

Agamben's Coming Philosophy

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Finding a New Use for Theology

Colby Dickinson and Adam Kotsko

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Introduction

Adam Kotsko and Colby Dickinson

Perhaps the coming life will be no 'life' at all, none that we today can recognize; the coming God will be no 'God' at all, the coming theology no 'theology' at all, and the coming 'religion' no religion at all, not as we know any of these things.

—John Caputo, *The Insistence of God*¹

We begin with this quote because we are forced to consider, and want the reader to consider as well, what exactly Giorgio Agamben's 'coming philosophy' might be. John Caputo himself seems to sense in the air something of what Agamben is up to; indeed, prefacing disciplines with the term 'coming' is a tactic that Agamben has taken up on multiple occasions: the 'coming philosophy', the 'coming ethics', the 'coming politics', the 'coming community', and, now, the 'coming theology' would seem more than appropriate. One thing we want to stress is that whatever it ends up being, whatever Agamben is really trying to draw us to see, theology will have to play a significant role in determining just what shape philosophy may take for us in the future.

The essays in this collection cover the whole range of Agamben's work, from his earliest reflections to his forthcoming magnum opus, *The Use of Bodies* (currently being translated by Adam). Along the way, the reader will receive an overview of Agamben's project as a whole, as well as incisive reflections on individual works and isolated themes. This book as a whole also explores Agamben's methodology; his relationship with his primary sources (most notably Walter Benjamin); and his relevance for questions of politics, ethics, and philosophy. We believe, moreover, that this book addresses, in a compelling and accessible way, one of the biggest stumbling blocks for (primarily philosophical) readers of Agamben: his rigorous and intensive engagement with the theological tradition. As such, we believe it also demonstrates how Agamben's 'new use' of theology is actually focused on the reinvention of philosophical thought.

This book is an attempt to present two young scholars' concurrent, evolving thoughts on the work of Agamben and in particular its implications for the fields of both theology and philosophy. In this connection, Colby is perhaps best known as the author of *Agamben and Theology*,

whereas much of Adam's contribution has taken the form of translating several of Agamben's most recent and most theologically oriented works.² In fact, we met as a direct result of our respective projects, as Colby reached out to Adam to see if he had finished his first translation of *The Sacrament of Language*, which Colby wanted to refer to in his book. Adam's kindness prevailed and a dialogue began.

When the providential hand of the academic job market brought us both to Chicago, we began meeting regularly for wide-ranging discussions. When the Brazilian publication *Unisinos* approached Colby for an interview concerning Agamben's work, he invited Adam to participate as well. Soon Colby suggested we might take the collaboration a step further by putting together an essay collection that would build on the conversations we had been having—and which had been seeping into our writings on Agamben already—as well as both deepening and broadening the discussions currently taking place on Agamben's work from a variety of perspectives. In this sense, even though a good deal of what is presented in this volume was work begun (and often published) separately, the impact of our views upon one another was already evident and part of an ongoing dialogue that we were able to expand further here.

As we read each other's pieces with an eye towards this collection in particular, we were both struck by the productive tensions in our respective readings of Agamben. Both of us share the conviction that Agamben's unique approach to theology has the potential to transform the practice of theology more generally and to transform the field of philosophy in a variety of ways. What is clear is that both of us are interested in the way Agamben helps to make theological materials available in a new way for other disciplines and projects. Our respective emphases are also complementary. Colby comes to Agamben through his previous work on Walter Benjamin, and his essays range widely over Agamben's entire corpus, with a special emphasis on his earliest, most Benjaminian work. By contrast, the 'centre of gravity' for Adam's reading of Agamben is the *Homo Sacer* series and particularly the sequence of heavily theological works that began with *The Kingdom and the Glory*.

This varied focus lends itself to contrasting approaches. Adam spends most of his contributions puzzling over how the disparate volumes included in the *Homo Sacer* series fit together into a whole, whereas Colby is more interested in using Agamben's work as a starting point for drawing broader connections. To put it another way, though both of us engage in both tasks, Adam is more concerned with exegesis, while Colby is most comfortable with hermeneutics.

As mentioned earlier, most of these pieces have previously appeared elsewhere, but we have revised and reintroduced all of them to varying degrees in light of our own evolving thought and, perhaps more importantly, in response to each other's perceptive comments. At the same time, however, we have left much unchanged, even where it results in

contradictions, both between the two authors and within their own contributions. A key reason for that decision is that we thought it would be beneficial for readers to watch as our respective readings of Agamben developed and changed. More importantly, though, it felt somehow Agambenian to allow our partial, sometimes contradictory insights to stand side by side and leave to the reader the task of sorting it out—or perhaps finding a new use for the materials we have worked through. At any rate, we have carefully arranged the chapters to provide a cohesive narrative flow to the contents, as the essays come to respond to one another, and in order to provide new avenues of thought in relation to what came before them. That is, the sequencing is intentional and hopefully provocative, and a good deal of internal revision has taken place as a result.

One reason for combining two perspectives in one volume is that we believe it will help us to better grapple with the radical diversity and even heterogeneity of Agamben's sprawling corpus. A good portion of his work focuses on questions of aesthetics and much of the rest is devoted to careful and idiosyncratic readings of major figures in the history of philosophy. After a trilogy of overtly political books—*Homo Sacer*, *State of Exception*, and *Remnants of Auschwitz*—he turned his attention to a commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans; then to an enigmatic and fragmentary study of the relationship between the human and the animal, *The Open*; and, finally, to a series of investigations of the history of Christian theology. During the years of the presidency of George W. Bush, however, it was Agamben's investigations of sovereign authority, the state of emergency (or exception), and 'bare life' that made him famous, as they seemed to speak directly to the most immediate and pressing political concerns of the day—the emergency powers claimed in the so-called War on Terror, the fate of the 'detainees' kept in the lawless zone of Guantanamo Bay, and the general reassertion of the kind of state sovereignty that globalization was supposed to be rendering irrelevant.

Despite being coincidentally topical, however, there is much that is puzzling about the political works themselves. *Homo Sacer*, which famously claims that the paradigm of all modern politics is the concentration camp, proceeds by way of an investigation of an obscure figure in Roman law, the *homo sacer* ('sacred man') who could be killed with impunity but not sacrificed, before also stopping to deal with Pindar, Friedrich Hölderlin, and many other unexpected figures along the way—including werewolves. *Remnants of Auschwitz*, for its part, focuses on the 'Muselmänner', the most degraded and hopeless victims of the Shoah, but spends a surprising amount of space dealing with questions of structural linguistics. *State of Exception*, in many ways the most straightforward of the three, provides a history of emergency powers in the Roman and modern world, but instead of making the seemingly obvious claim that we should stop relying on emergency powers and stick with normal

legal structures, hints towards a radically different solution that Agamben believes to be implicit in a Kafka short story in which Alexander the Great's horse becomes a lawyer.³

WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?

A striking feature of Agamben's work is its tendency to leap immediately from the tiniest detail to the broadest possible generalization, and understanding this simple movement goes quite a long way in helping the reader to comprehend some of the connections he will make throughout his oeuvre. For instance, in *Homo Sacer*, we learn that the entire history of Western political thought was always heading towards the horrors of totalitarianism—as we can tell by taking a look at an obscure corner of ancient Roman law. Similarly, while his works have increasingly large-scale ambitions, they nonetheless take on a fragmentary form and always make room for digressions and asides (often in the form of footnotes that are inserted right in the middle of the text, introduced by the Hebrew letter aleph, א, or through the various '*scholia*' that end certain chapters in his early work and echo Baruch Spinoza's own formidable scholarship).

Agamben's interest in totalitarian thought stems in part, no doubt, from his early study of Hannah Arendt, a figure who deeply inspired him throughout his youth (there is even an early 'fan' letter from Agamben to Arendt, as well as her response, in the Arendt archives).⁴ The traits of loose connection and revelation can themselves, we believe, be traced back to Agamben's two most significant influences: Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger. Agamben served as the editor of the Italian edition of Benjamin's complete works, which consist primarily of dense essays and cryptic fragments, the majority of which were not published during Benjamin's lifetime. It was Agamben himself who found some of Benjamin's 'lost work' among the files at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris) some years ago, which he later published. Agamben seems to admire the compression and vast interdisciplinary range of Benjamin's work and to aspire to similar effects in his own writing. Meanwhile, as a student in one of Heidegger's postwar seminars, Agamben picked up the great philosopher's ambition to provide an overarching account of the history of the West and use such a reading in order to shed light on the contemporary world. From both thinkers, he drew a careful attention to philological detail and questions of translation—and at the same time, a marked tendency towards abstraction. Heidegger, for instance, spent his entire career investigating the concept of 'Being', while some of Benjamin's most famous essays are devoted to the broadest possible topics, such as violence, language, or history.

It is not only Agamben's methods that stem from these two thinkers but often his path of investigation as well. All of his political writing,

beginning with *Homo Sacer*, for instance, can be read as a follow-up on Benjamin's suggestion in 'Critique of Violence' that someone really ought to look into the origin of the concept of the sacredness of human life (an issue that will be taken up directly later in this volume). His study of animality in *The Open* is, by contrast, centred on one of Heidegger's writings on that question, and many of the chapters expand on Heidegger's own key references. In a very real sense, Agamben's work can be read as a series of footnotes to the two great thinkers who have most inspired him—though very few of his writings presuppose a detailed knowledge of either.

* * *

At this point, one could rightly ask, What is Agamben's own unique style? Much of his creativity can be traced to the way he brings together Heidegger and Benjamin, along with other major figures such as Michel Foucault, Carl Schmitt, and Aristotle. Then, of course, there are the authors he frames his work in relation to but who remain, for the most part, peripheral figures who are acknowledged far less than by their impact on his writing: Baruch Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze, Guy Debord, Emmanuel Levinas, Sigmund Freud, and, not least among them, Jacques Derrida.

Leaving aside questions of intellectual genealogy, however, much of what is most distinctive about Agamben's style of thought comes from a love of paradox and contradiction. For instance, when investigating the notion of the sacredness of human life, he traces it back to an origin that, far from indicating that human life has exceptional and unconditional value, actually refers to a form of human life (the *homo sacer*) that has been completely deprived of all legal protection. And instead of marveling at how much our concept of the sacredness of human life has changed, he argues that the old meaning still stands—the state that respects the sacredness of human life is actually a machine that threatens to turn every one of us into a defenceless *homo sacer*. His continuous project of trying to render the 'anthropological machinery' that shapes us begins here and has not lost its vehemence for an instant.

This love of paradox is also not simply a rhetorical tic. It deeply shapes his political analysis, which seeks out places where our accustomed categories begin to overlap and break down. For example, he is fascinated with the figure of the sovereign ruler who can suspend the law because the sovereign occupies a paradoxical space that is outside the law. On the one hand, the sovereign who declares a state of emergency can freely violate the letter of the law, but on the other hand, his actions are legitimated by reference to the law and (at least ideally) aim to restore the normal conditions for the rule of law. Sovereign action in the state of emergency is thus a strange kind of legal illegality—or is it illegal legality?

A related dynamic is at work with the figure of the *homo sacer*, who stands as a kind of metaphor for all people who are excluded from official legal protection and reduced to 'bare life', such as refugees, 'enemy combatants', and concentration camp victims. Again, the voice of Arendt and her work on stateless persons comes glaringly back to mind. On the one hand, they are excluded from the realm of law, but this very exclusion is a legal act, one of the most forceful and decisive of legal acts. Thus the person reduced to bare life is 'excluded in' or 'included out'. A variety of significant and even tragic contemporary legal and ethical positions involving such acts spring immediately to mind, or at least they should.

The greatest contradiction of all, however, is the way that the sovereign's and the *homo sacer*'s respective relationships to the law—relationships of exclusive inclusion or inclusive exclusion—overlap. On a purely formal level, the same paradoxical and contradictory relationship to the law holds equally for the mightiest ruler as for the most desperate victim. And this overlap makes sense insofar as the sovereign's emergency power transforms potentially everyone into a *homo sacer* who can be killed with impunity. Agamben believes that our political system is increasingly breaking down so that extralegal but legally validated emergency power is no longer the exception but the rule. Here we might think of the way in which the supposed 'emergency' of the 'War on Terror', which has now dragged on for well over ten years and shows no sign of stopping, is used to legitimate increasingly extreme executive powers including, most recently, President Obama's claim that he has the right to assassinate U.S. citizens suspected of terrorism without trial and on U.S. soil. This breakdown in the law is not a moment of weakness, but, for Agamben, it is the moment when the law displays its power in its rawest and most deadly form. It is inevitably part of sovereign rule—and liberals as well as conservatives should learn to recognize this fact before attempting to reform or blindly support such political systems. As Agamben says in *State of Exception*, when 'the state of exception . . . becomes the rule, then the juridico-political system transforms itself into a killing machine'.⁵

* * *

Many critics of the 'War on Terror' have used Agamben's terminology to mount a kind of moral critique of such policies. One might say, for instance, that the government is wrong to create a kind of exceptional law-free zone in Guantanamo Bay because that results in turning the detainees into bare life—which is a bad thing to do. And certainly it *is* a bad thing to do; yet Agamben's work is hard to fit into this kind of moralizing discourse. For Agamben, the answer cannot be to return to the 'normal' conditions of the rule of law because the very structure of the Western political system has always contained the seeds that would grow into our

universalized exception. It can't be a matter of refraining from turning people into 'bare life' because in a very real sense that is just what Western legal structures *do*. The extreme, destructive conjunction of sovereign authority and bare life is not a catastrophe that we could have somehow avoided—for Agamben, it represents the deepest and truest structure of the law.

Now may be the time to return to the Kafka short story about Alexander the Great's horse, titled 'The New Attorney'.⁶ What strikes Agamben about this story is that the warhorse of the greatest sovereign conqueror in the ancient world has not simply retired but has taken up the study of law. For Agamben, this provides an image of what it might look like not to go back to a previous, less destructive form of law but to be free of law altogether:

One day humanity will play with law just as children play with dis-used objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good . . . This liberation is the task of study, or of play. And this studious play is the passage that allows us to arrive at that justice that one of Benjamin's posthumous fragments defines as a state of the world in which the world appears as a good that absolutely cannot be appropriated or made juridical.⁷

In this suggestive illustration, the law is not simply done away with, but it is used in a fundamentally different way. In place of enforcement, we have study; and in place of solemn reverence, we have play. Agamben believes that the new attorney is doing the state of emergency one better: his activity not only suspends the letter of the law but more importantly suspends its force, its dominating power. This would be an enactment of what he will elsewhere call, in the context of Saint Paul's letter to the Romans, the 'division of division itself', the suspending of the suspension that founds the rule of law in the first place. It is here as well that we begin to sense the close proximity which the history of theology will share with politics, and, ultimately, with philosophical inquiry.

Agamben's critical work has always aimed towards these kinds of strange, evocative recommendations and connections across genres, disciplines, and centuries. Again and again we find that the goal of tracking down the paradoxes and contradictions in the law is not to 'fix' the law or provide cautionary tales of what to avoid but to push the paradox even further. Agamben often uses the theological term 'messianic' to describe his argumentative strategy because messianic movements throughout history—and here Agamben would include certain forms of Christianity—have often had an antagonistic relationship to the law (primarily, but not solely, the Jewish law or Torah). He frequently draws on messianic texts from the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions for inspiration in his attempt to find a way out of the destructive paradoxes of Western legal structures. His fascination with the 'antinomian' thinker Sabbatai

Sevi, the subject of Gershom Scholem's massive study, can likewise be traced to this locale.⁸

In one of his more recent books to appear in English, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, Agamben conducts a detailed study of Christian monasticism, which he believes to be essentially a messianic movement. Not only was the movement founded and renewed by people who were unsatisfied with mainstream institutions that sought to represent a historical claimant to the title of messiah, namely Jesus, but they also display a particularly paradoxical relationship to the law. On the one hand, the monastic life is regulated down to the smallest detail, creating the impression that it represents the strictest possible form of law (an impression that is reinforced by the existence of detailed lists of punishments for infractions). On the other hand, monastic thinkers have always insisted that their rules are something other than laws. Where the law aims to provide boundaries to life through prohibitions and punishments, monastic rules aim to positively *shape* the lives of the monks.

What is at stake in monasticism is thus not the enforcement of norms but the very form of the monk's life. Agamben believes that this blurring of the boundary between rule and life, to the point where they become indistinguishable, is a concrete historical attempt to achieve something like the 'study or play' that he recommends in *State of Exception*. He finds the Franciscan movement to be particularly radical in this regard, and much of the book is taken up with the task of trying to figure out how the Franciscans were ultimately brought into the mainstream of Christianity—so that we can avoid the same pitfalls in our contemporary efforts to find a form of life that can somehow escape the destructive killing machine we call the law.

* * *

So far, Agamben's work may appear to be very systematic—and Agamben does reinforce that impression by elaborately dividing the project that began with *Homo Sacer* into various volumes and subvolumes. He even, on occasion, provides essays that focus on the methodologies he makes use of in other volumes of his research, such as when he discusses paradigms and exemplary forms beyond law.⁹ What we find most appealing about his work, though, is its open-ended and exploratory nature, the way in which he meanders over a variety of topics that appear unrelated at first glance but come together closely upon more careful inspection. For instance, in *State of Exception*, he notes how frequently modern governments have declared a state of emergency due to economic conditions, and that ultimately led him into his vast exploration of the concept of 'economy' in *The Kingdom and the Glory*—a book that surprisingly wound up encompassing the history of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, as well as a particularly satisfying chapter that presents angels as

God's bureaucrats. In *The Highest Poverty*, he notes that the monks seem to be continually tempted to turn their entire life into a nonstop act of worship—and so he conducted another study of the concept of liturgy, which ultimately led him to analyse contemporary concepts of ethical duty.¹⁰

For this reason, we think that one of the best ways forwards into Agamben's work may not be through his better-known writings but through his short and fragmentary works, such as *The Open: Man and Animal*. *The Open* contains several unforgettable passages—perhaps most notable is the story of an unfortunate tick that was deprived of all sensory input by researchers—and one might expect that it will challenge almost everyone's preconceptions about animals in some way. It is not clear how all the pieces fit together, but in a way that only increases its effectiveness, it appears not as a definitive answer to the question of how humans and animals relate but as a book to think *with*.

Reading *The Open*—or another book of a similar genre, such as *The Coming Community* or *Nudities*—before stopping to study the more imposing works among Agamben's corpus may help to clarify the reality that even those works, for all their sweeping ambition and programmatic claims, fundamentally represent the same fragmentary and improvisational style of intellectual exploration. There is a real sense in which Agamben's own scholarly approach exemplifies the kind of 'study or play' with the Western cultural and political tradition that he is advocating. And so, whatever else Agamben's works manage to achieve, we believe they are most successful when they serve to invite us to join him in the serious pursuit of study as play. One of the premises of the present volume, moreover, is that one might gain a significant amount of insight concerning politics or philosophy from his asides concerning literature or theology and that careful reflection upon this fact might actually yield an entirely unique perspective on Agamben's work taken as a whole.

* * *

What is unique about Agamben's more recent studies is not only that his persistent rereading of the history of theology finds (what we are calling) a 'new use for theology' but that his study of theology actually provides for a new way of doing philosophy and politics. Take, for example, Jessica Whyte's recent commentary on Agamben's political thought, her *Catastrophe and Redemption*. Though clearly contextualizing his use of theological terms as part and parcel of his task of 'profanation', Whyte nonetheless must devote a good deal of space towards elucidating just what kind of a transformation such terms undergo.¹¹ Sections of the book therefore bear titles such as 'Katechon, Antichrist, Messiah', 'The Remnant Shall Be Saved', 'Bartleby as Messiah?' and 'We Are Saved When We No Longer Want to Be'.

To the astute reader of Agamben's works, this should come as no surprise since this focus had, in many ways, been there all along, waiting to be unfolded in greater detail. His essay on 'The Idea of Language' in relation to the concept of revelation (collected in *Potentialities*) makes, for example, an easy transition to *The Sacrament of Language* some years later. His speculative ruminations on glory in *Idea of Prose* somehow pave the way towards his genealogical interests in *The Kingdom and the Glory*. And his fascination with Freud and the will in *Stanzas*, one of his earliest works, has not receded by the time we reach the conclusions of *Opus Dei*—if anything his early conclusions are only reaffirmed as they are brought into a new context.

In point of fact, there is much to say about the last line of this recent work devoted to yet another theological genealogy: 'The problem of the coming philosophy is that of thinking an ontology beyond operativity and command and an ethics and a politics entirely liberated from the concepts of duty and will.'¹² At least a few points worth considering in full should strike the reader familiar with his previous work: First, that despite all the work that has gone into the incredible breadth of the *Homo Sacer* series, no suitable ontology has yet been disclosed. In some respects, Agamben has himself ventured no further than his initial claims about a form of 'absolute immanence' penned in a small essay written seemingly in homage to Deleuze.¹³ Second, the task of rendering the anthropological machinery inoperative, which was so essential to his work in *The Open*, has not left his mind for an instant. It has only acquired a more profound intensity. Third, the project of emancipation so central to forming his sense of the 'coming community' is still impressed as a goal upon his every work, bringing the modern Marxist project to bear on his fundamental political orientation yet again.

If one were to venture a fourth reflection—though there are many more comments one could make on this quote, to be sure—it would have to be that each of these various trajectories of thought *does* converge in his work, most notably, in our opinion, upon the figure of Saint Paul, one of the reasons why we have both come to conclude that *The Time That Remains* perhaps best encapsulates what is at stake in Agamben's entire philosophical project. It is here, for example, that Paul's gesture towards the messianic 'division of division itself'—the same intuition Agamben senses at work in Benjamin's comments on the 'cut of Apelles' in the latter's enigmatic *Arcades Project*—becomes that which renders all identities as divided from within, leaving us 'indifferent', as William Watkin has recently put it, to that which seemed to have categorized us all along.¹⁴ This was what had allowed Paul to see no difference between Jew and Greek, slave and free, or even male and female, despite their being categories that seemingly upheld the order of the ancient (and not-so-ancient) world. There is a quest for emancipation that Agamben finds pertinent here and yet which also is not quite the same as the Enlighten-

ment's efforts to bring about a greater sense of human autonomy through reason.

Finding such a new use for the most ancient of theological materials is what gives Agamben's work a unique place among contemporary philosophers, and it is what provides us with a wonderful vantage point from which to begin the work that this volume proposes to take up. In what follows, we will be pursuing these connective tissues throughout Agamben's many books and essays, all in the hope of demonstrating how Agamben's 'coming philosophy' is not only a highly inventive rereading of the history of theology but also how such boundaries, in the end, may not matter as much as we once thought they did.

OUTLINE OF THE VOLUME

The first part of the book presents Agamben as a reader of Walter Benjamin. The aim of this section is to highlight the significant influence of Benjamin's work on Agamben's writings in general, a point that is best made through an inspection of Benjamin's descriptions of experience, knowledge, violence, gesture, and citation as taken up in Agamben's own formulations. The link that runs throughout each chapter in this section remains the constant and abiding influence which Benjamin has had upon Agamben's writing, notably, in this context, his crypto-theological viewpoints and his subtle critique of the history of philosophy.

In the early twentieth century, we witnessed how Benjamin's project of the 'coming philosophy' was one that would redefine the relationship of knowledge and experience, primarily through its reenvisioning of the role of religious teachings (*Lehre*) within the realm of the philosophical. Using this realignment of the relationship between philosophy and theology as a starting point, Colby's introductory essay to the volume, 'On the "Coming Philosophy"', offers us a means to understand how if the once 'transcendental' propositions embedded deep within the Western theological tradition are no longer valid, as Benjamin claims, then it is because our knowledge has entered into a unique relationship with a new sense of experience, one seemingly *without* transcendence as its supporting foundation. Following Benjamin, then, Agamben can be seen to set a course towards a new way of thinking through political theology (a point to be addressed directly in part 2, but which is prepared in this chapter).

Continuing to pursue Benjamin's redefining of political theology, Adam's 'Reading the "Critique of Violence"' notes how one of Agamben's primary sources for his *Homo Sacer* project is Benjamin's dense and enigmatic essay 'Critique of Violence', which investigates the relationship between violence and law. In this essay, Adam interrogates Agamben's reading of the text, arguing that he privileges the work of Carl Schmitt in certain parts of his writing in a way that leads him to overhas-

ty conclusions about the stakes of Benjamin's essay—and more importantly, to pass over aspects of Benjamin's argument that might deepen and extend his arguments presented later on in the *Homo Sacer* series. Reaffirming the influence of Benjamin on Agamben's philosophical viewpoint, and as underscored in the last chapter, this one keeps the focus on the way in which Benjamin drives Agamben's work, even when he appears to deviate from it.

By focusing on Benjamin's early conceptualization of mimesis and its relation to language, Colby's 'Gestures of Text and Violence' elaborates on Agamben's attempt to steer mimesis clear of its indebtedness to language and towards a 'purer' realm of gesture. Benjamin's formulation of a more proper 'divine' language of gestures could then be said to coalesce with certain historical-religious proclamations, something which Agamben's work, by taking up Benjamin's conceptualizations of gesture, challenges us to consider as a viable, albeit 'profane', political and ethical option for humanity. As Adam's previous chapter illustrated and which this chapter affirms and develops further, this conditioning of Agamben's thought towards a 'less violent' realm 'beyond language' is perhaps more subtle and pervasive than other interpreters have yet perceived and provides seeds of thought towards forming a new sense of political theology altogether.

