'life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate something like bare life.'¹⁰⁸

Clearly then, form-of-life has to be considered in direct opposition to the capture of bare life made possible by the separation between *zoē* and *bios* that characterises biopolitics. The concept manifests therefore Agamben's insistence on the fundamental unity of life against the artificial plurality and alienating fragmentation produced by the juridical and political apparatus; hence his use of a singular and hyphenated expression to contrast it with the multiple forms of life. Against any attempt of reduction, predetermination or assignation that have been rendered inoperative, form-of-life opposes the free use of the possibilities of life as the unrestrained expression of its intrinsic potentiality.

Form-of-life is therefore the formula that allows Agamben to condense his anthropological, political, and ontological conclusions into a single idea that integrates the three corresponding aspects of potentiality as a unique expression for what we could call a happy life.

The relation that form-of-life bears with the capture of bare life at the individual level is expressed at the collective scale by the idea of coming community. And, as we shall see, the introduction of the concept of *whatever singularity* allows Agamben to distinguish between the idiosyncratic elements that form an identity and the generic potentiality of the individual as form-of-life.

In both Jean-Luc Nancy's essay *The Inoperative Community*, whose title is borrowed from Georges Bataille, and Maurice Blanchot's book *The Unavowable Community*, the question of the common ground on which a community can be formed, integrates Heidegger's reflection on the concept of being-together (*Mitsein*). Being fundamentally a discussion about the ways of determining the inclusion and exclusion criteria implied by any idea of community, for Agamben, as for Bataille and Blanchot, the debate is essentially, from inception, a matter of ethics.

In his reflection on the possibility of grounding a free and prosperous community, Agamben identifies two major problems that need to be tackled. On the one hand, he vigorously denounces the ever-extending facticity of the '*société du spectacle*', so eloquently described by Guy Debord, in

¹⁰⁸ Agamben, *Means without Ends*, p. 3.

which he observes the continuous alienation of language and the denial of our fundamentally communicative nature. On the other hand, he opposes the viciously circular dialectic between the proper and the improper that keeps politics in a sterile and mortifying standstill. The solution to both issues depends, he thinks, on our ability to reassess our conception of the common. It requires a capacity to reinvent a state of ‘indifference between the proper and the improper’¹⁰⁹ that could be regarded as really common and would make possible its ‘free use’. What then does he exactly mean when he refers to the common, and how are we to consider a proper way of using it?

Agamben’s understanding of the idea of the common is akin to that of Heraclitus who identifies it with the *logos*.¹¹⁰ But, Agamben also warns us against preconceived ideas: ‘there can be no true human community on the basis of a presupposition - be it a nation, a language, or even the a priori of communication of which hermeneutics speaks.’¹¹¹ It is the ‘unpressupposable principle’ of the coming community, which means that, what is presupposed, is the nothing of this ‘Unparticipated principle’ that evades any appropriation or expropriation. It is the matter of language, directly discovered through the experience of the ‘pure event of language before or beyond all possible meaning.’¹¹² In other words, it is exposed by the *experimentum linguae* of which the first outcome ‘is a radical revision of the very idea of Community’,¹¹³ as we are told in his preface to the French translation of *Infancy and History*. The common is no other than our dwelling in language, our being-in-language recognised as such.

In the steps of Adorno, he asks himself whether there is a way to change our conception regarding the relation of the particular to the universal. In *The Coming Community*, Agamben proposes to qualify this relation between the singular and the universal with the most encompassing word he could apparently find: whatever.

The term, which actually translates the Latin word *quodlibet*, allows Agamben to consider the status of the human being such as it could be integrated into a community grounded in the potentiality of language, that is to say, in a community in which both the separation between *zoē* and *bios* and the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion would have been rendered inoperative. In such a community, this inoperativeness would be achieved by the indifference with which the particular predicates or characteristics of each individual would be regarded. But this indifference to the whatever

¹⁰⁹ Agamben, *Means Without Ends*, p. 117.

¹¹⁰ “διὸ δεῖ ἐπεσθαι τῷ (ξυνῶ, τουτέστι τῷ) κοινῷ· ξυνὸς γὰρ ὁ κοινός. τοῦ λόγου δὲ ἐόντος ξυνοῦ ζῶουσιν οἱ πολλοὶ ὡς ἰδίαν ἔχοντες φρόνησιν.” (7.133). Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians*, trans. by Richard Bett (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 29.

¹¹¹ Agamben, *Potentialities*, p. 47.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

¹¹³ de la Durantaye, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

singularity does not imply that it is such that it never matters, quite the contrary. Since the word *quodlibet* contains an implicit reference to love and desire (*libet*), it actually designates a ‘being such that it always matters’,¹¹⁴ a being that is lovable (*amabile*) no matter what. Like a beloved, a whatever singularity is appreciated, not for a particular trait or specificity, but for being the nexus in which all the particular properties are synthesised.

The coming community is then conceived as an aggregate of singularities built upon ‘a commonality that in no way concerns an essence.’¹¹⁵ Neither is it concerned with any historical destiny, political calling, or spiritual vocation. If Agamben describes this community as ‘coming’, he does it, not to evoke a utopia that could be actualised in a distant future, but to set it precisely as an ever-potential being, exclusively defined by the countless possibilities of intrinsic relations and interactions it allows. It must, therefore, not be excepted for the future, but perceived as a potentiality that exists right now, in the present circumstances. This community is also ‘coming’ in the sense that it is desired and hoped for. From this perspective, the coming community mirrors exactly, at a higher scale, the unfolded image of the *quodlibet*.