Colby's essay on 'Citing "Whatever" Authority' brings this first part to a close. Emphasizing the way in which Benjamin's work permeates Agamben's entire oeuvre, this chapter seeks to lay out an analysis of Agamben's central claims with regard to the formation of a theory of citationality. By juxtaposing Benjamin's theory of citations alongside Agamben's more recent, critical engagements with the Western theological tradition, Agamben sets himself the goal of redefining ethics itself along certain 'Levinasian' lines in order to arrive at a respect for the face of 'whatever' being before us, the true source towards which all citations seemingly point. Besides elaborating on this challenge to both ethics and theology, this chapter makes connections to the previous chapters by discussing the fundamental role that Benjamin's views play in forming Agamben's philosophical conceptualizations of citation, gesture, and violence.

The second part of this volume, 'Futures of Political Theology', takes many of the themes present in the first part and witnesses how they are transferred into a political-theological context. In fact, what becomes clear from the previous part is that Benjamin's influence on Agamben has been such that new tools for rethinking philosophy and ethics have only been provided through a critique of the (transcendental) structures of previous centuries' theological thought. This second part seeks to deepen this account by focusing on exactly how Agamben provides new insights into Western society's most recurring theological concepts, hence developing Benjamin's intuitions one step further.

Colby's essay on 'Immanence as Revelation' seeks to articulate the many implications which Agamben's work holds for theology. It aims to examine his (re)conceptualizations of language in light of particular historical glosses on the 'name of God' and the nature of the 'mystical', as well as to highlight the *political* task of profanation, one of his most central concepts, in relation to the *logos* said to embody humanity's 'religious' quest to find its Voice. As such, we see how he challenges those standard notions of transcendence which have been consistently aligned with various historical forms of sovereignty. In addition, the chapter intends to present Agamben's redefinition of revelation as the unveiling of the 'name of God' as the fact of our linguistic being, a movement from the transcendent divine realm to the merely human world before us. By proceeding in this manner, this chapter tries to close in on one of the largest theological implications contained within Agamben's work: the establishment of an ontology that could only be described as a form of 'absolute' immanence yet to be more fully pronounced within his writings (and which will be taken up more directly later on in this part).

Continuing the question raised by the last chapter concerning what form immanence must take today in philosophical terms, this chapter by Adam on 'Agamben's Messianic Nihilism' points out how it has been much noted that contemporary continental philosophers are growing increasingly interested in theology—but what is perhaps less noted is that their primary goal in approaching theology is to find a way to escape or deactivate the theological concepts and claims that lie hidden beneath our ostensibly secular political structures. This chapter takes Agamben as a case in point, using his approach to theology as a lens for viewing his *Homo Sacer* project as a whole. Arguing that his position is best characterized as 'messianic nihilism', Adam argues that Agamben stands between philosophy and theology in a way that allows us to understand their historically fraught relationship in a new light.

Drawing on the path opened up by the previous chapter towards rethinking theological terms and concepts, Colby's look at 'The Divisions of Sovereignty' in Agamben's work opens up speculation on what Agamben himself might truly be up to in his own musings on the nature of the divine—a point that *The Kingdom and the Glory*, despite its rigorous genealogical exploration of how God's being has been framed in relation to political forms of sovereign power, seemingly does not help to clarify. For example, Agamben's ability to sketch a paradigm for perceiving the intertwined nature of politics and theology in the Western world—one that places *transcendence* and *immanence* in a dynamic opposition—does not address his own work elsewhere on the fundamental state of 'absolute immanence' that he takes up in its Spinozistic-Deleuzean register. This chapter intends to answer questions such as: Can a form of philosophical ('absolute') immanence somehow escape the dualism of transcendence and immanence as posited by the inner workings of sove-

reign power (upon which, Agamben claims, it is structurally dependent), much as Agamben also claims that a form of 'pure potentiality' is somehow beyond the dualism of potentiality and actuality (and which constitutes the very axis for the utilization of sovereign power)? And yet, how exactly would such a form of absolute immanence be removed from our very real political and representational tensions? Is this tension a result of the 'messianic nihilism' proclaimed in the last chapter, or is something else at stake here?

Responding directly to the previous chapter, Adam's 'Perhaps Psychoanalysis?' argues that the discipline of political theology has been *too* fascinated by the question of sovereignty. In order to help the discipline to break this habit and reach its full potential as a critical discourse, Adam proposes to use psychoanalytic categories as a catalyst for diagnosing the problems that the sovereignty fixation leads to and for indicating the direction that a revised 'political theology from below' might take. Using Agamben's work as its primary point of reference, this chapter argues that in psychoanalytic terms, political theology is starting from the level of the 'master signifier', while a more robust approach would instead start from the level of drive. Mining Agamben's work for potential figures of drive, Adam concludes by calling for a political theology that takes its point of departure not from God but from the demonic.

The third part of the book, 'Methods, Economies, Theologies', presents the reader with a wide range of implications for Agamben's work on the whole, situating his methodology as one concerned not only with genealogical inquiry but also with economic and theological models of inquiry.

Setting the stage for focus on the methodologies that this section takes up, this first chapter by Adam on 'Genealogy and Political Theology' presents a solid rereading of genealogical inquiry for coming generations of philosophers. In brief, Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Glory* has come under significant critique from Marxist theorists who object to his 'theological genealogy' of economic concepts. This chapter responds to a critique of Agamben by Alberto Toscano and uses it as an opportunity to clarify the methodological commitments that inform Agamben's approach in his work. The chapter concludes by recommending genealogy as an important methodological tool in the still-evolving field of 'political theology', one that draws from a Benjaminian legacy but goes far beyond it as well.

Presenting one of his more recent genealogical explorations as an example of the last chapter's analysis, Colby's chapter 'The "Absence" of Gender' highlights Agamben's distinction between the prophet and the apostle as key to understanding how a messianic vision of history runs counter to the social, cultural, political, and religious boundaries that humanity has constructed and continues to construct in order to identify itself—its 'anthropological machinery'. For this reason, this chapter pri-

marily focuses upon Agamben's more recent writings on the theological and the 'glorious body' and how the core of our sexual being is the site which his work points towards, à la Foucault, and which must now be placed within the broader context of his writings on the whole. By doing so, we gesture towards the undisclosed affinity which Agamben's work shares with certain feminist thinkers who likewise attempt to push beyond the boundaries and divisions that linger in our world as a result of the political and cultural acts of signification that still continue to define humanity. In general, this chapter demonstrates how Agamben pushes us to contemplate new economies of bodily being that defy established 'incorporeal' economic models of relating to one another.

Pursuing the previous chapter's suggested 'economic' and genealogical focal points within his work from another angle, Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Glory* marked an explicit and decisive turn towards questions of economy. While his investigation focused on Christian conceptions of divine providence, Agamben made continual references to modern liberal democratic modes of governance. In Adam's piece 'The Theology of Neoliberalism', he argues that subsequent volumes of the *Homo Sacer* series—*The Highest Poverty* and *Opus Dei*—continue this oblique analysis of contemporary economic forms. When viewed through this framework, the Benedictine monk of *The Highest Poverty* and the dutiful priest of *Opus Dei* appear as the contemporary capitalist subject, continually driven to higher and higher levels of productivity and deeper engagement with the 'glorious' sphere of consumption and brands, even to the point of creating a brand out of oneself. The Franciscan attempt to develop a new form of monasticism that escapes from the temptation to transform life into an incessant liturgy thus provides a case study for contemporary attempts to subvert capitalism—and an occasion for clarifying Agamben's ambiguous relationship to Marxism.

Situated in questions of methodological debate which the last two chapters have brought to light, through providing itself as a sort of 'conclusion' on these matters, this chapter by Colby, '*Cur Deus Homo Sacer?*' aims to address the same questions from another perspective altogether. Among contemporary philosophers, there are few who have so wholeheartedly delved into the realm of theology as Agamben has, and yet his use of theological themes is really only to point the way towards a refashioning of certain philosophical tasks still to come. It would be instructive then, and this chapter engages these themes, to rehearse some of the more significant insights and methodologies which Agamben's work on the theological has uncovered throughout the long course of his career—the full impact of which is only just now beginning to be comprehended, and even then only to slight and varying degrees. This is done not only as a summary of the challenges and insights which he has offered not only to theologians but also to philosophers and political scientists alike.

Pushing the last chapter a bit further, though very much in the same effort to summarize Agamben's oeuvre, 'Paul and the Jewish Alternative' by Adam focuses on a short discussion of Saint Paul in Agamben's *Sacrament of Language*, in which it is claimed that the notion of 'the curse of the law' is crucial for understanding Paul's notion of redemption. This passage is explicated from two angles: first, what it says about Agamben, and second, what it says about Paul. In the first regard, the chapter places the passage in the wider context of *Sacrament of Language* and the *Homo Sacer* project as a whole, arguing that his use of Paul in this context shows that, for Agamben, philosophy and messianism are ultimately the same thing. In turning to the second concern, Adam argues that Agamben makes a decisive intervention into the most contested question in Pauline studies, namely the question of the law, strengthening the position of scholars who have seen Paul as a critic of law *tout court*, rather than of Jewish law exclusively. The chapter concludes by recommending rabbinic Judaism as a concrete example of what it means to suspend the force of law and make the law into an object of 'study or play'.

This final part concludes the book by pointing towards, first, the much anticipated finale of the *Homo Sacer* series (currently in translation) and, second, the authors' joint conclusions concerning Agamben's reinvention of philosophy. To begin, Adam discusses the structure of Agamben's *Homo Sacer* series in light of its forthcoming concluding volume, *The Use of Bodies*, of which he will serve as translator, in 'What Is to Be Done? The Endgame of the *Homo Sacer* Series'. Rather than providing a summary of the book's arguments, he discusses the way that it caused him to view previous books differently and claims that while we wait for the book to appear in English, Agamben's book on Saint Paul, *The Time That Remains*, serves as a remarkable foreshadowing of the main themes of *The Use of Bodies* and the *Homo Sacer* series as a whole and that reading it in light of the nearly completed series has a similar retrospective effect as *The Use of Bodies*. As such, this chapter shares the conclusions of previous chapters in reading the *Homo Sacer* series through his more directly theologically focused writings, a point that links the authors' positions on Agamben.

As a finale to the many studies which this volume has presented, both Colby and Adam come together in order to present their conclusions in an aptly titled reflection, 'Conclusion: Finding a New Use for Theology'. The volume as a whole has pointed towards the 'discovery' of a 'new use for theology', one that serves to seemingly reinvent both theology and philosophy as we have previously known them. By taking the time both to review the contents of the present work as well as Agamben's most recent publications dealing explicitly with theological topics, the conclusion assembles a compelling and original argument that Agamben's work—together, as a whole—issues one of the most profound critiques of theology that has yet been seen in the West while also dictating an entirely new horizon for philosophy than that which has previously been seen.

NOTES

1. John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: The Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 262.
2. Colby Dickinson, *Agamben and Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011). Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).
3. SE, 64.
4. Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Giorgio Agamben to Hannah Arendt, 21 February 1970, General, 1938–1976 (Series: Correspondence File, 1938–1976).
5. SE, 86.
6. The text is available at <http://www.harris-greenwell.com/HGS/TheNewAttorney>, and we recommend you take a moment to read it—it's very short and quite interesting.
7. SE, 64.
8. Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah: 1626–1676* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973).
9. SA.
10. OD.
11. Jessica Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption: The Political Thought of Giorgio Agamben* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), 4–5.
12. OD, 129.
13. 'Absolute Immanence', in P.
14. William Watkin, *Agamben and Indifference* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2014), xiii.

I

Agamben as a Reader of Benjamin

ONE

On the ‘Coming Philosophy’

Colby Dickinson

The work of Walter Benjamin has been perhaps the single most influential source of inspiration on Agamben’s work and one of the main reasons, I would conjecture, that Agamben’s writings tend to overlap between the theological, philosophical, political, cultural, and economic. There is, no doubt, also the genealogical methods of Michel Foucault that have made a significant, almost parallel impact on Agamben’s work. But it is still Benjamin who guides him the most. Besides providing a very eclectic platform from which to launch his focused studies on a variety of topics, Benjamin’s influence runs so deeply throughout Agamben’s thought that it permeates it not only in ways that he has not explicitly acknowledged (as I take up in a later chapter on citationality) but in ways that he himself might not even be aware of (and which Adam too addresses in the chapter that follows the present one). Following Benjamin, then, Agamben can at least be seen to set a course towards a new way of thinking through both politics and theology as yet, from another perspective, entirely philosophical projects (a point to be addressed directly in section 2, but which is prepared for in this chapter). What I hint at in the present study, however, is the way in which his methods and insights overlap with the philosophical (even phenomenological) project of Emmanuel Levinas, a connection which Agamben does not point to in his work, even and especially at times when it might seem obvious to do so (as when he talks of the ethics of the ‘face’ in his *Means without Ends*). Though I am not able to fully elaborate on this connection in the short essay that follows, I feel that this link is essential towards intuiting the profound, and often undisclosed, affinity between philosophy and theol-

ogy that is at work in much contemporary continental thought and which the present volume seeks to uncover and discuss in a number of respects.

In the early twentieth century, we witnessed how Walter Benjamin's project of the 'coming philosophy' was one that would redefine the relationship of knowledge and experience, primarily through its reenvisioning of the role of religious teachings (*Lehre*) within the realm of the philosophical. Using this realignment of the relationship between philosophy and theology as a starting point, we can perhaps understand how if the transcendental, ontotheological propositions embedded deep within the Western theological tradition are no longer valid, as Benjamin claims, then it is because our knowledge has entered into a unique relationship with an experience beyond what had previously been the case, one that entails an experience of reality without transcendence.

In the work of Agamben, as I intend to demonstrate in this chapter, the eradication of transcendence in our knowledge is indeed brought about so that we might experience the world and ourselves anew, a progression beyond representation (or law) and into the presentation (in religious terms, perhaps 'grace') of the 'thing itself', as such. According to Agamben, the relations between knowledge and experience have now come to the point that the immanent experience of our being no longer needs to rely upon a transcendental knowledge of itself in order to posit its own identity. In this time of the messianic, the 'time that remains', as he will call it, an immanent comprehension of our existence is all that we have, that which we face and that which we must adapt into our existing philosophies and theologies, consequently redefining what either of these disciplines could potentially be. The stakes for a complete redefinition of religion in the political sphere is part and parcel of such an encounter. Accordingly, there lingers in Agamben's thought an ethical imperative to form a 'coming community' based on one's always singular encounter with the face of the other, a quasi-transcendental, almost mystical experience that bears more than a passing affinity with the work of Emmanuel Levinas.

* * *

Arguably, the most influential thinker on Giorgio Agamben's work is the late modern literary critic Walter Benjamin, a writer whose eclectic patterns of thought traversed over many domains and disciplinary boundaries throughout his time, becoming in many ways the forerunner of what we would today refer to as 'cultural studies'. There is little doubt that his diverse blend of so many cultural realms—from Jewish theatre, European architecture, libraries, and Marxist thought to Russian literature, Parisian life, photography, the world of children's toys, and the oddities of cultural artefacts—was what gave his work its characteristic flare and its share

of subsequent influence in a world given over to the 'commodification' of life. This fascination on Benjamin's part with particular cultural forms and his inspired critical readings of their meaning and use in society has no doubt led many followers to construct similar undertakings within their own writings, and a catalogue of such leanings could no doubt quickly be assembled. The proximity of his thought to that of Agamben often seems to go beyond mere resemblance and into the territory of assimilation. What I hope to point towards in this chapter specifically is the way Benjamin's philosophy of language in relation to the force of the 'messianic'—if such a thing can be more or less determined—has been appropriated by Agamben as a full-scale critique of the most traditional philosophical and theological foundations and, moreover, how this particular strand of critical inquiry continues to illuminate our understanding of theology, politics, ethics, philosophy, and the interactions between each of these groupings, both for today and in the foreseeable future.¹

I turn from the outset to one among many of Benjamin's early unpublished fragments, one that contains a program for 'The Coming Philosophy' and which does not hesitate to draw its resources from a particular epistemological paradigm that will underlie the scope of this inquiry. As Benjamin so succinctly puts it: 'The central task of the coming philosophy will be to take the deepest intimations it draws from our times and our expectation of a great future, and turn them into knowledge by relating them to the Kantian system.'² It is this Kantian system which is singled out by Benjamin, not simply for its weighty influence on the subsequent history of philosophy but because of its resonance with the metaphysical and mythological themes that Benjamin finds so enticing. In this regard, he concludes that the 'commonly shared notion of sensuous (and intellectual) knowledge in our epoch, as well as in the Kantian and the pre-Kantian epochs, is very much a mythology like those mentioned'. And, he continues, 'in this respect, so far as the naïve conception of the receipt of perceptions is concerned, Kantian "experience" is metaphysics or mythology, and indeed only a modern and religiously very infertile one'.³ Experience, from this perspective, is merely the object of knowledge and not its source, something which renders it very 'infertile' for religious experience on the whole. This deduction, Benjamin is convinced, will allow for a space to exist between knowledge and experience where, in fact, a new type of experience will be allowed to accrue and the formulation of a new 'prolegomena to a future metaphysics'—a 'higher experience' if there ever is to be one—will appear.⁴ Just what such an 'experience' might be, however, remains somewhat veiled, though at times imperative.

What is clear from the start, however, is the understanding that 'philosophy is based upon the fact that the structure of experience lies within the structure of knowledge and is to be developed from it'.⁵ In turn,

everything is subsumed under this 'structure of knowledge', including religious thought, for the experience he is seeking to define

also includes religion, as the true experience, in which neither god nor man is object or subject of experience but in which this experience depends on pure knowledge as the quintessence of which philosophy alone can and must think god.⁶

His attempt, therefore, to establish a 'future epistemology' as a place of 'total neutrality' with regard to both the subject and object of thought becomes a site that seeks to eliminate the metaphysical entirely from their defining relations but not from a religious experience beyond the subject or object altogether. From a theological perspective, a certain reduction no doubt takes place here; one made so that a 'god' can be 'thought' from a purely philosophical perspective and so that a religious experience beyond metaphysical constraint might also be posited. It is as such an apparent reduction of any kind of established (onto)theology because it seeks to define the human being without recourse to any transcendently established divine being.

Though his ideas are perhaps startling compared to traditional theological claims wherein the human being is in some sense defined in relation to a speculated divinity, Benjamin is careful to clarify what exactly he means:

Thus, the task of the coming philosophy can be conceived as the discovery or creation of that concept of knowledge which, by relating experience exclusively to the transcendental consciousness, makes not only mechanical but also religious experience logically possible. This should definitely be taken to mean not that knowledge makes God possible but that it definitely does make the experience and doctrine of him possible in the first place.⁷

This is not a complete separation between the human and the divine but a careful circumscribing of what understanding makes clear and what it does not. The structures of thought and experience are indeed to be revealed in a manner that would go beyond Kant, though still in relation to him. From this point of view, we are able to see how Benjamin incorporates another element, that of language, to play a vital role in more accurately discerning the structures of experience. As he puts it, 'The great transformation and correction which must be performed upon the concept of knowledge, oriented so one-sidedly along mathematical-mechanical lines, can be attained only by relating knowledge to language, as was attempted by Hamann during Kant's lifetime.'⁸

Thus it is Johann Georg Hamann's linguistic focus—one modelled as a reaction to Kant's theoretical limitations—that strikes Benjamin as necessary for deducing how it is that humans situate themselves in the world. As an early confirmation of the 'linguistic turn' in philosophical thought perhaps, Benjamin illuminates a path that Agamben himself will later

follow directly, likewise taking Kant to task on the same grounds as Hamann, for favouring the certainty model of transcendental mathematics instead of turning to language as the ultimate grounds for knowledge.⁹ In this, I would suggest, Agamben follows Benjamin's lead without wavering, openly acknowledging his intention to continue Benjamin's line of thought in this direction.¹⁰ As Agamben outlines in his own project, 'Any rigorous formulation of the question of experience inevitably impacts on the question of language. This is where full weight must be given to Hamann's critique of Kant.'¹¹ The almost complete reduction of human experience to its relation with language will come to dominate Agamben's early thought, as will his continued allegiance to Benjamin's contribution to religious thought. This is a point we would do well to recall when Agamben tries to elucidate the relationship between language and revelation, and hence the manner in which the history of theology opens this up still further.¹²

For Benjamin, Kant's error was clear, and it offered us a glimpse of the path towards uniting knowledge made viable by this revelation of Kant's deficit. In this regard, and as far as Kant was concerned,

the consciousness that philosophical knowledge was absolutely certain and a priori, the consciousness of that aspect of philosophy in which it is fully the peer of mathematics, ensured that he devoted almost no attention to the fact that all philosophical knowledge has its unique expression in language and not in formulas or numbers.¹³

For this reason, Benjamin declares that philosophy is to be considered as 'systematically supreme' to the sciences as well as to mathematics (a move that Agamben will subtly follow throughout the many nuances taken within his own work).¹⁴ In a somewhat peculiar addition, however, Benjamin pauses to contemplate the implications for this reversal in terms of the priority of subject matter to be studied, and he determines that it is religion which will profit the most:

A concept of knowledge gained from reflection on the linguistic nature of knowledge will create a corresponding concept of experience which will also encompass realms that Kant failed to truly systematize. The realm of religion should be mentioned as the foremost of these.¹⁵

Without being too explicit as to his reasons for singling out religion as 'foremost of these', Benjamin nonetheless subsequently elevates the study of religious thought to a new level of epistemological inquiry. With something of a veiled theological meaning, he declares a certain type of knowledge or teaching (*Lehre*) to be the target of this trajectory. As he renders it:

Thus, the demand upon the philosophy of the future can ultimately be put in these words: to create on the basis of the Kantian system a

concept of knowledge to which a concept of experience corresponds, of which the knowledge is the teachings [*Lehre*].¹⁶

The Kantian turn to the structures alone of religious thought, coupled with an increased relevance for our linguistic situatedness as human beings, becomes for Benjamin the means of reaching the 'teachings', or *Lehre*, something towards which all knowledge tends to flow. Though Benjamin's efforts in this regard will not reach their 'summation' until he strives to articulate a vision of the messianic forces that move throughout history as a structural 'counterforce', these early ruminations point roughly in much the same direction, offering us a tempting rereading of the role of religion (or religious 'teachings') in our world.

As the English translators themselves have noted in their rendition of Benjamin's text, *Lehre* denotes something between 'teachings' and 'religious doctrine', though his exact meaning—due to the many definitions possible in the word's usage—ultimately remains unclear. An additional comment leads the reader to consider the connection made by Benjamin's most significant correspondent of this period, Gershom Scholem, between *Lehre* as being not only the 'status and path of mankind' but also as being the 'transcausal connectedness of things and their constitution in God'.¹⁷ If we are to take these statements at face value, it would lead us in a strange and almost circular route, from the erasure of any divine-human (metaphysical) relation as the condition for establishing identity to its unparalleled restatement in the 'transcausal connectedness of things and their constitution in God'. Very directly, such a shift in perspective was what informed Benjamin's reading of Kafka and the messianic moment when all things remain basically as they were but with a slight (yet very significant) difference—a point Agamben himself takes up again and again in his own work. Are we thus being led away from what Heidegger would later call an 'ontotheological' grounding of our existence, something Kant had once succumbed to, and towards another so far undisclosed theological foundation altogether? Or is what Benjamin pointing us towards something altogether different?

From one angle, the effacement of a possible ground for identity merely gives way to another, though one granted only after a difficult reworking of the general conditions for knowledge. Viewed perhaps as a necessity for modern thought, this reworked (or, we might also say, rejuvenated) alternate route for positing the human being as both 'without the divine' (in the initial effacement) and also oriented towards the divine (in the final reinstatement) presents itself as an interesting reconsideration of the grounds on which any potential theology rests. Yet how can theology rethink its relationship to the divine without falling into the traps to which it has previously been prey, that is, without merely being another reinscription into theological (dogmatic) formulas? Perhaps Benjamin can clarify this distinction with yet another:

To begin with, it is now clear that what is at stake is not the issue of the relationship between philosophy and religion but that between philosophy and the teachings of religion—in other words, the question of the relation between knowledge in general and knowledge of religion.¹⁸

As Benjamin himself recognized, this formula would alter the traditional relationship between philosophy and theology almost entirely: 'Such a philosophy in its universal element would either itself be designated as theology or would be superordinated to theology to the extent that it contains historically philosophical elements.'¹⁹

How then is one to consider doing philosophy as theology or as some reworked 'theology' operative on a level hitherto unknown? What forms would it take? What types of discourses would arise (if they could arise at all)? What would this even mean for those engaged in such activities, to displace the methodological rigor each has sought to maintain or the traditional disciplinary boundaries thought to separate them? The focus for Benjamin, it would seem, falls squarely and almost entirely on the realm of human experience as such, the site where everything would seem to be circumscribed. This, he seems here to say (and later will say, though in another valence), is the 'weak messianic force' that moves throughout history and that (re)frames our entire vision of time (and as Agamben himself will later assert as well, as we will soon see).²⁰ Clarifying himself further in an addendum to the original and somewhat brief essay, Benjamin adds that 'indeed, it must be said that philosophy in its questionings can never hit upon the unity of existence, but only upon new unities of various conformities to laws, whose integral is "existence"'.²¹

We can sense here the determinate force with which he invokes these religious teachings (*Lehre*), the source of much of humanity's most profound historical determinations concerning its own existence. It is in this way that philosophy can encounter something seemingly beyond itself which is yet within itself—in other words, the absolute.

The object and the content of this teaching, this concrete totality of experience, is religion, which, however, is presented to philosophy in the first instance only as teaching. Yet the source of existence lies in the totality of experience, and only in teaching does philosophy encounter something absolute, as existence, and in so doing encounter that continuity in the nature of experience.²²

This is what neo-Kantianism had failed to see. This is the trajectory which philosophy must dare to set itself towards, and religion will have to abide the consequences. In so many words, the project becomes one of bringing a religious experience of language, the experience of language itself (as religious experience), towards our understanding (philosophy) of existence itself, as well as their almost circular dance around each other providing a mutual reinforcement of the other's focus and drive. This would

be, of course, to mark off the linguistic turn in thinking through its ontological course, as Heidegger and Wittgenstein, two of Agamben's closest allies in further clarification of Benjamin's thought, both had attempted to do.²³

Again, the strange relationship between the human and the divine is broached by the almost paradoxical set of checks and balances which each places upon the other in their attempts to set limitations upon each other, to conduct each effacement with a later reinscription:

To say that knowledge is metaphysical means in the strict sense: it is related via the original concept of knowledge to the concrete totality of experience—that is, existence. The philosophical concept of existence must answer to the religious concept of teachings, but the latter must answer to the epistemological original concept.²⁴

The 'coming philosophy' is here laid out as what Benjamin conceives of as the 'virtual unity' of religion and philosophy, a unity achieved primarily through the 'incorporation of the knowledge of religion into philosophy' itself. This is pronounced, of course, shortly before adding, as if almost tongue in cheek, 'All of this is only a sketchy indication.'²⁵ It is this last hesitation, I am claiming, that provides an impetus for Agamben to continue the course of what Benjamin has projected, as we will now see.

AGAMBEN'S EXTENSION OF BENJAMIN'S 'COMING PHILOSOPHY'

One of the unresolved problematics in Benjamin's thought was his apparent inability to determine whether or not the subject-object dichotomy of philosophical speculation was an ancient or modern construction. His criticisms of the objectivist-historicist school of thought—as he took them up on occasion throughout his *Arcades Project*, for example—were firmly grounded in a critique of modernist views; yet his introduction of a messianic logic juxtaposed to historical progress often comes as implicitly wedded to an ancient biblical paradigm.²⁶ Peter Fenves, for one, has recently concluded that if Benjamin is to achieve his stated goal of attaining the 'coming philosophy' and so find a way to achieve a state of 'total neutrality' between the subject and the object, then he must take into account how the issue is really one of the relationship between continuity and discontinuity, a problem as old as anything else, especially as played out within the corridors of ancient Judaic thought.²⁷ Benjamin's preference for a messianic time, conceived as the point of disruption within historical time, was entirely indebted to this strain of ancient religious thought. It is also that which seemingly transcends the domain of the religious and offers itself as the most profane reading of time possible. As Fenves puts it, 'So conceived, messianic time is not another time; it is just

time.'²⁸ It is time, natural time, interrupting our historical, constructed narratives that Benjamin comes to rely upon so forcefully in his reflections on the concept of history.²⁹ Time, then: certainly something both ancient and modern.

This same unresolved nature of an oscillation between ancient and modern paradigms is also present in the work of Agamben and certainly in Jacques Derrida's critique of Agamben's work.³⁰ What Fenves points to as being the nature of messianic time, simply the natural course of time beyond our subjective (and sovereign) appropriations of it into history, is what Agamben picks up from Benjamin and further develops despite his own inability at times to distinguish whether the problematic is ancient or modern or both.³¹ Perhaps, by claiming that time is at once both an ancient and a modern dilemma, he rides the border between the two realms, as the problematic of time itself is grounded in our most basic representational patterns of thought; indeed, it is grounded in our very (in)ability to perceive anything at all. In Agamben's thought, there is an evolutionary principle that emerges within (what we have come to call) 'humanity' through its attempts to represent itself to itself, to justify its separation from the other animals, our true state of what we might call an 'original sin'.³²

Rather than simply dwell within this state of 'sin', however, Agamben firmly sets his sights on trying to perceive this state of things as it is in itself, naturally, as within a natural time that interrupts (as much as subverts) our historical sense of things. What he strives for is the presentation of an openness ('the Open') conceived as a form of 'pure visibility', the only way to allow the object to no longer be an object, at least one reducible to a subject-object dichotomy, but to transcend this act of naming (signification) in order to present itself as it truly is. This is the only way, he will stress again and again in a variety of contexts, which will allow the thing to present itself beyond its simply being objectified.³³

Trying to isolate the thing itself has certainly occupied a good portion of Agamben's writing. In a short essay titled 'The Idea of Glory' within his *Idea of Prose*, for example, Agamben goes so far as to characterize our ability to know things as bound by a 'necessary blindness' at the centre of all vision, a blindness that must be realized for what it is if we are ever to see the 'thing itself'. Using the eye as more than just a metaphor to describe it, he states:

At the point of innervations at which the image reflected in the retina becomes sight, the eye is necessarily blind. It organizes vision around this invisible centre—which also means that sight is entirely organized in order to prevent you from seeing its own blindness. It is as if every openness contained, set in its very centre, an uncancellable latency, as if every luminosity imprisoned an essential darkness.³⁴

The blind spot, we are told, is hidden from the animal that cannot form an experience of it due to its close proximity to the spot. The animal resides in a state of 'pure voice', in fact is this pure voice, entirely devoid of any experience of the image or representation. For the animal, presumably, there is only the presentation of things as they are constituted in and with this blind spot characteristic of all vision. Contrary to this state of animality, however,

in holding fast to this blind spot with all his might, man constitutes himself as a conscious subject. It is as if he desperately sought to see his own blindness. And so for man, a delay, a non-contiguity and a memory between stimulus and response, insinuates itself into every sight. For the first time appearance separates itself from the thing, the semblance from the shining. But this splash of darkness—this delay—permits that something be, is being. For us alone things are; only for us are things set free from our needs and from our immediate relation with them. They are: simply, marvelously, ungraspably.³⁵

Agamben's comments in *The Coming Community* regarding the liberation of the image from its theological signature under the historical progression of capitalism's furtherance of an objectified thing should be read in this light as well.³⁶ The 'idea of glory' appears here as an entrance into a realm of things severed from their theological signatures, something which the rise of capitalism points us towards at an accelerated pace but cannot by itself take us into.

It should be noted, however, that the severance of the theological signature from the thing itself, the thing before us, is not the sign of a complete break between the theological and the philosophical—or at least this (re)formulated sense of the theological beyond the theologies our world has hitherto known. Again, following Benjamin's (or, originally, Kafka's) gesture towards a genuine messianic moment, this is a religious quest above all else, a beholding of revelation as the presentation of the existence of language which is apparently the 'thing itself' that we have been after, that which frames all of our (very historical) representations. What Agamben hopes to do by pointing this fact out is to in some sense overcome the hold of language through language and only as such to point towards a new use of language, just as he tries to break the hold of theology through theology, and, I would suggest, to gain access to a possible new use for theology today. Therefore, he can conclude, 'And wasn't language given to us to free things from their images, to carry to appearance appearance itself, to lead it to glory?'³⁷ What we must now recognize is that such a vision of glory—a most solitary glory—is one that is at odds with the glory he later analyses in his *The Kingdom and the Glory*, one that contains a negative valence and which knows nothing of a possible 'other' glory still yet to come. But Agamben does seem to hint that such a thing is set upon the horizon.

This conclusion, of course, is perfectly symmetrical with his final remarks in an essay on 'The Thing Itself', where he unfolds the task of philosophical presentation as one of bringing speech to assist speech so that it is not presupposed but instead 'comes to speech'.³⁸ This is the only way, we are told, to formulate an 'authentic human community and communication'. And, lest we should mistake what is happening, 'to restore the thing itself to its place in language and, at the same time, to restore the difficulty of writing, the place of writing in the poetic task of composition: this is the task of the coming philosophy'.³⁹ Within this task, Agamben seeks to complete Benjamin's initial inquiry, to envisage a way beyond the hold of language and religion yet through both language and religion alike.

Towards the end of a subsequent essay on the nature of revelation as being bound up with the very idea of language, Agamben further asserts that the task of this coming philosophy is also to expose the limits of language and thus only to see, not anything per se, but 'that through which it sees things'.⁴⁰ This moment of seeing the very thing through which we see all else is the moment of revelation for Agamben, the moment of seeing things truly for the first time, or, in the Levinasian language he will on occasion take up, to behold the face of the other before us, in its sheer nudity and exposure to us.

Referring back to the passage at hand in *Idea of Prose*, we can now see an opening for the theological to reenter the horizon after the hold of its signatures has ceased. Specifically, we are able to comprehend how the 'vision of blindness' takes on a specifically theological resonance as an attempt to fathom an elusive, and 'eternally appearing', openness:

The only thing there would be to grasp here is an openness, a pure visibility: only a face. And the countenance is not something that transcends the face—it is the display of the face in its nudity, victory over character: word.⁴¹

The *logos*, or Word, is the face, that is, the lens through which all else is seen (and the resonance with the *logos* that is the Word and that is the face of God in John's Gospel is certainly worth mentioning). This is also a rereading of the entire theological project as we have hitherto known it, for 'if I were truly able to see the blind spot in my eye, I would see nothing (this is the darkness in which the mystics say that God dwells)'.⁴²

By situating his remarks as a commentary on the Western theological tradition, Agamben is poised to illuminate the reality of the 'thing itself' as it has developed within a transcendent (sovereign) framework—that is, as it has been masked, misperceived, and exploited. The trick now, for Agamben, is to profane this traditional notion of transcendence and to restore its workings to a purely human (profaned) realm—to let the natural face shine before us.⁴³ Only as such will there be a new usage for the theological available to us, one accessible through the profanation of

what was once held to be sacred and one wholly beyond what we have conceived theology to be thus far. Though this is in many ways a highly paradoxical situation to encounter—to find a new use for the theological through the profanation of our world—such is what Agamben conjectures and what might in fact be lurking within the Christian narrative itself in many ways.⁴⁴

Agamben's originality, however, would seem to lie precisely in his ability to graft this particular reading of messianic time to a Spinozist-Deleuzian conceptualization of 'absolute immanence'.⁴⁵ This reading would also offer us a renewed understanding of his often enigmatic and yet carefully pronounced statements in *The Coming Community* concerning God's being equal to the world, a proposition that, at least in some sense, would implicate him alongside Spinoza in the pronouncement of a 'God, or Nature' type relationship.⁴⁶ Agamben's interest in such appropriations can thereby be viewed as ultimately being the outgrowth of a 'theology of immanence' begun with Spinoza and culminating, at least in some sense, in the rise of a variety of 'object-oriented philosophies' now parading before us.⁴⁷

The challenge, from Agamben's standpoint and again following Benjamin here, is precisely to think beyond the subject-object split, to regress to a nonhistorical 'origin' which allows the thing before us, the thing itself, its face or its dazzling presence before us, to illuminate our understanding beyond those proscriptive logics that have bound us to their violent dominion. The 'regression' which Agamben seeks to disclose as key to our evolutionary movement is one that would likewise undo our hierarchical divisions, those between subject and object, animal and human, human and God (and, one would be tempted to add, between races and genders as well—a point I will take up in a later chapter).

Though this might be a problematic equivalence, since at least one recent 'speculative materialist' (Graham Harman) has drawn a firm distinction between a Deleuzian immanence of virtuality (and in this one can hear echoes of Agamben's use of the category of potentiality) and an object-oriented approach that focuses on actual objects, the conjoined turn to a plane of immanence does reflect a certain similarity and perhaps overlap.⁴⁸ This is the apparent gulf dividing 'object-oriented' philosophies from Agamben, as much as Deleuze can be divided from Bruno Latour: the materiality at stake is more potential than actual for Agamben, though the subversive structures of thought remain similar.

Yet, I want to ask, are things so clear? Is the characterization of a return to potentiality so removed from our actual, physical, even bodily being, the ultimate object, if one can put it that way? Could it rather be stated that a regression to a realm of pure potentiality is the only ethical way to engage an object or person before us, as it is in and of itself?

The seeds for such an ethical reading of our capacity for knowledge can be found most pointedly in Agamben's more recent writings on nud-

ity, as well as the glorious body, which for him is not simply a potential body but an insightful commentary on those bodies we inhabit here and now. This goes some way, then, in establishing a theory of materiality within Agamben's work, and this by the sheer fact that our nudity is not something peripheral to his thought but undeniably central to it. We are already our own potentiality, as his descriptions of the (theologically speculative) 'glorious body' being nothing more than our very earthly material bodies would have us conclude.⁴⁹ As he will state in this context, and as is reinforced at the conclusion to an essay on a form of Spinozist-Deleuzian immanence:

The glorious body is not some other body, more agile and beautiful, more luminous and spiritual; it is the body itself, at the moment when inoperativity removes the spell from it and opens it up to a new possible common use.⁵⁰

Such a new common use, the use opened up to us through this act of the profanation of the body, is what Agamben seeks in order that we might 'completely liberate nudity from the patterns of thought that permit us to conceive of it solely in a privative and instantaneous manner', a task then 'that requires uncommon lucidity'.⁵¹ Our nudity is the revelation of our potentiality that we barely know how to reveal, despite the obviousness and naturalness of its presentation.

By framing this discussion of our possible knowledge of the naked body with Agamben's multiple attempts to develop a pure potentiality, what I am hoping to demonstrate in this context is that his formulation of a 'knowledge of knowability' is not simply an immaterial abstraction from the 'real objects' before us. Rather, access to the 'thing itself' beyond any representational veils thrown over it is only possible through a permanent suspension of our perceptions as we have come to know them, through, that is, an entrance into a potentiality that effaces all representations or acts of naming. Only thus are we allowed to face the object before us, any object before us, whatever object before us, even our own bodies as they are in and of themselves.⁵² Another way to put this is that only as such are we confronted with the failures of our representations. The realization of this truth then opens us up to a radically new potential for what we could in fact be.

The use of the descriptor 'whatever' is not coincidental to articulating this state of being, for the absolute singularity of any whatever object can only be preserved through a regression to a realm of potentiality that allows for the preservation of an object's uniquely singular being. In his essay on nudity, he words it as such:

There is nothing behind the presumed clothing of grace, and it is precisely this condition of not having anything behind it, this pure visibility and presence, that is nudity. To see a body naked means to perceive

its pure knowability beyond every secret, beyond or before its objective predicates.⁵³

There is a quasi-religious experience of the thing itself beyond our categories utilized to understand it, as Benjamin had foreseen. All true knowing takes place on this level of the preservation of the object 'beyond or before its objective predicates'. It is in this sense as well that he can state how 'to know nudity is not to know an object but only an absence of veils, only a possibility of knowing'.⁵⁴ Or as he subsequently rewords it, 'The nudity that the first humans saw in Paradise when their eyes were opened is, then, the opening of truth, of "disclosedness" (*a-letheia*, "unconcealment"), without which knowledge would not be possible.'⁵⁵

A possibility only, perhaps, yes. But a possibility that may in fact allow us to know the object before us in a substantially different way, to experience it anew and even alter our coordinates for knowing it. It is the only real possibility we have for accessing the 'thing itself', whatever it may be. And this attempt to behold the 'thing itself' is what will allow Agamben to reveal the essence of our nudity as itself a revelation, the ground of all real revelation:

The nudity of the human body is its image—that is, the trembling that makes this body knowable but that remains, in itself, ungraspable. Hence the unique fascination that images exercise over the human mind. Precisely because the image is not the thing, but the thing's knowability (its nudity), it neither expresses nor signifies the thing. Nevertheless, inasmuch as it is nothing other than the giving of the thing over to knowledge, nothing other than the stripping off of the clothes that cover it, nudity is not separate from the thing: it is the thing itself.⁵⁶

The 'ungraspable' image that allows us to know the object, to recognize and orient ourselves in relation to it, 'neither expresses nor signifies the thing' because it is the thing itself, an experience of the thing that redefines our knowledge of it. The trembling image is the thing itself. Or, keeping his previous remarks in mind, the thing itself is the fragile word, the word that is aware of its being only a word. This is what religions have strived to communicate to us (their ethical core) but have been unable to pronounce—the truth of language that language itself cannot express, the blind spot that frames our vision, and so on.⁵⁷ Agamben draws the contrast between a 'weak' trembling image of our bodies in their sheer nudity, a word or body exposed, and a strong, transcendent, theological image of our bodies, one that is clothed in grace and for this reason false or deceptive.⁵⁸ This is the reason why an exposure of one's nudity, one's real vulnerability or weakness, is actually not such an enjoyable experience; rather, it is 'miserable' or a 'disenchantment' with the reality of the frail flesh before our eyes. And yet the sight of such an image is also the key towards overcoming our strong, theological inscrip-

tions upon the flesh. It is the path towards an unexpected salvation of sorts:

It is precisely the disenchantment of beauty in the experience of nudity, this sublime but also miserable exhibition of appearance beyond all mystery and all meaning, that can somehow defuse the theological apparatus and allow us to see, beyond the prestige of grace and the chimeras of corrupt nature, a simple, inapparent human body. The deactivation of this apparatus retroactively operates, therefore, as much on nature as on grace, as much on nudity as on clothing, liberating them from their theological signature.⁵⁹

The connections are therefore laid bare: the Spinozist-Deleuzian turn to immanence is merged with a Benjaminian focus on messianic time that enters into a Pauline critique of law and representation. The result is a coming philosophy that points directly towards a sort of object-oriented philosophy insofar as it establishes itself as a critique of all Western representational (dualistic) thought, and it does this insofar as it attempts to stand outside these confines. This is Agamben's effort to make a fundamental gesture towards a virtual (potential) clearing of the ontotheological terrain in order to access the object in itself. By situating this philosophical co-optation of the 'traditional theological' as an experience of the linguistic reality we dwell within, as Benjamin had earlier speculated, we thereby also approach the limits of the A/absolute, though perhaps in a way wholly unexpected—in a way that theology has historically (and ironically) avoided. Any responsible ethics must be founded on these grounds, and any religious or theological proposition that neglects to begin at this point misses the only genuine manner through which to approach a thing's alterity.⁶⁰

CONCLUSION

The case of the glorious body presents readers of Agamben's work with an interesting avenue by which to explore concepts of materiality within his philosophy, as his emphasis on potentiality often seemingly pushes the import of the material world to the background, exposing him to harsh criticism that his work lacks any substantial engagement with the very real political situations in which we find ourselves on a daily basis. What I am contending, however, is that this subtle, what I am calling Levinasian, thematic in his work is actually the prioritization of the ethical over the ontological—an ethics insofar as it is also a politics and a politics insofar as it is a theology (much as his recent work in the *Homo Sacer* series has amply demonstrated).⁶¹ It is the opening up of discourse (language) itself towards new forms of responsibility (for its own existence, for its own experiences, and in terms of its interactions with other discourses) that must be addressed before we can proceed to contemplate

the political, the theological, and the like. Agamben's main point here, and this is why I designate his movement as Levinasian, is that we must recognize our responsibility to the face before us, the whatever being that calls to us with its very presence, before we can begin to establish the various discourses that form our world and which have historically claimed superior positions to one another (theology as the 'Queen of the Sciences' perhaps foremost among them).

By suggesting this connection between Agamben and Levinas precisely regarding the problematic of immanence-transcendence, we might be able to demonstrate how Agamben's push beyond all structures of law and politics cannot be understood apart from Levinas's reading of the contrast between ethics and ontology—a contrast wherein he sees ethics taking priority. Such an alignment might, in fact, show how all formulations of political and legal community are more or less indebted to a particular conceptualization of transcendence, one that only arises through the failures of traditional notions of an ontotheological, sovereign transcendence and which is still in need of rearticulation today. Though such speculation would seem to return us to other forms of dominance (which are deceptively promised to be 'less' oppressive but end up being more so), we must recall Agamben's point that it is only through the act of facing the object stripped of all representational markings (hence its 'nudity') that we are able to access, though not necessarily label, that which lies before us.

By focusing, for example, on the ways Agamben seeks to demystify our bodies, freeing them of their theological signature so that they might be profane but at least able to enter into a new plane of immanent life beyond the bind of sovereign power, we are able to see how the political project of emancipation in his work is more concrete than has been imagined, as well as how it takes its cue from the ethical implications of one's encounter with the face before it. It is also perhaps (and again mirroring Levinas on this) a clarification of the atheism (or, perhaps better, profanation) at the heart of religious belief that one senses through his work to be an integrally determinant factor within any faith.⁶² That is, our bodies are and will remain our bodies; they cannot be dispensed with—they are essential to life. They can yet, however, be rid of their ideological or theological inscriptions, left to bear only a nudity shorn of any preconceived ideas of what nudity is supposed to represent in our world (e.g., pornography, sexual attractiveness, etc.). When critics dismiss his political challenges to the status quo of representational norms as a form of 'nihilism' (and which Adam will take up later in his chapter on 'messianic nihilism'), perhaps we are now in a better position to see what he is actually trying to achieve.

This is a small and subtle but nonetheless crucial shift in our perspective of the world we inhabit, not to mention the purity of a faith shorn of its sovereign-transcendent claims to power. In short, Agamben seems to

be seeking a politics free of ideology, a circulation of social relations that are not predetermined by the nexuses of power already established through traditional (often theological) sovereign rubrics. His challenge to our world is, therefore, continuously fresh, and his bold call needs to be heard time and again.⁶³

NOTES

1. For more on Benjamin's systematic attempts to formulate his thoughts, see two more recent remarkable books on Benjamin: Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), and Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). See also the excellent synthesis of Benjamin's thought in Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

2. Walter Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 100.

3. Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', 103.

4. Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', 102.

5. Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', 104.

6. Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', 104.

7. Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', 105.

8. Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', 107–8.

9. IH, 50–51.

10. IH, 17.

11. IH, 50.

12. See Giorgio Agamben, 'The Idea of Language', in P. See also the manner in which this theme is subsequently expanded upon in SL.

13. Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', 108.

14. Such a position is what Agamben himself is at pains to stress over and again, that his reworked vision for *philosophy* (and as, at times, contrasted with the 'poetic task', the 'political task', the 'theological task', etc.) is what, in the end, provides a pathway out of the scissions in late modern thought. This weighting given to philosophy, seemingly as a slight to other 'paths', however, is one that in the end opens us up to wholly new, original readings of the other 'tasks' of humanity (i.e., religion, politics, ethics, etc.). In this sense, Agamben will be able to follow Benjamin's progression from 'coming philosophy' to a redefined sense of the religious, one that includes the category of experience in a way that previous philosophies did not.

15. Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', 108.

16. Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', 108.

17. Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), 73, cited in Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', 110n4. On Agamben's critique of Scholem's reading of Benjamin, see, among others, Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

18. Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', 109.

19. Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', 108.

20. See Fenves, *Messianic Reduction*.

21. Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', 109.

22. Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', 109.

23. CC, appendix.

24. Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', 110.

25. Benjamin, 'On the Program of the Coming Philosophy', 110.
26. See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), as well as Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History', in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003). See also the connections made in Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin*.
27. See Fenves, *Messianic Reduction*, chap. 7.
28. Fenves, *Messianic Reduction*, 244. Fenves continues: 'In order for historiography to correspond with time without succumbing to myth, the philologist cum historian must abstain from attributing to the "historical process" the essential characteristic of time: continuity. Since the directionality of this process owes its origin to guilt, which always deepens, the "times" in which the historical continuum collapses cannot fail to be redemptive.'
29. See the way this interacts with Agamben's notion of time in Agamben, *Time That Remains*.
30. See Agamben's oscillations in HS; Jacques Derrida's critique of Agamben in Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, ed. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet, and Ginette Michaud, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), as well as my take on this debate in Colby Dickinson, *Between the Canon and the Messiah: The Structure of Faith in Contemporary Continental Thought* (London: Continuum, 2013).
31. Cf. HS, as well as IH.
32. See O. I have commented at length on this issue already in Colby Dickinson, *Agamben and Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011).
33. See 'The Thing Itself', in P.
34. IP, 127.
35. IP, 127–28.
36. CC, 48–50.
37. IP, 128.
38. P, 35.
39. P, 38.
40. 'The Idea of Language', in P, 46.
41. IP, 128.
42. IP, 128.
43. Such a focus on the 'face' before us, exposed in its nudity as a 'form of life' before us, has been taken up directly by Agamben more recently in a number of contexts, including N and HP.
44. See Dickinson, *Agamben and Theology*, 165–75.
45. See the speculation on just this point in Eric L. Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 138n63.
46. CC, 90. See also Dickinson, *Agamben and Theology*, 165–75.
47. On such a 'theology of immanence' in Agamben's work, see Antonio Negri, 'Sovereignty: That Divine Ministry of the Affairs of Earthly Life', in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 9, no. 1 (2008): 96–100.
48. See Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne, Australia: Re.press, 2009).
49. On Agamben and his relation to issues of gender and sexuality, see Colby Dickinson, chapter 10, 'The "Absence" of Gender', in the present volume.
50. N, 103. Cf. 'Absolute Immanence', in P.
51. N, 65.
52. See Agamben's remarks on the 'whatever body' throughout CC.
53. N, 81.
54. N, 81.
55. N, 81.
56. N, 84.