Based on these reflections, it should clearly appear how, grounding itself in pure potentiality, and requiring first and foremost the generalisation of inoperativeness, the coming community finds its perfect motto in Bartleby’s formula which concentrates all the required elements in the most compact and efficient manner. Like the Christ who, as the second Adam, is said to recapitulate the entire human history, Bartleby represents, for Agamben, both as an eschatological and messianic figure, a symbol of the humanity of ‘the end of days, that is, every day’,¹¹⁶ freed from all presuppositions and restored in his integral (im)potentiality.

Having deeply reflected upon the lessons that could be drawn from Bartleby’s example, Agamben reached a conclusion that recalls that of Hannah Arendt, with whom he seems to carry similar hopes. In *Men in Dark Times*, she tells us that ‘What begins now, after the end of world history, is the history of mankind.’¹¹⁷ A half century later, the message delivered by Agamben does not differ much. It resonates like a distant echo of Arendt’s announcement: ‘the life that begins on earth after the last day is simply human life’.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 1.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹¹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. by Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), p. 27.

¹¹⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955), p. 90.

¹¹⁸ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 7.

Rethinking potentiality – A Conclusion

At the end of this philosophical journey during which we went through four major themes¹¹⁹ of Giorgio Agamben's thought, we should be capable of determining whether or not our initial hypothesis regarding the centrality and importance of the concept of potentiality is confirmed.

During this vast and complex exploration, we have been able to see how a thorough rethinking of the relation between potentiality and actuality has been advocated and we have identified the multiple grounds that have been put forward to justify this ambitious investigation. The key elements of Agamben's demand for a radical and exhaustive re-evaluation of the role and place of potentiality in our conceptual and cultural framework, which is the heart of his philosophical quest, can now be brought together and briefly recapitulated as follows.

Firstly, this reassessment is required for the neutralisation of the negativity on which language is grounded and which results from the detrimental combination of the *sacrificial mythologeme* and the putative ineffability of the Voice. These negative foundations, which consecrate silence and death as our primordial origin, are the roots of the alienation from our true being-in-language and of the all-pervasive nihilism that plagues our modern societies. The definitive rejection and overcoming of these damaging presuppositions can be accomplished through the *experimentum linguae* which brings to our awareness both the immediacy and intimacy of the *factum loquendi*. What is revealed then is our dwelling in language as pure potentiality, which is the true matter of language.

This rethinking is also needed for the necessary rejection of the reduction of Being to actuality and for the abandonment of the primacy of actuality over potentiality. Such a task, which had been prefigured in *Being and Time*, where Heidegger had already proclaimed that 'potentiality has primacy over actuality',¹²⁰ finds in the work of Agamben a renewed formulation and an extended scope. This radical transformation is achieved through the understanding of the nature of potentiality that allows Agamben's novel interpretation of Aristotle's definition. Instead of conceiving actuality (*energeia*) as merely synonymous for Being or reality, it must be thought of as the fulfilment (*telos*) of potentiality (*dynamis*). Furthermore, potentiality has to be conceived in its two co-belonging aspects of potentiality and impotentiality, respectively as a capacity to be or to do, and not-to-be or not-to-do. From this understanding emerges a new comprehension of the process of

¹¹⁹ Ontology, language, philosophical anthropology, and politics.

¹²⁰ "Höher als die Wirklichkeit steht die Möglichkeit". Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2001), p. 38.

actualisation. It is no longer the potentiality that is regarded as being destroyed by the passage into actuality, rather, it is the impotentiality that is ‘sacrificed’ in its becoming actual, while the integrity of potentiality is completely preserved in actuality. That which is exhausted in the process of actualisation is then the impotential, not the potential. This new understanding of potentiality can be summarised in a sentence that is almost as brief and puzzling as Bartleby’s formula: Potentiality ‘does not precede but follows its act’.¹²¹ Paradoxically, such a conclusion seems to reflect the Megarian’s point of view, but we know how erroneous it would be to reduce Agamben’s perspective to that which has been so vigorously criticised by Aristotle. On the contrary, Agamben’s analysis establishes the foundations of novel *dynamology*, which inaugurates an era in which it has finally become possible to think the ‘autonomous existence of potentiality’.¹²²

Finally, the complete reassessment of the relation between potentiality and actuality has been urged by the necessary elucidation of the dynamics and structures of political power such as they are manifested in the dual paradigm constituted by the biopolitical scheme and the state of exception, which has been analysed in its relation to the paradox of sovereignty. Because the concept of sovereignty articulates politics and ontology from the perspective of potentiality, as it has been meticulously demonstrated throughout the nine volumes that form the *Homo Sacer* project, understanding the nature of this relation reveals itself to be of paramount importance. Only a complete resolution of the aporia of sovereignty, through the development of an ontology of potentiality, will be capable of rendering inoperative the biopolitical machine and producing a real state of exception. For whatever singularity in its inessential participation to the coming community, these are the conditions that would allow the free use of potentiality.

From the vantage point offered by this brief overview, it should clearly appear that the most important issues identified in matters of language, anthropology, politics, and metaphysics, are all expressions of a deeper problem which impacts, beyond these four categories, all the fields of human experience. It should be equally evident that both the disease and its cure find their roots in a single principle, the name of which has ‘the Nothing as the final veil’,¹²³ and is truly, ‘the final name of language’.¹²⁴ Such is the knowledge that Agamben has restlessly and methodically tried to communicate. And such is the lesson provided by Bartleby, the scrivener.

¹²¹ Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, p. 65.

¹²² Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 45.

¹²³ Agamben, *Potentialities*, p. 115.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

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