57. See 'The Idea of Language', in P, as well as SL.

58. Cf. the comments on grace in TR.

59. N, 90.

60. The overlap here with the thought of Emmanuel Levinas is deliberate. See especially Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being; or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne, 1981).

61. Among other works both cited and unmentioned here, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

62. See PR.

63. See, among examples of such a reading, the notion of 'pure critique' developed in Thanos Zartaloudis, *Giorgio Agamben: Power, Law and the Uses of Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2010).

TWO

Reading the 'Critique of Violence'

Adam Kotsko

There can be little question that Walter Benjamin is the single most important influence on Agamben's thought. When he first encountered Benjamin's work, Agamben reports feeling that it could 'save him' from becoming a mere disciple of Heidegger, whose late seminars he attended. Agamben then went on to edit the complete works of Benjamin in Italian and discovered the manuscript for the book on Baudelaire that Benjamin was working on at the time of his death. Colby's chapters in this part rightly emphasize the importance of viewing Agamben first of all as a reader of Benjamin. What I explore in this piece, by contrast, is the possibility that Agamben is a misreader of Benjamin as well. I take my point of departure from the centrality of Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' in *Homo Sacer* and argue that Agamben consistently reshapes Benjamin's concepts to fit into the mould of Schmitt's. I conclude by arguing that this misreading of Benjamin is not merely a philological matter but a significant missed opportunity that hampers the development of his political thought.

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben devotes a crucial 'threshold' to an extremely compressed reading of Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence',¹ a threshold that provides the transition between his elaboration of the logic of sovereignty and his analysis of the concept of *homo sacer* or 'bare life'. That Benjamin's essay should play such a crucial role in Agamben's text is unsurprising. First, Benjamin is arguably the most important authority for Agamben's intellectual project as a whole, rivalled only by Aristotle and Heidegger. More specifically, Agamben's investigations in the eponymous second part of *Homo Sacer* are prompted by Benjamin's suggestion

that 'it might be well worth while to track down the origin of the dogma of the sacredness of life [*dem Ursprung des Dogmas von der Heiligkeit des Lebens*]',² an origin that Agamben will track down by using the Heideggerian method of determining the etymology of the word 'sacred' (though not Benjamin's *Heiligkeit*) and claiming its earliest etymological roots as being the most originary meaning of the word. This of course leads to a highly counterintuitive and even disturbing definition of the 'sacredness of life', which, far from indicating the extremely high value of human life as it seems to have been intended to do, instead denotes the exposure of bare life to sovereign power.

Agamben does not simply take up Benjamin's suggestion and allow his investigations to take him wherever they may lead—or at least he does not wish to present himself as doing so. Instead, Agamben takes the further step of attempting to vindicate many of Benjamin's initial intuitions about the concept of the 'sacredness of life'. While Agamben stops short of demonstrating that the concept is 'relatively recent', as Benjamin suggests, his deployment of Aristotle's distinction between *zoē* and *bios*³ indicates that there was at least a time in the Western tradition before the 'dogma of the sacredness of life' became widespread—and he goes on to suggest that it was in fact only the concept of sacred life that allowed the inchoate fragments of the Greek concept of life to be united into a single word.⁴ More importantly for the structure of his overall argument, Agamben follows Benjamin in positing a connection between the idea of sacred life and the figure of 'the marked bearer of guilt [in mythological thought]: bare life [*das bloße Leben*]'.⁵ This figure of 'bare life' is crucial for Agamben: 'The analysis of this figure—whose decisive function in the economy of the essay has until now remained unthought—establishes an essential link between bare life and juridical violence.'⁶

If we bring together all of what Agamben takes from 'Critique of Violence', we find that it supplies the basic structure of his project in *Homo Sacer*: an investigation of the origin of the concept of the sacredness of life (necessarily implying a rethinking of contemporary figures of sacred life, as in part 3 of the book), which will illuminate the relationship between bare life and juridical violence. Despite the fact that so many other authorities—Aristotle, Foucault, Arendt, Schmitt, and so on—are foregrounded, Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' would appear to provide the primary impetus, a debt that is acknowledged by the use of a reading of that essay as the connective tissue between the first two parts of the book.

That this is the case for the investigation of bare life or sacred life is clear from the very beginning of the second part of *Homo Sacer*. The primacy of Benjamin with regard to the analysis of the logic of sovereignty, however, is, curiously enough, not asserted until the first 'threshold', that is, after that analysis has already been undertaken. Instead, in the introduction to the entire volume, which serves as a kind of 'threshold' to

the first part on sovereignty, Carl Schmitt's definition of sovereignty from *Political Theology* initially seems to serve a role parallel to Benjamin's comments on sacred life in the first 'threshold'—only after Schmitt's definition has been asserted does Benjamin's oft-repeated dictum that the state of exception has become the rule come on the scene as an apparent supplement. Schmitt's definition, Agamben argues, 'became a commonplace even before there was any understanding that what was at issue in it was nothing less than the limit concept of the doctrine of law and the State', that is, the border between sovereignty and life.⁷ The true stakes were concealed as long as the state-form was strong, but 'now that the great State structures have entered into a process of dissolution and the emergency has, as Walter Benjamin foresaw, become the rule, the time is ripe to place the problem of the originary structure and limits of the form of the state in a new perspective'.⁸ The question obviously arises: Was Schmitt right all along? Does Benjamin fail to add anything other than a diagnosis that allows us to see precisely what was always at stake in Schmitt's concept of sovereignty?

Judging from the analysis that follows in the first part of *Homo Sacer*, it would appear that the answer to both questions is yes. Yet once that analysis is complete, Agamben attempts to reassert Benjamin's priority, beginning the first 'threshold' by asserting that 'Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" proves the necessary and, even today, indispensable premise of every inquiry into sovereignty'.⁹ After briefly laying out the basic terms of the essay and in particular the thorny problem of 'divine violence', Agamben brings Benjamin's text into relation with Schmitt's: 'It is likely that in 1920, at the time Benjamin was working on the "Critique," he had not yet read Schmitt's *Political Theology*, whose definition of sovereignty he would cite five years later in his book on the Baroque mourning play.'¹⁰ One might justly replace 'likely' with 'extremely likely' or 'virtually certain', as *Political Theology* was not published until 1922. Unless he is proposing that Schmitt's text was available in manuscript in early 1920 and that Benjamin and Schmitt were not only personally involved before Benjamin's 1930 letter to Schmitt¹¹ but close enough that Schmitt would allow Benjamin to read his manuscript, Agamben appears to be in error here.

This gesture towards the possibility of Schmitt's temporal priority is symptomatic, as Agamben gives Schmitt a definite conceptual priority. Although he admits that 'sovereign violence and the state of exception . . . , do not appear in the essay, and it is not easy to say where they would stand with respect to the violence that posits law and the violence that preserves it', Agamben very quickly moves to set sovereign violence in relationship to divine violence, eliding mythical violence altogether. The obscurity in the concept of divine violence stems from Benjamin's lack of the conceptual toolbox Schmitt provides; with Schmitt in mind, we can see that divine violence corresponds to the 'real state of exception'

from the 'Theses'. Only at this point does Agamben return to the question of mythical violence or to the dialectic of law-making and law-preserving violence, citing one of Benjamin's descriptions of this dynamic as 'the only point in which the essay approaches something like a definition of sovereign violence'.¹² This being established, Agamben turns immediately to the question of the sacredness of life, discussed above.

A certain degree of confusion is evident in this extremely condensed argument. Benjamin is supposed to be the 'indispensable premise of every inquiry into sovereignty' but does not mention sovereignty because of the contingent fact that he 'likely' did not read a book that was published over a year after he wrote his essay. Due solely to this omission, his concept of divine violence is obscure but becomes immediately clear once the logic of sovereignty is imported—after which we can see that the dynamics of mythical violence were close to being Schmitt's theory of sovereignty. If Benjamin is the 'indispensable premise of every inquiry into sovereignty', then it would appear that he is only such as a proto-Schmitt, and thus he is not indispensable at all. Aside from a brief summary of its most obvious features, 'Critique of Violence' is never read on its own terms.

In *State of Exception*, Agamben appears to have almost completely reversed course on the question of the relationship between Benjamin and Schmitt. Rather than hypothesizing some minimal possibility that Benjamin read the yet-to-be-published *Political Theology* while composing 'Critique of Violence', Agamben asserts, based on Schmitt's general reading habits, that Schmitt in fact most likely read 'Critique of Violence'—and wrote *Political Theology* in response.¹³ After laying out Benjamin's assertion that all legal problems are fundamentally undecidable, Agamben claims that '*Political Theology* can be read as a precise response to Benjamin's essay'.¹⁴ Where Benjamin claims that divine violence is completely outside the law, Schmitt posits a sovereignty that suspends the law; where Benjamin claims that all legal problems are undecidable, Schmitt 'affirms sovereignty as the place of the extreme decision'.¹⁵ With this in mind, Agamben (following Sam Weber) rereads Benjamin's use of Schmitt in the *Trauerspielbuch* as part of a continuing dialogue, allowing him to see the ways in which Benjamin's idea of sovereignty diverges from Schmitt. Most significantly, 'Benjamin ironically divides sovereign power from its exercise and shows that the baroque sovereign is constitutively incapable of deciding'.¹⁶ Thus, 'the paradigm of the state of exception is no longer the miracle, as in *Political Theology*, but the catastrophe', leading to a concept of an eschaton without content.¹⁷ Finally, Agamben reads Benjamin's contrast between the exception that has become the norm and the real state of exception as a rereading of Schmitt's distinction (in *Die Diktatur*) between the legal fiction of a regulated state of exception and 'the merely factual action of the president of the Reich under Article 48'.¹⁸

It is at this point that the argument once again becomes confused. It is clear enough that Schmitt opposes the halfway measures of liberals who will not admit the existence of a real state of exception and instead attempt to create a state of emergency that would somehow still be rule-bound. Yet is it really the case that Benjamin's eighth thesis wishes only to assert that 'the state of exception "in which we live" is real and absolutely cannot be distinguished from the rule' and that 'every fiction of a nexus between violence and law disappears here'?¹⁹ That is, is Benjamin simply reaffirming that there is a zone of violence divorced from law and that the current situation demonstrates that such is the case? In the light of the entire eighth thesis, such a reading of the concept of a 'real state of exception' seems unlikely:

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of exception [*Ausnahmezustand*]' in which we live is the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of exception [*Dann wird uns als unsere Aufgabe die Herbeiführung des wirklichen Ausnahmezustands vor Augen stehen*], and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism. One reason why fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.²⁰

Crucial here is the claim that the task is the bringing about of a 'real state of exception'. If one is to bring Benjamin's 'real state of exception' into contact with the 'divine violence' of the 'Critique of Violence', this sense of active agency certainly seems like a relevant point—after all, 'divine violence' is explicitly thought of in terms of the proletarian general strike (as opposed to the merely political strike), and here the realization that creating the 'real state of exception' is a necessary task is part of the struggle against fascism. In both cases, Agamben completely elides this aspect of Benjamin's argument. Instead, he posits the 'real state of exception' as something that is somehow already revealed as present in the situation under fascism, just as he claims that 'pure violence'—not 'divine violence'—'is attested to only as the exposure and deposition of the relation between violence and law'.²¹

These gaps in Agamben's readings are reflective of the same problem that affected the first 'threshold', as in *Homo Sacer*. In *State of Exception* the argument is considerably better documented and more nuanced, but despite the claim that Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence' directly affected the argument in *Political Theology*, Agamben still allows Schmitt to control the terms of the debate. Just as in *Homo Sacer*, 'Critique of Violence' is initially read in terms of the themes that resonate directly with Schmitt, almost as if the essay were a (preemptive) critique of *Political Theology* rather than

the other way around—and then after a certain number of detours, Agamben again arrives at the ‘real state of exception’, resulting in a reading of ‘Critique of Violence’ in terms of Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty. Certainly in *State of Exception* Benjamin is not so immediately collapsed into Schmitt as in *Homo Sacer*, but why the necessity to leap directly to reading ‘Critique of Violence’ in terms of Schmitt at all? To be sure, it is a difficult essay; however, it is difficult not because it is a half-digested fragment but rather because it is so dense—that is, because it is so tightly and rigorously argued. The essay itself does not mention sovereignty or the state of exception, and it seems on the face of it to represent a well-developed position of its own. Beyond that, some of Agamben’s evidence from Benjamin’s later writings seems to indicate that Benjamin himself did not feel particularly constrained by Schmitt’s terms: in the *Trauerspielbuch*, Benjamin presents a sovereign who is indecisive in the face of a catastrophe, that is, the precise opposite of Schmitt’s sovereign whose decision is necessary to convert the emergency (*Ausnahmefall*) into the state of emergency (*Ausnahmezustand*). Indeed, the reference to the *Ausnahmezustand* that has become the rule, if it refers to Schmitt at all, would seem to indicate that far from being a delimited and exceptional situation that is controlled by some particular sovereign subject, the so-called state of exception is, from the perspective of the oppressed, actually a historical constant.

In sum, before he was even able to read *Political Theology*, Benjamin developed a position of his own on the relationship between law and violence, and once he had access to Schmitt’s theory of sovereignty, he did not, as Agamben presents it, carefully stay a hairsbreadth away from it—rather, he decisively rejected it. All this indicates that for Benjamin, sovereignty was not the central concept for the analysis of juridical violence, and therefore Agamben’s attempt to follow through on Benjamin’s account of the ‘essential link between bare life and juridical violence’²² by importing Schmitt’s conceptual scheme is highly questionable at best.

Of course, one might object that this is largely a philological question that does not bear directly upon the stakes of Agamben’s project—his desire to ground his project in Benjamin is a relatively minor point, perhaps even a matter of personal idiosyncrasy, and is in any case separable from the question of whether his account of the relationship between sovereign power and bare life is convincing on its own terms. This is in principle a valid objection; but in this particular case, the stakes seem to me to be higher than a merely philological question. Agamben’s decision to ignore Benjamin’s reasons for rejecting Schmitt’s account of sovereignty and, more importantly, not to take seriously Benjamin’s own independently developed account of the nature of juridical violence (beyond the very brief expositions that are present in both *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception*) has very significant consequences precisely for his conceptual analysis.

For the purposes of this chapter, I will not attempt a complete reading of 'Critique of Violence',²³ but will instead limit myself to one particular aspect of the essay that Agamben does not address and seems to me to bear most directly on Agamben's project in *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception*, namely, the concrete figures that Benjamin uses in his analysis of juridical violence. Although Agamben does summarize the basic outlines of Benjamin's dialectic of law-founding and law-preserving violence in both texts, he immediately brings that dialectic into relation with Schmitt's concept of sovereignty. The sovereign decision is not, however, among the figures that Benjamin associates with this dialectic of juridical or 'mythical' violence. Instead, he first analyses juridical violence in terms of fate and brings the concept of fate into relationship with the critique of the death penalty, claiming that 'an attack on capital punishment assails, not legal measure, not laws [*Gesetze*], but law itself [*das Recht selbst*] in its origin. . . . For in the exercise of violence over life and death more than in any other legal act, law reaffirms itself.'²⁴ Thus, to 'a finer sensibility', the death penalty reveals 'something rotten in the law [*etwas Morsches im Recht*]' because the subject of the law 'knows himself to be infinitely remote from the conditions in which fate might imperiously have shown itself in such a sentence'.²⁵

The death penalty, however, is not the most extreme manifestation of 'something rotten in the law'. Rather, Benjamin argues that 'in a far more unnatural combination [*widernatürlicheren Verbindung*] than in the death penalty, in a kind of spectral mixture, these two forms of violence [namely, law-making and law-preserving] are present in another institution of the modern state, the police'.²⁶ The police are, on the one hand, apparently limited to legal ends—they enforce the law. On the other hand, however, they gain a kind of subterranean authority to set those very ends through 'the right of decree'. The latter authority normally goes unnoticed 'simply because its ordinances suffice only seldom for the crudest acts', but its existence is nonetheless problematic insofar as 'in this authority the separation of lawmaking and law-preserving violence is suspended [*aufgehoben ist*]'. In what might be called a normal situation, law-making violence 'is required to prove its worth in victory', while law-preserving violence 'is subject to the restriction that it may not set itself new ends.' However, 'Police violence is emancipated from both conditions.' Thus the police have broad discretionary power for regulating or even 'simply supervising' citizens' everyday lives.²⁷ At this point, we come to a sentence that Agamben quotes in part in *State of Exception*,²⁸ with no regard to its context in this discussion of the police:

Unlike law, which acknowledges in the 'decision [*Entscheidung*]' determined by place and time a metaphysical category that gives it a claim to critical evaluation [this subordinate clause, which apparently refers to the judicial decision rather than the sovereign decision, is all that

Agamben quotes], a consideration of the police institution encounters nothing essential at all [in the 'decision']. Its power is formless, like its nowhere tangible, all-pervasive, ghostly apparition in the life of civilized states.²⁹

The existence of such an institution would perhaps be more tolerable under an 'absolute monarchy . . . in which legislative and executive supremacy are united', but 'in democracies . . . [its] existence . . . bears witness to the greatest conceivable degeneration of violence.'³⁰

For Benjamin, then, it is clear that the police represent the privileged figure of juridical violence, even more so than the death penalty. Their broad discretion to 'intervene "for security reasons" in countless cases where no legal situation exists'³¹ leads to the utter breakdown of the normal concepts of legitimacy and exposes the citizen, in principle if not always in practice, to arbitrary violence and supervision. The contrast between Benjamin's police and Schmitt's sovereign exception could not be clearer—on the one hand, a ghostly apparition haunting the everyday; on the other, a well-defined state grounded in a legitimate decree. In terms of the presumably normal operation of law-making and law-preserving violence, the relationship with Schmitt's theory of sovereignty is somewhat more plausible, but ultimately Benjamin's conception is significantly different. One could, with some justification, draw an analogy between law-preserving violence and the presumed normal state (as opposed to the exceptional state) in Schmitt, but the sovereign exception and law-making violence have a significantly different valence. Where Schmitt envisions an emergency measure that leads to a reinstatement of the juridical order, Benjamin is clearly thinking in terms of revolution and in fact attacks modern parliaments for 'lack[ing] the sense that a lawmaking violence is present in themselves'—presumably meaning their origin in revolution.³²

Thus we can say that whereas Schmitt gives us a reactionary or nostalgic account of juridical violence, Benjamin gives us a distinctly modern one—and one that already goes a significant distance towards diagnosing what Agamben calls the 'idea of an inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism'.³³ Benjamin's analysis of the corruption of the promise of democracy by the omnipresence of police violence leads quite intuitively to the idea that the difference between liberal democracies and totalitarian states—also known as 'police states'—may be a quantitative rather than a qualitative distinction. Seriously deploying Benjamin's own concept of the police in the analysis of the 'essential link between bare life and juridical violence'³⁴ would also allow Agamben to proceed more directly in his attempted combination of Arendt and Foucault. Foucault's concept of a biopolitics that replaces any logic of sovereignty could be tied directly to Arendt's penetrating analyses of the relationship of refugees or stateless persons to the police. Finally, the increasing prevalence

of rule by executive decree in modern democracies documented in *State of Exception* could be seen not as a reassertion of the sovereign exception but as a steady growth of the dominance of police power even in nominally democratic states. All of his key insights would have remained in place, but by working directly with Benjamin's concepts rather than re-routing so much of his work through Schmitt, Agamben could have made his arguments much more directly and, one suspects, more convincingly.

ADDENDUM

When I first wrote this piece, Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Glory* had not yet appeared.³⁵ Compared to the early volumes of the *Homo Sacer* series, that text engages much more directly with Foucault's work on governmentality, displacing the theory of sovereignty in ways that initially appear to be broadly similar to what I recommended in the conclusion to this chapter. This is clearest in a key passage where Agamben summarizes what he takes to be the most important result of *The Kingdom and the Glory*: 'What our investigation has shown is that the real problem, the central mystery of politics is not sovereignty, but government; it is not God, but the angel; it is not the king, but ministry; it is not the law, but the police—that is to say, the governmental machine that they form and support.'³⁶ Ultimately, however, as I attempt to demonstrate in my chapter 'Perhaps Psychoanalysis?' in the present volume, even in *The Kingdom and the Glory* Agamben remains captivated by the logic of sovereignty, which remains the 'centre of gravity' of his investigation as well as its endpoint.

NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1978). In this chapter, I will be consulting the German text found in 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt', in Walter Benjamin, *Zur Kritik der Gewalt und andere Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1965). English page numbers will be given first, followed by the German page number ('English/German').

2. Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', 299/63.

3. HS, 1. But see Derrida's claim that this distinction 'is more tricky and precarious; in no way does it correspond to the strict opposition on which Agamben bases the quasi totality of his argument about sovereignty and the biopolitical in *Homo Sacer*'. Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 24.

4. HS, 66.

5. Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', 299/63; translation altered.

6. HS, 65.

7. HS, 11.

8. HS, 12.

9. HS, 63.
10. HS, 64; emphasis added.
11. See SE, 52.
12. HS, 65.
13. SE, 52–53.
14. SE, 54.
15. SE, 54.
16. SE, 55.
17. SE, 56. Here it would seem obvious to bring in the concept of divine violence, but Agamben does not do so.
18. SE, 59.
19. SE, 59.
20. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257 (translation altered); Walter Benjamin, 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', in *Illuminationen* (Frankfurt am Maine, Germany: Suhrkamp, 1977), 254–55.
21. SE, 62.
22. SE, 65.
23. For which see Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority', trans. Mary Quaintance, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 228–98. While he makes some very idiosyncratic claims—for instance, about the relationship between Benjamin's first name and the title 'Zur Kritik der Gewalt' and between Benjamin's 'divine violence' and the Nazi 'final solution'—Derrida's reading here is, characteristically, much more careful and attentive than Agamben's.
24. Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', 286/42–43.
25. Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', 286/43; translation slightly altered.
26. Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', 286/43.
27. Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', 286/44.
28. SE, 53.
29. Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', 287/44–45; translation altered. Agamben skips directly to a quotation referring to 'the curious and at first discouraging experience of the ultimate undecidability of all legal problems [*die seltsame und zunächst entmutigende Erfahrung vor der letzten Unentscheidbarkeit aller Rechtsprobleme*]' (293/54), again without noting its context (a discussion of a violence unrelated to legal ends). The only important thing for Agamben is the presence of the word *Entscheidung* and its cognates, which will allow him once again to bring Benjamin into direct dialogue with Schmitt.
30. Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', 287/45.
31. Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', 287/44.
32. Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', 288/46.
33. HS, 10.
34. HS, 65.
35. The Italian edition appeared in late 2007, and I first read it in the summer of 2008, as the original version of the present chapter was going to press.
36. KG, 276.

THREE

Gestures of Text and Violence

Colby Dickinson

As Adam highlighted in the last chapter, Walter Benjamin's influence on Agamben's work runs deep, perhaps much deeper than even Agamben himself has realized. Benjamin's effect on the philosophical conclusions we are here putting under closer scrutiny also becomes extremely relevant precisely at the moment when a myriad of voices rise up to challenge Agamben's apparent motion made towards bringing an end to politics as we know it. As many of his fiercest critics have charged, Agamben is looking to push towards a presentation of the 'thing itself' beyond all representation. Yet I continue to wonder, is this what Agamben is really up to in his work? Is the conclusion that he is trying to reach really one that should put people on the defensive because their world as they know it is about to end? Will all the familiar touchstones within our social and cultural representations be lost to us forever, the great fear that so many have read into Agamben's work? Along with Adam, I am convinced that something else is at stake here, something with potentially very radical consequences to be sure but also something that has not yet been fully grasped by those reading Agamben's many books. The present chapter is an odd result of trying to put Agamben's thoughts on 'gesture' — themselves heavily indebted to Benjamin — in relation to René Girard's thesis on the interrelations between sacrifice and sacrality in our contemporary world (mainly because I was presenting this research at a conference on Girard's thought at the University of Notre Dame some years ago). As careful readers of his *Language and Death* will have noticed, and of which readers of Girard are mainly only beginning to take note, there is a strong affinity between the two authors on precisely how we might move past the violence that is seemingly inextricably bound up

with human politics. By focusing in this chapter on Benjamin's early conceptualization of mimesis and its relation to language, I believe that a position can be elaborated that attempts to steer mimesis clear of its indebtedness to language and towards a 'purer' realm of gesture. Benjamin's formulation of a more proper 'divine' language of gestures could then be said to coalesce with certain historical-religious proclamations, something which Agamben's work challenges us to consider as a viable, albeit 'profane', political and ethical option for humanity. In many ways, I think this is a significant key that unites Adam's and my shared readings of Agamben in this volume, for if there is a way to think beyond the violence, gesture must play a central role.

Over the past few decades, the work of René Girard has had a tremendous impact on the study of religion, springing from his first, more literary-critical forays into a full-fledged scriptural-mythological debate.¹ His essential 'discovery', as it were, lies in the revelation of a violence implicitly at work in any form of communal self-understanding and of the ways that the various world's religions and myths have tended either to conceal and thus perpetuate this violence (as in the realm of myth, Greek, Roman, etc.) or to reveal and thereby denounce it (as in the Judeo-Christian heritage). That is, according to Girard, every community is prone to select and exclude its scapegoats (a choice often resulting in their death or exile), and only a revelation of this hidden violence can possibly bring about a peaceful resolution. Only those seeking the truth of violence, and hence our violent communal origins, can escape from this mimetic (or 'imitative') cycle. In general, Girard's theories have widened our understanding of how the processes of mimetic rivalry and scapegoating go hand in hand, though his work remains peripheral in the eyes of many.²

Subsequent criticisms of Girard's work have tended to view his theories as being too 'grand' or all-encompassing in some sense, too broad, for example, in their explanation of how all social groupings have tended to function along the same basic axis of a mimetic desiring that explains all violent conflicts; and though there are some who tend to see his work as approaching the most important underlying dynamics of society, it falls short or at least in need of revision in the end.³ Though I would certainly see a critical engagement with Girard's general theory as a productive one, what I intend to point towards in this chapter is what I am calling a 'mimetic affinity' between (as well as its accompanying challenge to) Girard's work and two other astute cultural theorists of recent times, Walter Benjamin and his apparent heir, Giorgio Agamben. By attempting to trace a movement away from mimesis and its connection to language and (textual) religion, as begun in the work of Benjamin and picked up somewhat later in Agamben, I want to illustrate how their affinity with the work of Girard in a sense both confirms and provokes a

Girardian worldview, pushing beyond its limitations and offering new vistas for thought, both philosophically and theologically.

MIMESIS AND GESTURE

In 1933, Walter Benjamin wrote a short, unpublished treatise titled 'On the Mimetic Faculty' in which he spoke of humanity's 'highest capacity' for producing similarity as the basis for producing common understandings.⁴ From the play of children to the history of dance and from magic to our core religious sentiments, Benjamin continuously sketched what a cohesive analysis of mimetic behaviour might resemble in light of the fact that, as he put it, 'there is perhaps not a single one of [our] higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role'.⁵ By highlighting the singular significance of the mimetic faculty in relation to the 'law of similarity' which has governed over 'both microcosm and macrocosm' for centuries, Benjamin noted how our propensity for recognizing similarities through the use of our mimetic faculty has evolved over the years, an evolution which indicated something of its fragility and mutability as well. By viewing our mimetic capacity as such, he was able to discern a mimetic component at the heart of human behaviour that was also foundational for all human institutions; yet this was a discernment which, according to him, had unfortunately been lost (or hidden) as time progressed. And so, now, 'the perceptual world of modern man contains only minimal residues of the magical correspondences and analogies that were familiar to ancient peoples'.⁶ The once common relations to material objects that had previously undergirded our ('animistic') vision of the world, and which had in fact transcribed its boundaries, have faded from view.⁷ Everyday mimetic patterns that had sustained communal life have now seemingly acquired other, more lasting (political) forms.

Benjamin quickly steers the discussion towards the most recognizable form in which 'nonsensuous similarity' is produced today: the existence of language. Despite references to the rise of language as a form of imitative onomatopoeia and as the tie that binds what is said to what is meant (that is, the spoken to the written), language largely has not received its due share of attention with regard to its mimetic origins.⁸ This is a lamentable fact that Benjamin was seeking to correct. As he describes their relationship: 'From time immemorial, the mimetic faculty has been conceded some influence on language. Yet this was done without foundation—without consideration of a further meaning, still less a history, of the mimetic faculty.'⁹ It is just such a foundation, however, which Benjamin begins to conceive. 'In this way', we are told, 'language may be seen as the highest level of mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity: a medium into which the earlier powers of mi-

metic production and comprehension have passed without residue, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic.¹⁰

The increased precision of language has historically, and proportionately, advanced in relation to a decrease in our dependency on the realm of magic. With an expanded vocabulary and increasingly scientific outlook on our world, our need to (magically) name the unknown presumably lessens. Benjamin consequently places his focus on the role of language within our modern 'textual' times, such that he is able to declare how myth finds itself on the verge of dissolving entirely. Though the dissolution of myth was Benjamin's stated project, this, again, is not to suggest that language is the only possible culmination of mimetic processes, only that language was its eventual grand outcome. Language became the historical outlet for a mimetic desiring detached from its everyday uses and grafted onto a vaster social and, ultimately, political project.¹¹ A decline in myth is consequently what comes about through an evolution of the ancient attempt to 'read what was never written', in the stars or in an animal's entrails, tasks which apparently morphed into a more normative usage of the mimetic faculty now seemingly forever equated with the rise and establishment of language itself.

Benjamin's proximity to theories on the origin of language is a heavily traversed terrain, yet one often not linked to these reflections on language's mimetic origins, or the larger cultural implications of mimetic desiring in general, for that matter. Indeed, his writings on mimesis and its relation to gesture have been, on the whole, essentially neglected, as David Michael Kleinberg-Levin points out in his remarkable synthesis of these themes in Benjamin's work.¹² This reading would present us with a missed opportunity, as Benjamin's fundamental connection of the two seems in effect to lie at the base of his philosophical-literary oeuvre.¹³ Until now, it has been more common to focus on his connection of human and divine language (along with the latter's affiliation to the priority of the biblical narrative), as he does in his highly influential essay 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man'.¹⁴ What I am trying to point out, however, is a link that also exists between mimetic desire as a quest for common understanding or cultural similarity and the rise of language, a connection united under the search 'to read that which has not been written', something which Benjamin emphasized in his notes and sketches gathered together in his 'Theses on History', written towards the very end of his life.¹⁵ Just as his remarks on divine violence cannot be read apart from his development of a divine language (as we will soon see), so too must these albeit too-brief comments on mimesis be read in conjunction with his other formulations that would seem to point beyond the realm of mimesis (and hence language) altogether. That is, what Benjamin was trying to direct us towards was a realm of nonsimilar gestures.¹⁶

One of the more intriguing elements of this work on the origins of the mimetic faculty was that it lies at the base of the connection between language and religion, a linkage that will return precisely at the moment when Benjamin is given over to considerations of their hollowing out or our encounter with the limits of each, such as in his essay on the work of Kafka. Within that context, the mimetic faculty 'evolves' out of sight entirely, not yet forming itself into language but instead yielding to another realm, one of the alienated, nonsimilar, and thus nonmimetic gestures.¹⁷ This 'de-contextualized experience of the self', as Deborah Levitt has called it, is a world freed of the traditional nexus between mimetic desiring and language, one in which the individual is suspended beyond the cultural inscriptions which mimesis normally dictates that humanity bear.¹⁸ Recalling both Benjamin's notion of a divine language beyond what we typically conceive of as being language and its conjunction with a form of 'divine violence' that he finds analogous to the worker's 'strike', a suspension of all normal economic relations, we are poised to locate the fundamental realm of gesture as the entrance to a truly new ethical paradigm, a first movement towards embracing what a 'divine language' might in fact resemble.

To understand Benjamin this way is to envision gesture as the nonlinguistic (nontextual) outcome of a mimetic faculty that does not necessarily culminate in the establishment of a human, politically encased language, that is, as a system of symbols all more or less signified through their ability to (violently) reduce objects to a common network of labels. It is a paradigm beyond language and towards which contemporary writers such as Kafka do indeed often point, with their alienated protagonists lost in a land without context, bumping into characters devoid of content. What these writers illustrate are those pure forms of life that are encountered more and more in zones without clear definition or boundary, what Paolo Bartoloni has referred to as 'interstitial spaces'.¹⁹

If the mimetic faculty was what produced a realm of social and cultural similarity in unison with the earliest forms of religious aspiration (i.e., magic, astrology, animism, etc.), then the motion made towards the realm of gesture would be the signal given by Kafka and Benjamin (among others) towards a plane devoid of this religious content, one not merely secularized, as it were, but profaned, as Agamben will later term it. My reading of Benjamin at this point certainly runs parallel to that of Agamben who, in an essay devoted to developing a 'theory of signatures', reads Benjamin's remarks on the mimetic faculty as the very condition for all acts of signification, including the use of language, something which he himself will attempt to defy on multiple occasions.²⁰ Though Agamben's analysis of Benjamin on this point is brief, and as I hope to make clear in what follows, it is Agamben's (often unstated) use of these loose strands in Benjamin's thought that allows him to unite the realm of gesture to the coming political task of profanation. This unity between ges-

ture and profanation is something that he deems as an essential part of the messianic vocation of humanity beyond any traditional religious connotations of the term.²¹ I would only add that this interpretation shares a good deal in Girard's thesis on violence in relation to mimetic desire, as Girard himself essentially steers the conversation away from divine intervention in human affairs and returns us to the core dynamics of an all-too-human process of scapegoating. What all three authors are trying to access would seem to be the level on which humanity deceives itself into believing that the divine is responsible for such purely human, and violent, matters and the matrices of representation that are founded upon such misunderstood constructions.

GIORGIO AGAMBEN'S TURN TO THE BODY

In a fragment dating from 1936, a sign that his reflections on the mimetic faculty had not abated some three years after his initial formulations on mimesis, Benjamin further conceived how 'the knowledge that the first material on which the mimetic faculty tested itself was the human body should be used more fruitfully than hitherto to throw light on the primal history of the arts'.²² In this way, Benjamin seemed to be hinting towards the way in which any foundational approach to the history of mimetic desiring must approach its subject matter: through the bodies which display and perpetuate its significance and force. In short, we might consider that this was a movement on Benjamin's part to comprehend the impact of mimesis on humanity and beyond its dependence on language.

Undoubtedly aware of this fragment, as well as the implications it contained for reconceiving the history of humanity (or of humanity's self-constitution) beyond its linguistic or textual confines,²³ Agamben enters our horizon again precisely at this point where the body, subjected to mimetic desiring, becomes intertwined with its exposure to another (an other), its sheer nudity illuminated beyond its linguistic inscription. For Agamben, this is nowhere more forcefully demonstrated than through the figure of the *homo sacer*, or the being stripped to the point of exhibiting nothing but its 'bare life', a figure suspended beyond our ability to define it through language. And, as he will make clear on more than one occasion, to see humanity beyond its confinement to language is to reexamine the role of sacrality in our world entirely, as well as its interaction with what we have come to regard as the 'human being'.²⁴ Hence, we are able to witness the appropriateness of the word *sacer* in the various formulations of this figure as well as his reference to the existence of language as itself somehow being a sacrament.²⁵ Already in one of his earliest works, *Language and Death*, written in 1982, a full thirteen years before he was to engage more fully with the figure of the *homo sacer*, Agamben anticipates the fundamental trajectory behind this later line of inquiry,

illustrating how central these lines of thought are to his work as a whole. I will therefore explore this relationship briefly before linking it to the realms of mimesis and gesture, which are central to any presentation of a possible alternate way to juxtapose the sacred (accessible via the nexus between mimesis and language) and the profane (brought about through a gesture beyond linguistic conscription).

As Agamben describes this figure of the *homo sacer* in relation to the institution of sacrifice (and in what could only appear as very Girardian terms),

However one interprets the sacrificial function, the essential thing is that in every case, the action of the human community is grounded only in another action; or, as etymology shows, that every *facere* is *sacrum facere*. At the center of sacrifice is simply a determinate action that, as such, is separated and marked by exclusion; in this way it becomes *sacer* and is invested with a series of prohibitions and ritual prescriptive. Forbidden action, marked by sacredness, is not, however, simply excluded; instead, it is now only accessible for certain people and according to determinate rules. In this way, it furnishes society and its ungrounded legislation with the fiction of a beginning: that which is excluded from the community is, in reality, that on which the entire life of the community is founded, and it is assumed by the society as an immemorial, and yet memorable, past. Every beginning is, in truth, an initiation, every *conditum* is an *abs-conditum*.²⁶

Remarking on the ambiguity and circularity of the concept of the 'sacred', Agamben defines the same lineage of thought which his later studies on the figure of the *homo sacer* will develop more extensively in relation to politics. Essentially, the 'ungroundedness' of the human being, which is likewise the basic platform on which humanity has sought to establish its distinction from its animality, becomes the source of an exclusive or divisive action intended to ground humanity in its decisive (and at times, therefore, legal or categorical) forms and to remain as 'that which, remaining unspeakable . . . and intransmissible in every action and in all human language, destines man to community and to tradition'.²⁷ It is the 'unwritten' that one attempts to read which Agamben seizes upon, as it was likewise Benjamin's foundation for all those mimetic operations that humanity has been all too quick to (linguistically) codify.

This 'fiction of a beginning' is that which is undisclosed on some level ('immemorial') and yet solidified as the foundation of a particular community. In this way, we can see how it is something which society attempts to give to itself, an act which it subsequently masks through the institution of a founding violence, according to Agamben, a point which Girard will also emphatically demonstrate as central to his own theories. Explaining the violent nature of communal foundations, as they are often begun with a seminal murder or sacrifice lying at their origins, Agamben discerns in this founding violence the myriad attempts of humanity to

posit itself as humanity, an ontological (or even 'ontotheological') ruse that is also inherently violent:

Violence is not something like an originary biological fact that man is forced to assume and regulate in his own praxis through sacrificial institution; rather it is the very ungroundedness of human action (which the sacrificial mythogeme hopes to cure) that constitutes the violent character (that is *contra naturam*, according to the Latin meaning of the word) of sacrifice. All human action, inasmuch as it is not naturally grounded but must construct its own foundation, is, according to the sacrificial mythogeme, violent. And it is this *sacred* violence that sacrifice presupposes in order to repeat it and regulate it within its own structure.²⁸

Violence (as language, expressing its own grammar even) appears in our world as a result of our separation from our own animality (and its seemingly more originary mimesis). Sacrifice therefore, under Agamben's terms, results from this primary, artificial scission of the human from the animal. Sacrifice is now seen as precisely that which (falsely) promises to grant us our self-definition, our very ability to be 'human' at all. It would seem that the mechanisms of this 'anthropological machinery', as he will elsewhere label it, dictate specific representations of the human being that are entirely caught up within a violent logic of sacrificial rites as ancient as the origins of what we have come to call 'humanity'.²⁹ They are the foundation for any of our ontological claims and are given their legitimation through our (traditional) theological assertions—what Girard will critique as the 'false sacred' used repeatedly in our world. This is, in essence, also the origin of any ontotheology.³⁰ In general, Agamben can thereby conclude that there is a certain 'unnaturalness' to human violence, yet it is, in another sense, often viewed as a foundational necessity, the origin of religious desiring (from its magical and astrological phases to its more contemporary religious forms). He therefore states that 'the foundation of violence is the violence of the foundation', an almost inescapable fact that serves to legitimate many a violent endeavour in our world.³¹

In this early effort by Agamben to move away from a logic of sacrificial violence, he isolates philosophy rather than revealed religion as capable of 'absolving' human beings from their indebtedness to a sacrificial and cyclical logic. He in fact prepares a philosophy which, as we will soon see, is defined as a movement into the realm of gestures beyond language—the very point he borrows from Benjamin and which takes him somewhat beyond Girard's approach to the problematic of violence.³² He makes it clear at this point as well that any attempt to think beyond this logic will most certainly appear as excluded from all of our common (shared, or similar) articulations precisely because it is beyond the signification of language.³³ Yet how exactly are we to express our

common humanity beyond the unifying force of sacrifice, that is, to renounce the logic of the excluded other (the one sacrificed in order to maintain the foundations of any conceived 'humanity') and its indebtedness to our political, cultural, and religious significations that take place through language? Despite the apparently insurmountable obstacle of this condition, Agamben unequivocally states that this is the defining political task for the 'coming community', one which he clearly situates in relation to its ability to move beyond the logic of the excluded figure, or the *homo sacer*, for example.³⁴ In order to even begin answering these dilemmas, and as he frames the solution through yet another question, 'we must . . . ask why Western politics first constitutes itself through an exclusion (which is simultaneously an inclusion) of bare life. What is the relation between politics and life, if life presents itself as what is included by means of an exclusion?'³⁵

Agamben's thought is given over, time and again, to understanding how the human being in its full bodiliness has been constituted by the 'anthropological machinery' of our world, a machinery which ceaselessly dictates the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, hence how this machinery sits precariously, undefinably on the borders of the human and the animal, as well as the human and the divine.³⁶ In so many words, this is how one can read his gradually evolving *Homo Sacer* project, as well as the accompanying study on animality conducted in his work *The Open: Man and Animal*. Yet these studies are also nothing if not 'first philosophy' for Agamben—they are caught up in the fundamental transition from potentiality to actuality, a movement previously formulated in Aristotle's work that Agamben reconsiders as the central problematic of all identity and political construction.³⁷ Let me explain. The zone of indifference where the anthropological machinery operates is the same zone wherein sovereignty (and its accompanying political power) is constituted, the zone that links our mimetic desire to language, though it is also a space where we need not do so, where we might actually reside within our pure potentiality (the realm of gesture) beyond any acts of signification (such as those made through language). Not only are we capable of living without a sovereign politics, enslaved to our mimetic heritage, we are, if we embrace it, capable of living in a realm of pure gesture beyond language as we have known it. It is a realm perhaps more closely aligned to what Benjamin conceived of then as being 'divine'.

This same thread of gestures that we find operative in Benjamin's work, those used to contrast the linkage of mimesis and language, is further articulated through Agamben's expansion of it. Gesture becomes for Agamben, and as Levitt again describes it, 'an exhibition, a process of making visible, a revelation device, and what it makes visible is the medium, the milieu of human beings'.³⁸ Yet Levitt immediately qualifies this expression of our potential situatedness in the realm of gesture: 'Such a milieu refers not only to the medium that human beings are in, but

equally to the medium that human being is.' It is what survives after the constructed image of the 'human being' that the anthropological machinery created has been rendered inoperative. In such a manner, 'bare life' itself lives on in pure gesture, as Agamben puts it, 'like creatures bathed in the light of the Last Day, surviving the ruin of their formal garment and their conceptual meaning'.³⁹

As can be heard echoing throughout these suggestively rich thoughts, Agamben is referring to a realm of gesture beyond its historical-theological guise, to 'a wholly profane mystery in which human beings, liberating themselves from all sacredness, communicate to each other their lack of secrets as their most proper gesture'.⁴⁰ It is a mark of profanation beyond ontotheology, an experience 'of mediality as the ethical dimension of human beings'.⁴¹ And this is politics in its purest form: a 'means without ends' that avoids becoming a mimetically scripted attempt at forming some sort of totalitarian schema, whether that be a political or theological configuration of some sovereign form. This is the case because gesture, in Agamben's words, 'breaks with the false alternative between ends and means that paralyzes morality and presents instead means that, as such, evade the orbit of mediality without becoming, for this reason, ends'.⁴² Politics, in this sense, is capable of becoming a 'sphere of the full, absolute gesturality of human beings' — that is, philosophy.⁴³

CONCLUSION

Agamben's focus on violence in this context arises similarly to the aims of Girard to end all of our world's sacrificial machinery. What Agamben does that is unique, however, is to follow the Benjaminian thread towards gesture and to a possible realm of potentiality that could defuse the violence and point to another world beyond this one. For Girard, the end of violence is one that comes about through an often textual (linguistic) revelation. Yet a textual revelation, in Agamben's eyes, though it may be able to expose the violence of signification, still has to go beyond it and into a realm of gesture that also exists as an unexplored realm of nonviolent mimetic desiring. If Agamben is on to something, then Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe was right to point towards the way in which Girard's formulation of mimetic desire is problematically intertwined with representation and that the basis of both religion and language are fundamentally inseparable from their interplay.⁴⁴ For this reason, his critique of Girard, mimesis, and representation might best be juxtaposed with Agamben's attempts to formulate gesture in relation to the task of presentation, an act beyond the confines of both language and religion, beyond the mimetic textual resonances upon which Girard's work has tended to be so dependent.⁴⁵ A shift would necessarily be involved in such a reading that would proceed to move us from (textual, canonical)

models of social-sacred behaviour dependent on mimetic desiring, to a realm of absolute gesturality that foresees the coming of our profane existence beyond the 'false sacred' within our world which is often used in order to justify violence and oppression. This would provide us with another exploration of our mimetic faculty wholly beyond its connection to language and the representations of our world.

There are two main theses which Agamben's reading of Benjamin seems to be pointing us towards, and that I want to highlight above all else: First, that violence arises from our separation from our animality, the fundamental act that pushes us to form language as an attempt to deal with a mimetic faculty removed from its original habitus. Second, that we must return to a form of animality (of a purely immanent life, then, devoid of transcendence) that is expressible only as a realm of pure gesture, a mimetic behaviour not brought to its linguistic heights (or depths)—a realm of habit.⁴⁶ For Agamben, this analysis opens our ethical thinking towards paradigms of thought that move beyond a logic of exclusion, a movement from particularity to particularity that escapes the universal/particular dichotomy.⁴⁷ In short, and as he will more fully develop later on in *The Highest Poverty*, we are presented with 'forms of life' that function through examples and not exclusions, allowing the full range of nonsimilar gestures to be respected as the absolute singularities that they are, beyond all mimetic cultural (violent) inscriptions.⁴⁸ If sacrality has been historically established and justified in its existence as a bid to legitimate sovereign power through the mechanism of sacrifice, then this is the case because it has been complicit with a mimeticism drawn to its fulfilment through the signifying acts of those sovereign powers that be.⁴⁹

Agamben's project of moving beyond, because before, language and so before religion, to a realm of pure gesture beyond mimetic articulation thus bears a certain Girardian affinity, as it is the task of putting an end to the sacrificial logic at work in our world, hence a task of pure profanation. Yet it also draws upon the (Benjaminian) realm of gesture, as much as of our pure potentiality, in order to navigate a path forwards in relation to the languages and representations that be. Though it may seem as if Agamben's emphasis on language (signification) as a form of violence might actually serve to trivialize the harsh realities of violence in our world, I would contend that he is instead seeking to reveal the true foundations of our most violent social and political acts, acts which are entirely dependent on the process of drawing borders and reducing those precious and precarious lives before us to a system of mere labels. He pushes beyond Girard's textual (scriptural) dependence and towards gesture because he senses that this is the only way we will be able to live out a movement beyond our given representational worlds. As he reveals the hollow foundations of our (ontotheologically established) political realities, Agamben's efforts could be seen as nothing less than a tearing open

all those veils that conceal an otherwise empty space once said to contain the 'holiest of holies', representation (language) itself.

NOTES

1. See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979); Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987); Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); and Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001). Some of the more recent commentaries on his work illustrate the growing significance of his theories, including Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroad, 1995); Richard Joseph Golsan, *René Girard and Myth: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002); Chris Fleming, *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis* (Oxford, UK: Polity, 2004); Frederiek Depoortere, *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy: Gianni Vattimo, René Girard, and Slavoj Žižek* (London: T&T Clark, 2008); and Michael Kirwin, *Girard and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009).

2. Cf. the elaboration of mimetic desiring, though from a Girardian standpoint, in Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Genesis of Desire*, trans. Eugene Webb (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010).

3. Such an analysis lies in Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe's remarks on Girard in his *Typology: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, trans. Christopher Fynsk (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 102f., a critique apparently so incisive that Hent de Vries is confident enough to briefly treat Girard's theories in a footnote with merely a reference to Lacoue-Labarthe's study. Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 204–5. See also the manner in which Lacoue-Labarthe's work has inspired critical-theological engagements, from Raymund Schwager's *Must There Be Scapegoats?* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2000) to S. Mark Heim's *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

4. Walter Benjamin, 'On the Mimetic Faculty', in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 720–22.

5. Benjamin, 'On the Mimetic Faculty', 720.

6. Benjamin, 'On the Mimetic Faculty', 721.

7. Cf. the theses surrounding Anselm Franke's 'Much Trouble in the Transportation of Souls; or, The Sudden Disorganization of Boundaries', in *Animism*, vol. 1, ed. Anselm Franke (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2010), where he draws on Benjamin's mimetic theory in his attempt to revitalize (but not restore) the concept of animism, once so significant for modern anthropological classifications. See also the discussion of mimesis in relation to animism as found in Rane Willerslev's *Soul Hunters: Hunting, Animism, and Personhood among the Siberian Yukaghirs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), cited also in Franke, 'Much Trouble in the Transportation of Souls', 49–50.

8. For a discussion of this lack of scholarship on mimesis in relation to Benjamin's general theories on language, see Uwe Steiner, *Walter Benjamin: An Introduction to His Work and Thought*, trans. Michael Winkler (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 47–48.

9. Benjamin, 'On the Mimetic Faculty', 721.

10. Benjamin, 'On the Mimetic Faculty', 722.

11. See the 'dialectical materialism' he espoused as contrary to myth in his celebrated theses 'On the Concept of History', in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 389–400.

12. David Michael Kleinberg-Levin, *Gestures of Ethical Life: Reading Hölderlin's Question of Measure after Heidegger* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 142–203.
13. See Kleinberg-Levin, *Gestures of Ethical Life*, 193–97.
14. Walter Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 62–74.
15. See Benjamin's notes on the 'Theses on History' which also include references to reading things not written. The consideration here then lies between this suggestion and his earlier remarks on mimesis.
16. Matthias Fritsch, *The Promise of Memory: History and Politics in Marx, Benjamin, and Derrida* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).
17. Walter Benjamin, 'Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death', in Jennings, Eiland, and Smith, *Selected Writings*, 2:794–818.
18. Deborah Levitt, 'Notes on Media and Biopolitics: "Notes on Gesture"', in *The Work of Giorgio Agamben: Law, Literature, Life*, ed. Justin Clemens, Nicholas Heron, and Alex Murray (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 205.
19. Paolo Bartoloni, *Interstitial Writing: Calvino, Caproni, Sereni and Svevo* (Market Harborough, UK: Troubador, 2003). See also Bartoloni's *On the Cultures of Exile, Translation, and Writing* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2008).
20. SA, 71f. On Agamben's relationship to Benjamin, see, among others, Vittoria Borsò, Claas Morgenroth, Karl Solibakke, and Bernd Witte, eds., *Benjamin-Agamben: Politics, Messianism, Kabbalah* (Würzburg, Germany: Königshausen & Neumann, 2010).
21. The realm of gesture thus would appear as one wherein the deactivation (inoperability) of the law that the messianic act works within history, if Benjamin's theses on history are to be read in conjunction with these remarks, becomes manifest as intricately intertwined with the hollowing out of our traditional forms of language and religion.
22. Walter Benjamin, 'The Knowledge That the First Material on Which the Mimetic Faculty Tested Itself', in *Selected Works*, vol. 3, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 253.
23. This opposition to acts of signification (including language) in Agamben's work has brought him to contest, many times over, the work of Jacques Derrida, for whom, famously, there was 'nothing outside the text'. Cf. LD, 39; S, 155–57; P, 171; HS, 54; and TR, 102–3. On the multiple critiques which this contrast has drawn, see, for example, David E. Johnson, 'As If the Time Were Now: Deconstructing Agamben', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 2 (2007): 265–90; Simon Morgan Wortham, 'Law of Friendship: Agamben and Derrida', *New Formations* 62 (2007): 89–105; Jeffrey S. Librett, 'From the Sacrifice of the Letter to the Voice of Testimony: Giorgio Agamben's Fulfillment of Metaphysics', *Diacritics* 37, nos. 2–3 (2007): 11–33; Vernon Cisney, 'Categories of Life: The Status of the Camp in Derrida and Agamben', *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 46 (2008): 161–79; Catherine Mills, 'Playing with Law: Agamben and Derrida on Postjuridical Justice', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 1 (2008): 17–35; and Kevin Attell, 'An Esoteric Dossier: Agamben and Derrida Read Saussure', *ELH* 76, no. 4 (2009): 821–46. A substantial review of the tensions between Derrida and Agamben can also be found in Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 184–91.
24. See Agamben's *Homo Sacer* project in juxtaposition with his later work on profanation in PR. On the subject of the production of the human being, see also O.
25. SL.
26. LD, 104–5.
27. LD, 105.
28. LD, 105–6.
29. See the description of the 'anthropological machinery' which could be said to generate humanity over and against its animality in O, 33–38. This thesis, of course, shares a remarkable similarity with the work of René Girard on the relationship be-

tween violence, religion, and sacrifice, a similarity which Agamben has not yet taken up directly as such. On the affinities and differences between Girard's position and that of Agamben, see also Christopher A. Fox, 'Sacrificial Pasts and Messianic Futures: Religion as a Political Prospect in René Girard and Giorgio Agamben', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 33, no. 5 (2007): 563–95, as well as Rey Chow, 'Sacrifice, Mimesis, and the Theorizing of Victimhood', *Representations* 94 (2006): 131–49. Moreover, if Girard's thesis can likewise be read as an attempt to conceive of the Christian message as one ultimately doing away with the 'false sacred' within our world, a sort of 'secularization' thesis as found in the work of Gianni Vattimo, for example, then perhaps Agamben's attempt to 'profane' our world can be understood as a similarly minded gesture. Cf. Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

30. The term 'ontotheology', of course, comes from its critique in the work of Martin Heidegger, someone with whom Agamben once studied and who remains heavily influential on his work. Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 4, *Nihilism*, ed. David Farrell Krell, trans. Frank A. Capuzzi (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1982), 209f., as well as Iain Thomson, *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

31. LD, 106.

32. On the role of gesture in Agamben's work, see also Samuel Weber, 'Going Along for the Ride: Violence and Gesture: Agamben Reading Benjamin Reading Kafka Reading Cervantes', *Germanic Review* 81, no. 1 (2006): 65–83; Anthony Curtis Adler, 'The Intermedial Gesture: Agamben and Kommerell', *Angelaki* 12, no. 3 (2007): 57–64; and Alastair Morgan, '"A Figure of Annihilated Human Existence": Agamben and Adorno on Gesture', *Law Critique* 20 (2009): 299–307.

33. LD, 106.

34. CC.

35. LD, 7.

36. See the role given to the body in N.

37. See the collection of essays devoted almost exclusively to this topic: Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

38. Levitt, 'Notes on Media', 202.

39. 'Kommerell; or, On Gesture', in P, 80.

40. 'Kommerell; or, On Gesture', in P, 85.

41. Levitt, 'Notes on Media', 203. Cf. ME, 57.

42. ME, 57.

43. P, 85.

44. See Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, 108ff.

45. The search for a presentation beyond representation certainly has a religious (revelatory) resonance within it, and in many ways has shaped the past centuries philosophical endeavours. See, for example, the thesis surrounding Alison Ross, *The Aesthetic Paths of Philosophy: Presentation in Kant, Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe, and Nancy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

46. Note the manner in which Agamben's various remarks on habit, as found in LD, 97; CC, 29; and P, 233, can be read together. For example, his remarks concerning the movement away from language (and towards its infantile state) from *Language and Death*: 'Here language . . . returns to that which never was and to that which it never left, and thus it takes the simple form of a habit' (97).

47. The sacrificial logic of exclusion is pursued by Agamben in multiple places, though perhaps most pointedly in his essay on paradigms in SA. Likewise, the tactics of exclusion are studied in their political form in SE.

48. On the centrality of the 'form of life' to Agamben's stated project to move away from a logic of exceptionalism, see 'What Is a Paradigm?' in SA, as well as his interview with Ulrich Raulff titled 'An Interview with Giorgio Agamben', *German Law Journal* 5, no. 5 (2004): 609–13.

49. See the central theses behind SE, as well as his more recent study, KG.

FOUR

Citing 'Whatever' Authority

Colby Dickinson

The politics of citation was a central focal point within the ongoing debate between Agamben and the late Jacques Derrida. In this, there was a continuous back-and-forth between them, culminating perhaps in Derrida's biting remarks on Agamben's philological methods in his lectures published as *The Beast and the Sovereign*. For Derrida, Agamben is perpetually on a quest to be the first to the source, the first to claim that his reading is the correct reading, the first, truly, to claim to be sovereign as author. For Agamben, however, who had himself also gone to great lengths in order to challenge Derrida's use of citation (most notably in his essay on 'friendship' in his *What Is an Apparatus?* which claims that Derrida in fact ignored his philological advice altogether), the use of citations are at the heart of philosophical reflection, much as they were for Benjamin, someone whose own massive compilation of citations, his *Arcades Project*, has become a masterwork in its own right. There is something at stake in Agamben's work on the citation, specifically in relation to their use within the larger context of one's writing, that, to my mind, triggers a great deal of ethical reflection beyond the inconclusive debate between Agamben and Derrida. By picking up the various readings of violence which this section has already explored in depth but advancing them a bit further, I want to provide a profound example of how these readings of violence might be played out in a more developed ethical theory of citationality which has yet to be fully perceived in Agamben's oeuvre. Interestingly, though Agamben had brought up the work of Levinas directly in his *Remnants of Auschwitz*, he failed to 'cite' Levinas when making specific remarks concerning the 'face' in his *Means without Ends*, a particularly noteworthy lack of citation, I would add, which I addressed

in an earlier chapter in this section. I note this omission here again because it is specifically by juxtaposing Benjamin's use of citations alongside Agamben's more recent, critical engagements with the Western theological tradition that I try to demonstrate how Agamben sets himself the goal of redefining ethics along certain 'Levinasian' lines in order to arrive at a respect for the face of 'whatever' being before us, the true source towards which all citations point. Just how he seeks to develop an ethical position in relation to the 'face', in the context of his efforts to cite the face of 'whatever' being before us, vis-à-vis Levinas's work is not entirely clear. Then again, perhaps not citing Levinas in order to bring the presence of Levinas's work to light in another way entirely was Agamben's intention all along.

Put simply, no matter how they are performed, citations are references to an original source (their origin, as it were) made in order to bolster an argument or claim to legitimacy. For this reason, citations are also inherently contentious, whether presented as such or not. For example, there may be a discrepancy between the citation and the source, or a source may be used incorrectly—taken 'out of context'—or the use of a source might simply appear as 'dated' or uncritically appropriated, having been discredited since the advent of its publication. Perhaps the biggest offender among these might be the use of a citation with no immediate relevance to the context of a present argument, one which was simply used to convey a sense of authority to the claims being made, as if the mere mention of a particularly revered source were enough to dispel any attempts to make any claim to the contrary.

In recent memory, the investigation of the use of citations, their role and function in society in general, has given rise to further deepened theories of 'citationality' that seek to explore everything from the performability and reproducibility of the 'signature' to the manner in which even gender could be said to cite previous social performances of its kind.¹ The import of these claims, if considered on the whole, is that citations are explicit acts of social, cultural, political, and even religious representation. They are seldom posited neutrally—their careful selection often speaks volumes enough already—and they are often the difference between safeguarding a common practical sense of intelligibility (for most) and providing a much-sought-after emancipation (for some). A quick scan of one's frequently used sources is therefore often enough to loosely identify one's particular ideological leanings. Yet as any 'reputable' or 'respectable' academic society will testify, it is the use of these citations, and the traditions they inspire, which grants a certain intelligibility to our discourses. Without them we would otherwise seemingly run the risk of being incomprehensible or—perhaps worse—of simply not being taken seriously. Negotiating the middle ground between these

two positions, as I will argue in what follows, is the difficult territory within an educational setting that must become more transparent.

Beginning with a theory of citations in the work of Benjamin, before turning to its subsequent elaboration and acquired ethical dimensions in the work of Agamben, I want to demonstrate something essential to the nature of citations and the role(s) they play in culture today, both within and beyond their literary and academic contexts. This is in many ways a task of exposing the tactics of a practice so common to academic contexts that it often goes unnoticed: claims of authority and legitimation in general are posited and contested through the citations we invoke, whether we recognize this fact or not. In so many words, a more fully developed theory of citationality, as I am here attempting to sketch, might enable us to better grasp not only the undisclosed role of citations in academic contexts today but also the aporia (and hence impossibility) of an authority's supposed legitimation, its 'ungroundedness', as it were. The inability to ever fully ground one's authority over time, that is, to reign 'legitimately' as sovereign in any sense (and this is the political question that Agamben has pursued in a variety of contexts), is illustrated by the often ambiguous and ultimately unjustifiable use of citations.

Following this, Agamben's depiction of citationality can be seen as a heavy contestation of the Western cultural tradition, a creative rereading 'against the grain' which attempts to undo the obfuscations of our most normative claims and their accompanying frequent citations. By conducting my inquiry thus, I intend to show how, over and beyond the theological (Agamben's more recent and choice discipline in this respect) the ultimate source sought by all citations—again whether social, cultural, political, or religious, according to Agamben—is the singular nature of the face before us, the 'whatever' face that calls us to a relationship bound by love. With this rather Levinasian-sounding proposition, Agamben works quickly towards an examination of the ethical dimensions of citations. By opening our thought to an ethics 'beyond representation', Agamben seeks to challenge our standardized conceptualizations of ethics in order to offer us a completely new way to view the use of citations today.

CULTURAL TRANSMISSION AS THE ART OF MYTH

I begin with Benjamin for, beyond the seemingly strange and unusual topics he often chose as his subject matter (e.g., children's toys and books, photography, shopping arcades, major European urban landscapes, etc.), he was in no small measure fascinated with the art of collecting. It was something that he often directly wrote about, from the associations made while unpacking his own library to his more studied reflections on the Marxist art historian Eduard Fuchs, 'Collector and Historian'.² Collec-

tions were, for Benjamin, more than bourgeois indulgences; they were an open door to the past that likewise contained the potential to reassign values within a contemporary context. They were for him the most 'profane' manifestations of a 'nearness' to the past, something that could almost conjure a sacred air with their very presence. They were, in fact, that which binds us to the past better than anything else in our modern world could.³

In the face of traditions which were, and still are, dissolving, the collector becomes the individual who exhibits this reality of relations best through a transfiguration of objects removed from their original, historical context. This is an act which Agamben, who is also Benjamin's Italian translator and editor, will describe as 'suddenly depriving them of both their use value and the ethical-social significance with which tradition had endowed them'.⁴ Henceforth, collections seemingly float through existence, removed from any worldly economy and severed from any meaningful use within a particular, traditional society. Hence the quasi-mystical character they exude simply by existing, a quality many a modern museum patron might also attest to.

It should also be stated that Agamben's relevance here is no minor point for further developing Benjamin's theory of collecting. Over the past several years, Agamben's popularity among scholars working within a wide array of fields has grown very quickly.⁵ And, I would note, it is in his (re)articulations of Benjamin's theory of cultural transmission that we are privy to the political dimensions present in any 'renewal' of a given tradition and its accompanying authority. This is indeed a profound connection that can be gathered under the mark of 'citationality', as we shall soon see.

At this point, and within the context of collecting, Agamben considers the course of Benjamin's analysis as illustrating a 'revolutionary' disjuncture in history.⁶ As he puts it, the collector is something of a 'revolutionary' figure, since for both 'the new can appear only through the destruction of the old. And it is certainly not an accident that the great collector figures flourish precisely in times of break from tradition and exaltation of renewal.'⁷ This development is in sharp contrast, we are told, to a 'traditional society' where 'neither the quotation nor the collection is conceivable, since it is not possible to break at any point the links of the chain of tradition by which the transmission of the past takes place'.⁸ Like the nostalgia for former national contexts which have since collapsed and which subsequently drive interest in collecting goods and memorabilia from such periods (as, for example, with the 'Ostalgie' some people display for the former East Germany), a fondness for these historical items can only derive its worth from a radical rupture within our representations of history and its traditional contextual moorings (i.e., national, ideological, etc.).

As Agamben will further assert, the phenomenon of collecting in the modern era is inseparable from our cultural perceptions of art. Indeed, understanding the relation of the two, collecting and art, can aid our comprehension of the ethos in which we are situated. Our present age, Agamben considers, is such that the art collections housed in public museums quickly find their mirror image in private houses that are turned into quasi-museums. This lack of a genuine experience of the art within one's daily life is symbolized by the place of the museum in society today, or, as he puts it, 'the impossibility of using has its emblematic place in the Museum'.⁹ For Agamben, this trend represents not only a seismic shift in the cultural relevance of art but also the impossibility of an authentic experience being present through art, not to mention the impossibility of an actual use being attached to many objects within someone's own home. It registers, in fact, an 'impossibility of use' that one faces when confronted with the reality of 'things' themselves. As such, our world is immersed within a state of constantly expanding collections, something he terms 'the museification of our world'. This is the reality in which 'one by one, the spiritual potentialities that defined people's lives—art, religion, philosophy, the idea of nature, even politics—have docilely withdrawn into the Museum'.¹⁰ And it is this 'enclosure' of the space of the 'museum' that has almost paradoxically expanded to encompass most of our living space. 'In this sense, the Museum can coincide with an entire city . . . a region . . . and even a group of individuals. . . . But more generally, everything today can become a Museum, because this term simply designates the exhibition of an impossibility of using, of dwelling, of experiencing.'¹¹ As a quasi-sacred zone, the boundaries of the museum come to proclaim the definitive eradication of (daily, practical) use of the objects that are part and parcel of humanity itself. These objects, having been 'museified', are now rendered useless to humanity, captured within the domain of an aesthetic which cannot bring them (mythically) back to 'life' (as something 'useable'). How an ethical (or religious) experience, or any experience at all for that matter, is possible within the modern era thus remains tentative at best (and this point will take on more significance in the chapters that follow in this volume).

Instead, as he will elaborate in another context, art now only maintains its ability to identify itself with the destruction of tradition, with the intransmissibility that is at the origin of 'the experience of shock'.¹² This is a process which, in the last half of the previous century, had quickly taken to accelerating the forces of disruption, producing a 'shock' value intended to invoke a radical disruption with history itself. As each new stage of art seemingly renders the mediums and modalities of previous eras insufficient, outdated, and surpassed, we are inundated by such relics, or items now intended only for collections, not for actual use. Art itself becomes only that which is to be collected, with its past, symbolic role consequently being further lessened over time. In effect, the 'latest'

and 'most contemporary' art, pushed to its most extreme form, will truly only serve the purpose of preventing traditional forms of cultural transmission and translatability from taking place.

Politics, in this context, becomes redefined as the space where meaningful symbolic utterance is continuously narrowed by these (artistic) processes, because it is precisely these processes that define the public sphere of intelligibility. As Agamben puts it, 'The reproduction of the dissolution of transmissibility in the experience of shock becomes, then, the last possible source of meaning and value for things themselves, and art becomes the last tie connecting man to his past.'¹³ In turn, this permanently present existence of art isolates traditional forms of both meaning and value, threatening to render many peoples and cultures symbolically obsolete. The present subject of cultural transmission becomes consequently ever more alienated, indeed solipsistic. In this sense, 'the survival of the past in the imponderable instant of aesthetic epiphany is, in the final analysis, the alienation effected by the work of art, and this alienation is in its turn nothing other than the measure of the destruction of its transmissibility, that is, of tradition'.¹⁴

With this advent of the unprecedented destruction of tradition, what becomes clear is that, while this is no longer the case, culture once was inseparable from its transmission. While 'premodern', it was united as a single entity within a given context, defining traditional societies as communities with no gap between their past and their present, that is, between their culture and its transmission. The recording of history had not yet acquired its modern focus on the dichotomy of continuity and rupture. From this premodern perspective, values, whether ethical, religious, or aesthetic, had no meaning outside of this indissoluble bond between the act of transmission and the thing being transmitted. In many ways, modern attempts to formulate an ethics based on communitarian values are still founded on the possibility of this connection, a linkage that Agamben wholeheartedly denies as a genuine possibility for our age. In contradistinction to this state of 'traditional' affairs, the 'interruption of tradition . . . opens an era in which no link is possible between old and new, if not the infinite accumulation of the old in a sort of monstrous archive or the alienation effected by the very means that is supposed to help with the transmission of the old'.¹⁵ As a result, this state gives rise to an 'accumulated culture', as he puts it, that yet presses forwards through time without meaning, and which seemingly functions only to reveal our suspension in a groundless void of existence. It is an accumulation that gathers itself under the sign of 'the collection', the debris lying in piles among us.

The deep resonance of this theme with the 'angel of history' as depicted by Benjamin is purposefully reasserted by Agamben in this context. For Benjamin, the angel as the illustrative figure of his final great work 'On the Concept of History' becomes symbolic of the melancholic

engagement with the past with its thrust towards the future and with the impossibility of transmitting the past to the present, or that which seemingly most needs to be retained from all of history. As Benjamin describes the angel,

His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm.¹⁶

For Agamben, this image captures the ragged edge of the situation humanity now faces: our complete encasement within the aesthetic (i.e., the modern 'museification' of the world) and the impossibility of our truly ever reaching the domain of the mythical-theological, despite our desire to ascend to it. As he comments on this state of affairs, 'The past that the angel of history is no longer able to comprehend reconstitutes its form in front of the angel of art; but this form is the alienated image in which the past finds its truth again only on condition of negating it, and knowledge of the new is possible only in the nontruth of the old.'¹⁷ Again, the rupture is affirmed as the very way in which art reconstitutes itself in the present.

The best that humanity can now achieve is a sort of 'suspended' living, one that neither touches the core of our reality as human being nor fabricates a solution to the deadlock between the past and the present. Everything in fact seems bound for a course of destruction and the accompanying debris which seems to dissolve any chance for redemption. This is a problem as theological as it is historical, though the difference between them is not always clear, and its implications stretch even further than this, as I will soon suggest. The only reality to be grasped in this world is one of an inherent alienation of the subject who struggles to comprehend and grasp the symbols at hand, that is, to (aesthetically) give order to them in some sense, all the while ultimately failing to achieve the traditional (mythological-theological) meaning once ascribed to life (that which had once guaranteed its meaning).¹⁸ Hence, Agamben's commentary on Benjamin's most fundamental historical image:

The redemption that the angel of art offers to the past, summoning it to appear outside its real context on the day of aesthetic Last Judgment, is, then, nothing other than its death (or rather, its inability to die) in the museum of aesthetics. And the angel's melancholy is the consciousness that he has adopted alienation as his world; it is the nostalgia of a reality that he can possess only by making it unreal.¹⁹

The integrity of experience once present to us in its fullness, as undivided and in some sense 'pure', is now forever separated from itself, causing each possession (as part of a collection) to remain in an ethereal state only, again suspended from actual use. Each concrete reality exists consequently as ultimately inexperienceable. Mirroring his comments elsewhere on the poetic, Agamben here depicts the contemporary aesthetic project as one that is fundamentally intertwined with the plight of the modern autonomous subject in that this subject must, in a sense, use art in order to inhabit its world, even if it is an 'unreal' world in many respects.²⁰

In this, aesthetics comes to replace tradition in the contemporary world, uniting the past we cannot fully grasp with the present where we are continuously having to re-create ourselves. By doing so, however, and as an astute observer might suspect, contemporary aesthetics actually begins to praise its discontinuity with the past, offering this rupture itself as valuable to the processes of forming a modern subjectivity. As Agamben frames it, 'By destroying the transmissibility of the past, aesthetics recuperates it negatively and makes intransmissibility a value in itself in the image of aesthetic beauty, in this way opening for man a space between past and future in which he can found his action and his knowledge.'²¹ He will later state directly that this is the very means by which humanity itself can reign sovereign.²² Under these conditions, the survival of culture is itself lodged within the modern alienation of art, and its intransmissibility is a sign of its perpetual need for re-creation, something perhaps not unfamiliar to an advanced capitalist economy or a pop art/advertising mentality. It is also in many ways the prime exemplar of the human condition, the state of humanity in which we must ceaselessly articulate ourselves in order to posit itself as 'real' (human beings) over and against the animality of our nature.²³

Aesthetics today thus performs a twofold act of extreme significance which we can now note: it eradicates the distance between the object of history and its transmission into the present, and, as it accomplishes this act, it inches closer towards the boundary of what was once the mythical-traditional. This occurs with one important distinction yet remaining between the 'traditional society' and our own: art 'although it can reach the threshold of myth, it cannot cross it'.²⁴ In this frustration, and by refusing to force a conceptual bridge to be constructed between them, humanity is capable of comprehending, perhaps for the first time, the true nature of its (art-ificial) situatedness in the world:

If man could appropriate his historical condition, and if, seeing through the illusion of the storm that perennially pushes him along the infinite rail of linear time, he could exit his paradoxical situation, he would at the same time gain access to the total knowledge capable of giving life a new cosmogony and to turn history into myth. But art alone cannot do this, since it is precisely in order to reconcile the histor-

ical conflict between past and future that it has emancipated itself from myth and linked itself to history.²⁵

It is this modern 'aesthetic' deadlock which allows humanity to grasp its dwelling within the world most acutely. In this fashion, art touches the border of what was traditionally the domain of the mythic-religious. Despite this proximity, however, it cannot cross over into 'becoming myth', as it were. Art stands alone, and religion in its traditional forms is determined to be hollow. The symbols which once most sustained the continuity between traditions and their people (the 'political theologies' that gave rise to elaborate and rich religious landscapes) are now suspended amid a quest for (aesthetic) meaning that is prevented from continuing itself. Art, in the end, enacts nothing more profound than the revelation of our sense of alienation in the world.

Echoing one of Agamben's basic reiterations in this context, and as he here reads Kafka very closely, we might be able to see how redemption for the modern subject waits on the other side, though, as Kafka said, it is 'not for us'.²⁶ Beyond this, however, it is more than just our understanding of religion or myth that is deeply altered by such insights (and as I have already highlighted in this section of the present volume), for from the traditional space occupied by the theological flows our very relationship to language itself, to all writing, then, and certainly (perhaps above all else) to those tirelessly working to lend some sense of authority or meaning to their work through the citations they invoke.²⁷

CITING THE MESSIAH

This refusal to endorse redemption as a concept 'for us' moderns is something which Agamben takes significantly to heart. It is a situation for him that is made possible through the fact that Kafka's genius, as Benjamin had previously noted, is that he was able to sacrifice 'truth for the sake of transmissibility'.²⁸ This fact is what prods Agamben to cite Kafka as the writer who 'most coherently' displays this interruption of the linear time of history. It is an interruption that art tries to reappropriate and bridge this gap by juxtaposing alongside it 'the paradoxical image of a state of history in which the fundamental event of the human condition is perpetually taking place; the continuum of linear time is interrupted, but does not create an opening beyond itself'.²⁹ It is also a purely immanent consideration of how humanity constantly engages with its own identity, framed by the intransmissibility of the past and so also perpetually in need of reestablishing itself. This is a condition, we might add, that is never fully resolved because humanity is not able to properly unify its past with its present.

For Benjamin, who developed a form of 'dialectical materialism' precisely to address such a split in humanity's 'origins', the figure of the

messiah (whether conceivable as a historical person or as an image from the past) was crucial to fulfilling history and recuperating, in some sense at least, our humanity. A messiah was the only figure who could bridge the gap between art and myth, restoring humanity's fundamental symbols to their proper use. It is the messiah as messenger who 'reveals' the linguistic fact of our being to us, as the use of the concept of *logos* to identify the messiah in Christianity will make more than clear. This is the message that concerns the nature of the medium itself, and thus, for Agamben, announces the significance of language in establishing 'humanity' as such.³⁰ Stating the existence of language therefore is the fundamental human trajectory that all of our human endeavours point towards, with religion simply maintaining a privileged position, according to Agamben, in this regard.³¹ This 'revelation' will even induce him to construct an image of a messenger similar to Benjamin's, a messenger who is the long-awaited messianic figure who brings this knowledge down to us and would have it circulate among us.

This 'messenger', moreover, is the figure of the messiah, a religious historical figure whom Agamben depicts as involved in 'revealing' the origin of language as nothing more than the task of transmission itself. With this characterization, he is able to portray the messianic figure historically as one who restores humanity to its own 'infancy', a place of openness and pure potentiality, the only true act of redemption possible for a humanity otherwise bent on securing its own actuality (as a bid for sovereignty).³² It is only this messianic movement—which is actually an apparent regression—that finally engages in acts of profanation in order to allow humanity to appropriate a historical space for itself, to remove things from their 'museified' (quasi-sacred) state and turn them to another use altogether. His radical rereading of Saint Paul, in the midst of a continuous contemporary revival of philosophical views on Pauline literature, also reveals as much.³³ In a nutshell, these are the threads that unite all of Agamben's varied works. In fact, this is a linkage between threads that is only further certified for Agamben by the indissociable, though undisclosed, bond between Benjamin and Saint Paul, a forceful structural connection made in order to depict the 'weak force' of messianic power working within history. As Agamben himself puts it, 'This orientation toward the past characteristic of Benjamin's messianism finds its canonic moment in Paul.'³⁴ This is, of course, certainly not a claim which all Benjamin scholars must find convincing, but it is one that lies central to Agamben's securing of his own philosophical integrity as well as his theory of citationality.

It is a difficult connection to prove conclusively, especially since it potentially involves the controversial use of what Benjamin referred to as a 'citation without citation', something which sounds dangerously close to plagiarism in its most literal form. It is also, however, that which Agamben detects at work in Benjamin's conceptualization of history as

an indebtedness to Pauline thought that Benjamin himself had to efface in order to remain loyal to the logic of citationality, as I will now try to explain. According to Agamben, this was a logic which bound Benjamin to approach the truth of Paul's propositions, as it were, without relying upon the authority of the source, an attempt perhaps to subvert the traditional (over)reliance on citations as legitimations of one's position and certainly an attempt to avoid 'being sovereign' in some sense. The stress of the contemporary 'fracture of being', its radicality, and its crisis today, however, are what press Agamben to work towards an 'unveiling' of sources in this regard. As he puts it, 'Whatever the case may be, there is no reason to doubt that these two fundamental messianic texts of our tradition, separated by almost two thousand years, both written in a situation of radical crisis, form a constellation whose time of legibility has finally come today.'³⁵ This is a constellation on which Agamben, for his part, will heavily rely.

By aligning Benjamin's theory of citationality within a Pauline framework with his own earlier work on art and history (which we have just seen), Agamben is able to work towards a definition of the citation that parallels his comments on art as the 'secret meeting place' between the past and the present. Accordingly, pulling citations (as messianic images) from the past in order to destroy (otherwise violent and imposing) representations within the present: this, and only this, is the way towards undermining the traditional notions of authority that have dominated our world under the banner of 'sovereignty' for centuries, something which we are perhaps only just now beginning to discern in some sense.³⁶ This leads Agamben to rearticulate Benjamin's essential point: 'When it is truly redeemed and truly saved, humanity is therefore in possession of its past. But for humanity to be in possession of it, Benjamin says, is for it to be able to cite it.'³⁷ The citation, as such, appears consequently as the key to restoring the modern alienated subject, though we still need to flush out the details of what such an illumination may involve.

This desire for citations as a reworking of the past is what, undoubtedly, lies centre stage within Benjamin's grandiose *Arcades Project*, a piecemeal of associations and quotations never formally finalized but containing the fragments of his entire corpus. In it were the citations and assorted reflections that characterized the culmination of his thoughts on a materialist historiography as it was concerned with the collision of tradition and catastrophe, with a 'tradition that is catastrophe'.³⁸ For his part, as Agamben unpacks Benjamin's 'theory of citation', he begins to negotiate the journey between the poles of destruction and creation, catastrophe and tradition, until the line between them begins to blur. Citation destroys, to be sure, as it rips words from their originary context: 'To write history thus means to cite history. It belongs to the concept of citation, however, that the historical object in each case is torn from its

context.³⁹ But it is also, at the same time, an act of transfiguration worked in concert with the power of justice, as his celebrated theses on the concept of history make abundantly clear. These 'destructive forces' of liberation are housed in the act of citation itself, setting Benjamin's project at a great distance from any historicist effort to 'eternalize' the past or fix the narrative of 'History' once and for all. In Benjamin's depiction, rather, any redemption of the past is necessarily the way in which to fulfil it and, therefore, closer to the means of discarding certain readings of it. It is a 'return to origins' that liberates them from their place within a given canonical representation of history without necessarily involving a historical, locatable origin as such. As Agamben describes it, 'The return to the origin that is at issue here thus in no way signifies the reconstruction of something as it once was, the reintegration of something into an origin understood as a real and eternal figure of its truth.'⁴⁰

This is the truth of origins that Agamben detects at work in Benjamin's study, for 'according to Benjamin, by contrast—and the radicality of his thought lies here—to redeem the past is not to restore its true dignity, to transmit it anew as an inheritance for future generations'.⁴¹ A true redemption of the past can only bring matters to a close, not perpetuate them further, as conceivable on something like the Day of Judgement: 'For Benjamin, what is at issue is an interruption of tradition in which the past is fulfilled and thereby brought to its end once and for all. For humanity as for the individual human, to redeem the past is to put an end to it, to cast upon it a gaze that fulfills it.'⁴² This is a task both to 'shake off the past and bring it into the hands of humanity', which Agamben unhesitatingly calls an 'unusual' task.⁴³ This is 'unusual' perhaps because it appears to do away with historical narrativizing altogether, that which is perhaps another, more alienating disjunction of the modern subject. And yet citations are not just messianic fulfilments (in a theological sense) but also the unsurprising upending of historical representations themselves, a form of living in the present which cannot be manipulated for canonical-ideological or religious ends. For Agamben, at least, bringing 'dialectics to a standstill' is the first fundamental act taken towards ending political and cultural representations as a whole, the completed task of a profanation of the quasi-sacred museum pieces and the start of a community still to come.⁴⁴

As we have already seen for Benjamin, the real issue at stake within modernity was one concerning the 'transmissibility of culture' and the increasingly complex impasses which any attempt at transmission would inevitably encounter. Following Agamben's formulation of this context, we are able to see how

the particular power of quotations arises, according to Benjamin, not from their ability to transmit that past and allow the reader to relive it but, on the contrary, from their capacity to 'make a clean sweep, to

expel from the context, to destroy.' Alienating by force a fragment of the past from its historical context, the quotation at once makes it lose its character of authentic testimony and invests it with an alienating power that constitutes its unmistakable aggressive force.⁴⁵

And this reality of the citation, in some sense at least, is what first confronts the reader of Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, a project consisting mainly of citations and dedicated to ('aggressively') redefining the scope of how the nineteenth century is historically perceived. At the same time, however, the stakes within Benjamin's project were far greater, attempting to do nothing less than completely (re)conceive the relationship between history and authority, as I have been indicating throughout this chapter. Authority, from his view, is only maintained through time by traversing over its own historical context, that is, by being torn as a citation from its context, registering itself for an instant in the present (its 'now-time' or *Jetztzeit* of the dialectical image 'at a standstill').⁴⁶ A fuller significance of this passage is now made legible to us as it can now be contextualized within the scope of Agamben's own claims against the linkage of citation and authority. As Agamben puts it quite pointedly, 'Benjamin, who for his entire life pursued the idea of writing a work made up exclusively of quotations, had understood that the authority invoked by the quotation is founded precisely on the destruction of the authority that is attributed to a certain text by its situation in the history of culture.'⁴⁷

Authority is established, in Benjamin's eyes, by superseding (destroying) all previous claims to authority and thereby exposing the processes of sovereign power that function within the act of citation. What Benjamin does to these processes, however, and through his own use of citations, is not simply a perpetuation of this cycle. He is rather determined to upend its functioning and to provide an alternate reading of history—its liberating (messianic) weak force. For Benjamin then, as Agamben puts it,

Its truth content is a function of the uniqueness of its appearance, alienated from its living context in what Benjamin, in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' defines as 'une citation à l'ordre du jour' ('a quotation on the order of the day') on the day of the Last Judgment. The past can only be fixed in the image that appears once and for all in the instant of its alienation, just as a memory appears suddenly, as in a flash, in a moment of danger.⁴⁸

In many ways, the appearance of the past image (Benjamin's messianic image), torn forever from its historically situated context, was an appearance of authority from outside of whatever 'authority' had been constituted as sovereign. This is an appearance of an authority on the level of citations that could only be read as a contestation of whatever 'authority' posited itself as such in the present. An almost paradoxical definition of authority ('paradoxical' because only an authority from outside of what

is presently considered as 'authoritative' can be said to arise from history), it provides a unique commentary on an earlier aporia of the grounding of authority that Agamben had been attempting to work out in relation to citationality. This aporia becomes manifest precisely in what he calls the 'vicious circle of authority and citation'. Specifically, it is an aporia where 'authority is the source of the citation but the citation is the source of authority', a state which then 'renders impossible the birth of real authority in the modern world (or, more exactly, only renders possible its "authoritarian" counterfeit)'.⁴⁹ This is consequently to reveal a force of citation that is deliberately, and often, employed within the various social, cultural, political, and religious domains in order to achieve hegemonic ends.⁵⁰ It is also the staple tactic employed in all academic and educational contexts, though with assuredly less understanding of the reasons as to why this citational reality is exercised as such.

What all of this is leading us towards is the question of whether citations from the past register themselves as an authority that is capable of disrupting the present 'authoritative' structuring of cultural legibility or whether they in turn legitimate such an order. Either way, citationality should be conceived as being among the ranks of a political decisionism in some sense, deftly choosing from among the ruins of history for its own canonical (and so always to some extent ideological or religious) representations. As such, new 'less violent' forms of citation might develop in the future, while the 'more violent' forms are slowly eradicated from general acceptance.⁵¹ Yet things might also not be so simple. According to Agamben's reading of Benjamin, this often repeated formulation does not fully embrace the radicality of Pauline, messianic thinking. Indeed, the complexity of citationality may in fact come to reflect the complex (mis)readings of the coming of a historical messiah, ones we have on record, such as the tension evident between the expectations of a political messiah (who would redefine political representations, as with the Maccabean revolt, etc.) and a messiah who comes to end political representation itself (for Agamben, this is Paul's Christ).⁵²

For Agamben, the past image brought into the present in order to 'complete' it is not simply a 'less violent' form of representation: it is rather the end of representation itself. And with the end of representation comes the beginning of a new ethical paradigm which Agamben will formulate as being beyond any 'resemblance' sought within the field of representation. This is a movement straight towards the pure word spoken not as a form of representation but as a pure presentation, something Agamben refers to as an 'exposure', the true target of what any citation attempts to embody but is ultimately incapable of doing.

Taking up these remarks on the attempt to present something beyond its representational confines alongside his writings elsewhere on the nature of the 'face', we are confronted with a unique understanding of citations as an attempt made within language to present the pure com-

municability of the human being—our face.⁵³ There is a 'visage' beyond any representation that the reality of a particular face presents us with and that exposes us to the other before us, in all its nudity so to speak. It is almost as if beyond this there is also a fundamental linguistic element contained within such an exposure of our being—that which unites such an exposure of our visage with the nature of language and citations. As he puts it, 'The face is not something that transcends the visage: it is the exposition of the visage in all its nudity, it is a victory over character—it is word.'⁵⁴ It is a word of pure expression which is seemingly beyond all language and yet which invokes a particular experience of language (much as citations often seek to do).

In other words, the face is language itself, the pure word that humanity has been searching for and longing to cite in contestation of an unjust (authoritarian) sovereign rule of representations within the present. This is the radical insight that Agamben seems to be pointing us toward and that which would certainly give us pause to (re)consider how it is that we write and record ourselves in language. It is, moreover, what we have apparently been searching for within history and what Benjamin's 'dialectical materialism' sought to retrieve from the ruins of civilization. It is the summit of that which all character points towards and which must courageously be presented in its 'nudity' before another face.⁵⁵ It is what Agamben will refer to as the quasi-mystical, quasi-sacred 'exposition' of the face as it becomes the truth presented beyond representations, beyond the limitations constitutive of the human being as a particular, historical construct. Over and beyond this, its exposition is also the pure showing of the face that language is unable to present in linguistic terms. The face can only present this reality by exposing itself, by showing itself, as it were. Ultimately, Agamben's complete reenvisioning of ethics results, as we shall see, in this attempt to comprehend the face as the present image that is dialectically, materially sought in fulfilment of the past, the face of the other before us, and the real quotation that Benjamin longed to cite.

CONCLUSION

It was Michel de Certeau who once quipped that it was the art of citation which 'appears to be the ultimate weapon for making people believe'.⁵⁶ This was the case for him because citation could be said to play off people's assumptions concerning belief. Our 'reality' is generated by our reliance on the general sense of belief which circulates around us through the (self-)citations continuously being performed in society. Citation for de Certeau, in fact, provides a modern sense of credibility in the face of religious disintegration and thus comes to replace those unbelievable

doctrines that once were seen to support the religious (or perhaps all representational) life.

For Agamben, being beyond representation means being beyond citation and beyond the varied notions of sovereignty associated with it, hence beyond the historical forms of religious life *tout court*. In truth, the face is what citations ultimately strive to become, to embody, as it were, like the 'whatever' nature of the infant's face, searching for something wholly beyond authority and that usually comes to define a relation of love.⁵⁷ The face is the citation sought among the ruins of history that can yet give life to the fractured human self and which can provide the much-sought-after sense of 'transcendence-in-immanence' that religions have subsequently distorted and monopolized. Hence the appropriation of citationality by a gender theorist such as Judith Butler is not as remote from this context as it might seem at first glance. It is this stress on the body called forwards through language into history, for example, that she is seeking to recover and to love, in all its embodyable forms, a celebration of a 'whatever' being that demands to be loved as much as addressed, not subjected to a series of violent (normative) representational frameworks which strive for hegemonic bids of sovereign power.⁵⁸

Agamben's development of Benjamin's theory of citationality yields a hope that human nature can get beyond cultural significations in some sense, beyond political representations, and enter into an unforeseen world, not utopian but rather the most realistic one we could imagine. In what might be the simplest clarification on what paradise could in fact be: 'Here language . . . returns to that which never was and to that which it never left, and thus it takes the simple form of a habit.'⁵⁹ This would be a bold move towards a new form of writing, one that strives to be a habit more than a sovereign claim to power. Just what such a form of writing might entail, however, remains an open question, one very much needing to be further explored.

NOTES

1. Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London: Routledge, 1993).

2. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 2, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 486–93; and *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002), 260–85.

3. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 205.

4. MC, 105.

5. See, among others, Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Catherine Mills, *The Philosophy of Agamben* (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008); Thanos Zartaloudis, *Giorgio Agamben: The Idea of Justice and the Uses of Legal Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2010).

6. Matthias Fritsch, *The Promise of Memory: History and Politics in Marx, Benjamin, and Derrida* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).
7. MC, 105.
8. MC, 105.
9. PR, 84.
10. PR, 84.
11. PR, 84.
12. MC, 106.
13. MC, 107.
14. MC, 107.
15. MC, 108.
16. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 392.
17. MC, 110.
18. Benjamin, 'Convolute N.', in *The Arcades Project*.
19. MC, 110.
20. Cf. LD, 74ff.; IH, 15ff.; S, xvii.
21. MC, 110.
22. O.
23. O.
24. MC, 114.
25. MC, 114.
26. TR, 56–57.
27. SL.
28. MC, 114. See also Walter Benjamin, 'Letter to Gerhard Scholem, 12 June 1938', in *Briefe*, ed. Gerhard Scholem and Theodor Adorno (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1973), 763.
29. MC, 113.
30. MC, 114: 'Since the goal is already present and thus no path exists that could lead there, only the perennially late stubbornness of a messenger whose message is nothing other than the task of transmission can give back to man, who has lost his ability to appropriate his historical space, the concrete space of his action and knowledge.'
31. 'The Idea of Language', in P.
32. IH.
33. TR.
34. TR, 144.
35. TR, 145.
36. TR, 139. Likewise, this seems to be the source of Agamben's involvement with German legal theorist Carl Schmitt and his *Homo Sacer* project, for the link between citation and authority is one which reveals the powers at work in our world as much as the means towards subverting them (cf. HS and SE).
37. P, 151–52.
38. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 473.
39. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 476.
40. P, 152.
41. P, 153.
42. P, 153.
43. P, 153.
44. CC.
45. MC, 104.
46. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 473.
47. MC, 104.
48. MC, 104–5.
49. S, 74.
50. These comments are to be read in conjunction with both Benjamin's and Agamben's work on Carl Schmitt and the notion of sovereignty implied therein, for it is only

the decision of the sovereign as such that can cut through the aporia of authority, through its ungroundedness and its inability to justify its own existence (cf. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005], 5ff.; SE, 1ff.).

51. Just such a proposal seems inherent in the work of Jacques Derrida, who took up similar themes to these found here in his numerous works. See the conclusions drawn in Leonard Lawlor, *This Is Not Sufficient: An Essay on Animality and Human Nature in Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

52. TR.

53. ME, 97.

54. ME, 97.

55. Cf. the emphasis on nudity in Agamben's *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

56. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 188.

57. CC, 106ff.

58. Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004); see also CC, 20ff.

59. LD, 97.

II

Futures of Political Theology

FIVE

Immanence as Revelation

Colby Dickinson

In this chapter, I continue to examine Agamben's reconceptualization of language, specifically in light of particular historical glosses on the 'name of God' and the nature of the 'mystical' in general. In this effort, I highlight as well the political task of profanation, one of his most central concepts, specifically in relation to the *logos* said to embody humanity's 'religious' quest to find its Voice. I believe that by framing the discussion in this way, we are able to see how he challenges those standard ('onto-theological') notions of transcendence that have been consistently aligned with various historical forms of sovereignty. As is well documented, Agamben's critiques of sovereignty have been plentiful throughout the years, and I see no exception to this in his attempts to delineate an ontology in explicitly philosophical terms. In contrast to the actuality of the sovereign, intent on declaring the 'state of exception', Agamben routinely turns to the conceptualization of pure potentiality in order both to undermine the sovereign's claims of necessity and to deactivate the rule of law that governs our political and representational forms. In this particular context, I present his redefinition of the concept of revelation as the unveiling of the 'name of God', which is actually the fact of our linguistic being. To do this, as I see it, is not to remove oneself from the claims of sovereign power but to make a movement from the transcendent divine realm (and its accompanying claims to sovereignty) to the merely human world before us. By proceeding in this manner, I am trying to close in on one of the largest theological implications contained within Agamben's work: the establishment of an ontology that could only be described as a form of 'absolute' immanence, potentiality, and of living a 'form of life' outside the confines of law. Yet I want to be clear on this point: I do not

think that Agamben's work inherently or directly espouses some type of pantheism. What I am suggesting is that if we are to view Agamben's work from a theological perspective, wondering what ontology he himself puts forwards as plausible, the best we can come up with seems to be something more or less open—but only open—to the possibility of a pantheistic or panentheistic position, though, again, this is not named as such by him in his work. At most, there are some suggestive passages in *The Coming Community* that point in this direction, and I do not think that he modifies this position to any significant degree in the *Homo Sacer* series. His almost enigmatic remarks on transcendence and immanence in *The Kingdom and the Glory* seem, to my mind, to only reinforce this reading.

In the last few years, Agamben has begun to arouse great interest, not only among those immersed in philosophical and political theory but also among those in literary circles, critical-legal studies, theology, feminism, postcolonial thought, and history.¹ Despite the critical-constructive work being done with regard to his writings, however, it has almost escaped notice that there has been little account given for Agamben's overtly theological claims by the discipline of academic theology proper.² This is a lamentable fact in many respects, most notably because his rereading of the theological tradition—as well as the central role it plays in his work—contains significant consequences for the way theology is both perceived and performed on the whole. His work in fact often focuses on redefining traditional theological terms as philosophical ones, a process which appears in many ways to threaten the integrity of theological study as it has generally (at least historically) been conceived. This would include the complete revision (or, better, profanation) of concepts such as revelation, redemption, original sin, profanation, the messianic, sovereignty, the sacred (especially through the figure of the *homo sacer*), glory, the 'name of God', and creation, among others. Demonstrating his close proximity to theology time and again, these terms are continuously explored in his work in direct relation to the history of theology as well as theology's attempts to formulate its various doctrines and creeds in relation to the history of Western thought. The disciplines of theology and of religious studies thus would be greatly amiss if they were to continue neglecting the radicality of his thought in producing their very self-definition.

It is with all of this in mind that I articulate something of the many implications which Agamben's work holds for theological study specifically, its past, present, and future. First, I intend to do so in relation to his (re)conceptualizations of language, something he formulates in light of particular historical glosses on the 'name of God' and which ultimately lead him to a reevaluation of the nature of the 'mystical'. I hope to show how Agamben's critique of mysticism can open theology to a new per-

spective on both its nature and its essence. Second, I turn to the way in which Agamben lays out the political task of profanation, one of his most central concepts, in relation to the *logos* said to embody humanity's 'religious' quest to find its Voice. By doing so, I am aiming to present Agamben's challenge to those standard (ontotheological) notions of transcendence that have been consistently aligned with various historical forms of sovereignty. And, finally, I close with a section presenting revelation as being solely the unveiling of the 'name of God' as the fact of our linguistic being, a movement, therefore, from the transcendent divine realm to the merely human world before us. By proceeding in this manner, I narrow in on one of the largest theological implications contained within Agamben's work but which is not directly or necessarily endorsed by him: the establishment of an ontology of 'absolute' immanence that might pave the way for a theological espousal of some form of pantheism (or perhaps panentheism) still to be more fully developed beyond Agamben's own suggestive indications.³

LANGUAGE BEYOND THE 'MYSTICAL'

From the outset, Agamben's pursuit of the origins of language does not deviate too greatly from the heritage which seemingly bequeathed it to him. From more remote mystical traditions to the most 'authoritative' theologians, Agamben draws from a rich history of theology in order to move, in effect, to a place that seems to be entirely beyond its contours. Even when he engages with philosophy directly, and this throughout several of his works, it is from a quasi-theological-mystical interest that he analyses its most fundamental propositions, thus giving rise to those comments which would see his work as being somewhat overtly theological.⁴ For example, and as an introduction into these theological-philosophical juxtapositions in his writing, it is within the context of his depiction of the 'coming community' that Agamben carefully situates his discourse in between two of the twentieth century's greatest philosophical minds, two thinkers who arguably also happened to achieve a remarkable proximity to the mystical: Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein. If their works appear at moments to be isolating the borders of the mystical rather than giving way to it (as Wittgenstein's famous comments on the 'mystical' in his *Tractatus* appear to do) then so much the better for Agamben, who finds an oscillation between both thinkers to be the approximate dynamic he needs to achieve a liquidation of the mystical in its near entirety.⁵

His immediate references are language and its relation to our being-in-the-world, something that has directly occupied thought, he tells us, since the time of Plato.⁶ Situating himself within this historical trajectory, Agamben begins to formulate the precision of his thoughts on language

and the mystical in relation to the singular act of naming, something which reaches its pinnacle expression in the various historical attempts on the part of theologians to formulate (or pronounce) the 'name of God'. For Agamben, the act of naming, that is, our attempt to deal with our being-in-the-world as revealed in the existence of language itself, is what should be considered as the primary 'content' of religious expression. It is a fact of our (linguistic) existence that we are unable to state as such, and this gives rise to its 'mystical' aura, to mysticism itself, in fact, and to any accompanying religious impulse. This is indeed what enables him to say that

what remains without name here is the being-named, the name itself (*nomen innominabile*); only being-in-language is subtracted from the authority of language. According to a Platonic tautology, which we are still far from understanding, the idea of a thing is the thing itself; *the name, insofar as it names a thing, is nothing but the thing insofar as it is named by the name.*⁷

This name is far from being understood by us, not solely because it is an obscure (and obscuring) thought in itself but because the relationship between them, between name and thing (as between language and being-in-the-world), constitutes the essential problematic of a determinate existence: how are we to move from one to the other? In other words, it forms the problematic contours of transcendence itself.

In its basic structure, this problematic nestled within the event of language itself, its 'taking-place' as it were, reveals the fundamental division that grounds much of Agamben's ontological reflections. The partition between language and our being-in-the-world is opened up for him by those philosophical figures who were fascinated by our dwelling in language, such as Aristotle, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein, figures who were no less interested in 'theological' claims, even if they do not always express it directly as such. As he unfolds this event's history,

the scission of language into two irreducible planes permeates all of Western thought, from the Aristotelian opposition between the first *ousia* and the other categories . . . up to the duality between *Sage* and *Sprache* in Heidegger or between showing and telling in Wittgenstein. The very structure of transcendence, which constitutes the decisive character of philosophical reflection on being, is grounded in this scission.⁸

The difficulty of conceptualizing this scission rivals only the comprehension of the difficulties embedded within the structure of transcendence itself, or that which indeed limits any understanding within the realm of ideas—or even the realm said to be inhabited by the divine.⁹ It is, however, precisely this domain of thought that Agamben, despite declaring that we are still quite unable to comprehend it, hopes to explicate as something immanent to our existence, the very fact of the existence of

language itself.¹⁰ For, as he will put it in another, earlier context, though one that nonetheless sets the course for these later ruminations, it is 'only because the event of language always already transcends what is said in this event' that 'something like a transcendence in the ontological sense' can be shown to take place.¹¹ This is a 'transcendence' that does not ultimately transcend the world but remains entirely immanent to its linguistic economy. Indeed it is not necessarily even a transcendence-in-immanence because it actually blurs the line between them.¹² Seeing reality as such would seem only to confirm the significance of Agamben's taking up of Heidegger and Wittgenstein at the conclusion of his political formulations in his *The Coming Community*.

The oscillation between these contemporary thinkers with an almost mystical trajectory is subsequently consulted in relation to medieval theologians for whom the problem of a transcendence-in-language appears to be the fundamental philosophical problem, according to Agamben's reading. It is a short step from here to inspecting this 'event of language' as the fundamental structure of our 'being-in-the-world', one conceived in relation to the grounds and origins of what constitutes the theological in the first place. In an earlier work, *Language and Death*, Agamben renders it as such:

The transcendence of being and of the world—which medieval logic grasped under the rubric of the *transcendentia* and which Heidegger identifies as the fundamental structure of being-in-the-world—is the transcendence of the event of language with respect to that which, in this event, is said and signified; and the shifters, which indicate the pure *instance* of discourse, constitute . . . the originary linguistic structure of transcendence.¹³

As the ontological difference that Heidegger had always claimed constituted the 'always forgotten ground of metaphysics', this transcendent structure of our linguistic being is what captured the medieval mind-set as being constituted solely under the auspices of the divine. Likewise, it was the difference which gave rise to the originary line of signification drawn between human beings and God, or between humans and animals, as also perhaps between such divisions as gender and race.¹⁴ And it is this difference that continues to haunt Western thought (and theology) to this day.

As Agamben frames the issue, while simultaneously expanding upon it:

The opening of the *ontological* dimension (being, the world) corresponds to the pure taking place of language as an originary event, while the *ontic* dimension (entities, things) corresponds to that which, in this opening, is said and signified. The transcendence of being with respect to the entity, of the world with respect to the thing, is above all,

a transcendence of the event of *langue* [language] with respect to *parole* [speech].¹⁵

These reflections on the event of language lead Agamben back to the medieval theological tradition which perhaps best exemplified this step beyond the mystical and towards the root of language itself, a state beyond all grammars. In *Language and Death*, for example, he notes how in the work of the medieval logician Albert Magnus, faith is defined as

a particular dimension of meaning, a particular 'grammar' of the demonstrative pronoun, whose ostensive realization no longer refers to the senses or the intellect, but to an experience that takes place solely in the instance of discourse as such (*fides ex auditu*).¹⁶

Something thus occurs in the *parole* (speech) concerning the nature of *langue* (language) itself and is therefore central to comprehending the grounds of faith, something which Agamben seeks to discern further.

The division between being-in-the-world and language is asserted once more as the fundamental scission within Western thought.¹⁷ This takes Agamben inevitably, and as one might nearly guess, from the reception of Magnus's work to the thought of his most prized student, Thomas Aquinas. For Aquinas, similarly, the name of God can only be illuminated as 'that in which no determinate being is named', the beyond of language that is not, however, to be confused with the realm of the mystical but rather seen as the origin of language itself, located in a realm beyond utterance. There is an opening made to 'the infinite and indeterminate sea of substance', which, according to Aquinas, is said to be 'a certain shadowy realm said to be inhabited by God'.¹⁸ By Agamben's reckoning, the 'dimension of meaning at stake here goes beyond the vagueness normally attributed to mystical theology (which is on the contrary, a particular but perfectly coherent grammar'.¹⁹ Consequently, and with no resources to describe this state inherent within the theological tradition, as Agamben relates, Christian ontological musings turn to Hebrew conceptions of the *nomen tetragrammaton*—'the secret and unpronounceable name of God'—as the source of linguistic signification, hence as the source of language itself.

Theology has dealt often with the erasure of the verb 'to be', the verb of existence stated in relation to God.²⁰ It is this very tenuous relationship which is subsequently mirrored in the various historical acts of trying to define the difficult relationship between mystical experience and language (apophatics). Agamben is no stranger to this theological tradition, as we have seen. Indeed, he is quick to extend this discourse even further in order to encompass the entire realm of human existence and thereby demonstrate what a true nature beyond even the mystical might be. This is a proposition which in itself may actually approach an apophatic thinking beyond apophatics. For example, in another context, Agamben

has recourse to describe the effect of the revealing of the origins of language on the (Western, philosophical) subject as such:

We see that the cogito, like mystical synderesis [the capacity to intuit the universal principles of humanity], is what remains of the soul when, at the end of a 'dark night', it is stripped of all its attributes and content. The heart of this transcendental experience of the I has been signally described by an Arab mystic, Al-Hallaj: 'I am I and the attributes are no more; I am I and the qualifications are no more . . . I am the pure subject of the verb.'²¹

The experience of what it means to be human (the fundamental proposition behind the cogito) is revealed in its relation to language, in the verb 'to be', and is as such founded upon this 'I' that is said to exist without being, that is, in a state of indeterminable essence, 'stripped of its attributes and content'. The subject, the Western political, philosophical, and theological subject of so much historical focus and scrutiny, lies in between its being-in-the-world and language. It is founded upon this scission, and this is a fact seemingly only approachable through recourse to near-apophatic language. It is also, and not surprisingly, what is 'revealed' by Agamben as making up the essence of the various mystical traditions arising from the three traditional monotheistic faiths.

The linkage of medieval mystical traditions to the transcendental subject of modern philosophy becomes a central recurring point of reference for Agamben throughout his work, as well as the most immediate reference point for grounding his theological musings on the nature of language.²² This connection is what lends him the confidence to go a step further and rearticulate the place of the subject in relation to language altogether.²³ In the context of perusing the decline of experience in the contemporary world, and of humanity's increased isolation of itself, Agamben declares, in a typically aphoristic manner, that 'the transcendental cannot be the subjective; unless transcendental simply signifies: linguistic'.²⁴ And there it is: transcendence appears to be nothing more than a veiled attempt (within all religious aspirations) to articulate the origin of language, one that in the end ultimately fails. And its failure, in turn, gives birth to the subject of Western rational thought.

The entire problematic of transcendence, as well as its accompanying transcendental subject, is rendered visible through this fundamental disclosure: truth itself, and the truth of language's existence foremost among it, cannot be spoken of in language, or even by language, but must only be revealed indirectly. And this, more than anything else, is what has given rise over time to the fundamental impulses behind our most basic religious and apophatic aspirations. As Agamben will most directly formulate the intersection of truth and language in his work *Infancy and History*:

Truth is not thereby something that can be defined within language, nor even outside it, as a given fact or as an 'equation' between this and language: infancy, truth and language are limited and constituted respectively in a primary, historic-transcendental relation.²⁵

An essential juncture is consequently reached through the determination of these coordinating points, one that still bears down significantly upon our definitions of humanity. For it is at the moment where infancy, truth, and language all meet up that the constitution of the transcendental subject is effected. The subject, the intrusion of the 'I' into language at the point of infancy, must join up with what Agamben, following Mallarmé, will term '*la voix sacrée de la terra ingénue*' ('the sacred voice of the unknowing earth'): the language that animals need not conceive because they are already identical to it but which humanity must enter into, must assert itself within. 'Man, instead, by having an infancy, by preceding speech, splits this single language and, in order to speak, has to constitute himself as the subject of language—he has to say I.'²⁶

As Agamben will make foundational to his elaborations on the (in)distinction between human and animal, it is with this understanding that humans must continuously reconstitute themselves against an undefined (undecidable) background of this vacuous sacred language, this empty space wherein the human being is nearly engulfed in the world of its own animality.²⁷ Humanity, finding itself in this situation, tries to posit itself as an unambiguous existence despite the fact that it exists in reality (as 'humanity') because of its fractured dwelling in language.

Citing Aristotle, Agamben is able to extract the overall import of these reflections by considering how

if language is truly man's nature (and nature, on reflection, can only mean language without speech, *genesis synechês*, 'continuous origin', by Aristotle's definition, and to be nature means being always-already inside language), then man's nature is split at its source, for infancy brings it discontinuity and the difference between language and discourse.²⁸

Unlike in the world of animality, human beings develop a sense (or 'faculty') for history, one grounded precisely in this difference and discontinuity. As it develops,

it is infancy, it is the transcendental experience of the difference between language and speech, which first opens the space of history. Thus Babel—that is, the exit from the Eden of pure language and the entry into the babble of infancy . . . —is the transcendental origin of history.²⁹

As Agamben emphasizes over and again, we (humans) live in a post-Babelian world, one that must recognize its unique situation among the ruins of paradise and become conscious of the transcendental subject at

history's centre. And it is the logical, and inevitable, conclusion which follows from these premises that if the singular sacred voice within which all creation lives is continuously brought about by a fractured state through which humanity attempts to elevate itself above the rest of creation, then the task unique to humanity, one that humanity will ultimately have to embrace if it is to cease engaging in such violent reductions of being, will be one of profanation, of ridding itself of its various notions of 'the mystical' which still haunt our world and which testify only to the fracture within our being without really doing anything about it.

THE PROFANATION OF OUR DWELLING IN LANGUAGE

It should come as no surprise, then, that his most direct expression of the task of profanation inscribes itself at the heart of our dwelling in language. There are, perhaps, a number of ways that we might envision the 'task of profanation' which Agamben sets before humanity, framed as the daunting and yet necessary operation of the 'coming community' beyond the confines of our ongoing political representation.³⁰ It is a 'going beyond' representation that seeks what lies before language and in which humanity more primordially dwells. In other words, it is a profanation that must emerge from a deeper intake of what truly lies at the origins of language and religious thought, from the silence which is said to give rise to both. It is thus entirely beyond the grammar of the mystical-transcendental.

Like Aquinas's 'infinite and indeterminate sea of substance' that is God, the *mythogeme* of a silent voice becomes a subsequent point of departure for Agamben's reflections on the origin of language, as well as theology's repeated attempts to articulate it. This *mythogeme* is the ontological ground of language itself, one that likewise appears in the earliest Christian mystical texts.³¹ Again, the history of theology becomes imperative for Agamben as he performs his critical philosophical examination of its mystical traditions. But it is also necessary for him to examine this theme if he is to conceive of this exercise as one of being both a philosophy of theology and a theology of philosophy, hence situating his reflections within the wide berth of the history of philosophy and the 'end of metaphysics' often suspected as lurking within its core.³² Within this context, the distance between mysticism and the Western philosophical legacy of nihilism is quickly closed, though it is also reopened from another angle and explored anew. Any attempt to think the negative foundations of speech will be a return to metaphysics proper, even if it is a metaphysics of nihilism or a metaphysics not immediately recognizable as such.

Here, in the context of a discussion on Gnosticism, as he puts it,

the Abyss (*buthos*)—incomprehensible, unformed, and eternally pre-existent—contains within itself a thought (*Ennoia*) that is silent, *Sigé*. And this 'silence' is the primary, negative foundation of revelation and of *logos*, the 'mother' of all that is formed from the Abyss.³³

Echoing what were to be the seminal biblical texts on the origin of the *logos* (Prov. 8:22ff. and John 1:1ff.), Agamben, without entering into the debate on Christ's nature (*homousios*), is content to merely circumscribe the boundaries of a silent abyss that contains God's name, to give rise to the *logos* and to all revelation. This abyss, however, is no small characterization of a rich theological tradition; rather, it forms the basis of how God's self is potentially comprehended. In this sense, there is little difference between language and God, at least insofar as the silence in question 'negatively unveils the arch-original dimension of the Abyss to sense and to signification' and as such becomes 'the mystical foundation of every possible revelation and every language, the original language of God as Abyss (in Christian terms, the figure of the dwelling of *logos* in *archē*, the original place of language)'.³⁴

Ranging over a broad tradition of, and often not discriminating between, ancient Gnostic texts and apocryphal works, Agamben is contented to conclude these reflections with reference to a strain of mystical thought found in Augustine's *De Trinitate*, where the 'silent Word' comes to dwell 'as unspeakable in the intellect of the Father'.³⁵ Or, as another perspective on the subject would have it, 'in its silent "spiritual prayer," the Syrian mystical tradition will seize upon this experience, recounting how a praying man arrives at a place where the language is "more internal than words" and "more profound than lips," a language of "silence" and "stupor"'.³⁶ This portrayal of 'silence as Abyss' is what allows him to conclude that the distinctions often made between orthodoxy and heresy, at least in this regard, do not hold as such; indeed 'there is no absolute opposition between the Gnostic *Sigé* and the Christian *logos*, which are never completely separated'.³⁷ The common ground between them, their shared proximity, as it were, is a silence existing as

the negative foundation of *logos*, its taking place and its unknown dwelling (according to Johannine theology), in the *arche* that is the Father. This dwelling of *logos* in *arche* (like that of *Sigé* in *Buthos*) is an abysmal dwelling—that is, ungrounded—and Trinitarian theology never manages to fully emerge from this abysmalness.³⁸

Though he provides no further comment here upon these Trinitarian claims, Agamben's presentation of the relation between *logos* and *archē* is fundamental for the structuring of Western thought as a whole, and it is what will once again enable him later to pick up this strand of Trinitarian thought, as we will see in a moment.³⁹ Here, however, culture itself, in all its varied and multiple forms, rests upon this silent, unpronounceable abyss of dwelling from which everything else proceeds, akin only to

Aquinas's 'infinite and indeterminate sea' that is God and from which all else (and not just the Trinity) proceeds. All creation is to be found here.⁴⁰ As he phrases it:

It is important to observe here how the 'conscience' of Western philosophy rests originally on a mute foundation (a Voice), and it will never be able to fully resolve this silence. By rigorously establishing the limits of that which can be known in what is said, logic takes up this silent Voice and transforms it into the negative foundation of all knowledge. On the other hand, ethics experiences it as that which must necessarily remain unsaid in what is said. In both cases, however, the final foundation remains rigorously in-formulable.⁴¹

More than a 'veiled theology', it is important to note, Agamben's remarks here appear as a nod in the direction of the very grounds on which theology is deemed possible, the point of its articulation within an all-too-human thought. It is a solid movement perhaps best situated within the Kantian search for religious structures of thought, yet with a linguistic twist, that which aims towards depicting the grounds of possibility for the existence of theology *tout court*.⁴²

The stakes for understanding the significance of this import are great. Agamben proposes nothing less than a reformulation of Western thought or what was once heavily based on its ontotheological foundations. In fact, 'the mystical is nothing but the unspeakable foundation; that is, the negative foundation of onto-theology.'⁴³ The task of profanation, one of the central recurring terms in Agamben's philosophical corpus, is opened up by the erasure of what presents itself as the mystical: 'Only a liquidation of the mystical can open up the field to a thought (or language) that thinks (speaks) beyond the Voice and its *sigetics*; that dwells, that is, not on an unspeakable foundation, but in the infancy (*in-fari*) of man.'⁴⁴ The conclusion is stark: this side of our infancy, the mystical has no currency, no economy in which it could be said to function. It is only an opening to our 'infantile dwelling' in language which characterizes this age in which we live, the result of an 'extreme nihilistic furor' which has seen the liquidation of all ontotheological masks.⁴⁵ In turn, and as a result of this context in which we are immersed, metaphysics must make an attempt to 'think the unthinkable', to comprehend its own negative foundations but not to solidify them into a dangerous ontic political form, one that operates with traditional representational limits, as Heidegger had once been tempted to do.⁴⁶ This is a case of language expressing its own existence; in short, to think that which he will term 'the Absolute'.

Thinking 'the Absolute' becomes, for Agamben, a thinking beyond conceptual oppositions, beyond the scissions and negativity that mark our dwelling in this world (our being-in-the-world).⁴⁷ It is that which returns to its own place and which he will equate directly with the appearance of the Voice, for 'only the Voice with its marvelous muteness

shows its inaccessible place, and so the ultimate task of philosophy is necessarily to think the Voice'.⁴⁸ This is an 'ultimate task' indeed, one that comes in many ways to mirror the Hegelian quest for the 'absolute spirit', which in this case is language. To think the 'Absolute' beyond any signified conceptual oppositions appears as the primary initiative embedded in the search for Voice. And the Absolute, as it traverses the history of philosophical thought, becomes a process of crossing over both 'negativity and scission in order to return to its own place'.⁴⁹ This is the unending journey that characterizes the potential of our existence, or its 'pure potentiality' as it were.⁵⁰

Much like Aristotle before him, and as his later development of the concept of 'potentiality' will further cement, Agamben turns to the problematic latent within the basic principles of thought in order to delve further into the line between potentiality and actuality, to move closer towards the former in the form of the Absolute which remains Absolute only through avoiding its concretion in actuality. For Agamben, this will mean that

To think the Absolute signifies, thus, to think that which, through a process of 'absolution', has been led back to its ownmost property, to itself, to its own solitude, as to its own custom. For this reason, the Absolute always implies a voyage, an abandonment of the originary place, an alienation and a being-outside.⁵¹

This move is an abandonment that is at the same time an 'absolution', something which will later be developed in Agamben's work under the banner of 'profanation'.⁵² It is also what he considers, following the German poet Novalis, to be a form of 'nostalgia' or the 'desire to be at home everywhere' and thereby 'to recognize oneself in being-other'.⁵³ It is only because philosophy is not 'at home with itself' that it must entertain the journey back to itself, and this is exactly the process of 'absolution' we search after (and often unknowingly)—another theological term reappropriated for its profane and entirely immanent usage. Implying the full theological cycle that would see human existence through from its entrance into language and the original sin of signification to its absolution (as a sort of 'forgiveness' to this state of sin) upon return to its infancy, Agamben circulates a pseudo-theological grammar that in many ways could be said to hinge on the experience of being 'born again' or perhaps even 'resurrected', here expressed as a continuous act of returning to our infancy.⁵⁴

What we again seem to find here, as elsewhere in his work, is an immanently profaned rebirth to the theological itself, one where the terms are destabilized and inverted, providing a significant reflection on the shift in perceiving God as immanent rather than transcendent or as a form of transcendence-in-immanence or immanence-in-transcendence, perhaps.⁵⁵ Rather than perceive philosophy as *ancilla theologiae* (the

'handmaiden' to theology), as Aquinas among others was wont to do, this movement is one that would rather posit philosophy as that which points towards the realm of the divine and theology as a purely immanent exercise, yet with an absolute gulf still existing between them. Philosophy remains in the domain of the immanent and transcendence remains muted, a silent partner on the other side of the abyss. Theology is therefore historically perceivable as an attempt to formulate this chasm between the immanent and the transcendent but not strictly established as a discourse on the transcendent as such. Rather, it exists today as a sort of ruin, a failed historical (and political) attempt to bridge an unbridgeable gap.

Thus, when referring to these processes of a purely immanent absolutization, Agamben can determine that philosophy is capable of doing what theology cannot, of providing us with a 'revelation' of its own:

Philosophy is this voyage, the human word's *nostos* (return) from itself to itself, which, abandoning its own habitual dwelling place in the voice, opens itself to the terror of nothingness and, at the same time, to the marvel of being; and after becoming meaningful discourse, it returns in the end, as *absolute* wisdom, to the Voice. Only in this way can thought finally be at home and 'absolved' of the scission that threatened it from there where it always already was. Only in the Absolute can the word, which experienced 'homesickness' (*Heimweh*) and the 'pain of return' (*nost-algia*), which experienced the negative always already reigning in it habitual dwelling place, now truly reach its own beginning in the Voice.⁵⁶

The Voice can be found in our immanent dwelling and only established thus as 'Absolute'. This is the ethos of humanity, that which, according to Heraclitus and as Agamben tells us, lacerates and divides into a demonic (*daiomai*, *daimon*) scission that must be fought and resolved. Philosophy, in many ways functioning here as if it were a quasi-'theological' paradigm in its own right, becomes for Agamben that which guides and renders meaningful the search throughout life for this return to our origins, our infancy.

Philosophy is considered to be a dialogue between humanity and its Voice, to be an embodied search for this Voice, one that faces the certainty of death at the same time as it attempts to 'assure language of its place'.⁵⁷ It is only through the death of the Voice that something like the end of philosophy could be considered, and this would be the only possible way to experience a language without negativity or death. What it could also be, however, is the starting point of a theology that has yet to be written. The possibility of such an experience, no matter how difficult it might seem to formulate, is what appears to fascinate and centre Agamben's philosophical quest. His articulation of this goal is consequently rather sharp: 'What is a language without Voice, a word that is

not grounded in any meaning? This is something that we must still learn to think.⁵⁸ And if this goal is achievable, then 'with the disappearance of the Voice, that "essential relation" between language and death that dominates the history of metaphysics must also disappear'.⁵⁹ Only then can something else appear.⁶⁰

In short, theology is reborn as a purely profane endeavour. And so, as the task of profanation or living in a world marked by God's absence will later encapsulate, this experience of a language severed from negativity and death is one wherein humanity must regain a connection with its primordial infancy. It must face the terror of remaining within the absence of Voice; it must face, in fact, its own silence: 'To exist in language without being called there by any Voice, simply to die without being called by death, is, perhaps the most abysmal experience; but this is precisely, for man, also his most habitual experience, his ethos, his dwelling.'⁶¹ As his reflections on the history of theology have already illustrated quite well, this is a state that was 'always already presented in the history of metaphysics as demonically divided into the living and language, nature and culture, ethics and logic, and therefore only attainable in the negative articulation of a Voice'.⁶² Breaking free of the Voice would posit a humanity freed from God, from the Name-of-the-Father that calls us into a realm of signified things and which constitutes the 'original sin' of human being.⁶³ Thus it is with the eclipse of the Voice that it becomes possible for humanity to experience a more radical poverty of world than that which was hitherto known.⁶⁴ We must share in the animal's poverty of world, enter the Open space between things, and realize ourselves anew.⁶⁵ But it is a poverty, no doubt, that is also humanity's most natural state of dwelling and to which we must and will return to over and again. This, and little else, is what actually serves to situate the various discourses of Agamben's *Homo Sacer* series.⁶⁶ It is likewise the basis for what Lorenzo Chiesa, among others, has referred to as Agamben's 'Franciscan' (because it is 'poor' or 'weak') ontology.⁶⁷ As Agamben will himself speculate, it is perhaps within this loss, within this poverty that humanity can sever the 'chain of tragic guilt' that seems to exist without resolve and enter a land free from pain.

Using a Greek term that was to become a favourite of Derrida's, Agamben foresees how

this *chora*, this country without pain where no voice is spoken at death, is perhaps that which, beyond the Voice, remains to be thought as the most human dimension, the only place where something like a *me phunai* is possible for man, a not having been born and not having nature.⁶⁸

This is a utopian dream, a hope that human nature can move beyond cultural significations, beyond political representations, and enter into an unforeseen world that can only be conceived of as rightly theological

inasmuch as it is (paradoxically) free of the theological. In what might be the simplest clarification on what paradise could in fact be, 'here language . . . returns to that which never was and to that which it never left, and thus it takes the simple form of a habit'.⁶⁹ For Agamben, of course, this state seems only just out of reach, something nearly obtainable that should yet be here. It is an eschatological dimension within being itself that will bear a strong affinity with the writings of Saint Paul, though perhaps more strongly with the early Paul, the new apostle for whom the kingdom of God was so near at hand that he advised the earliest churches not to invest too heavily in their worldly life (see, for example, Paul's advice on marriage in 1 Corinthians 7).

This is to conceive of the end of philosophy as the beginning of a theology of sorts, an entirely immanent theology that is severed from all false notions of sacrality which have come to dominate our world through their imposition and alignment with worldly forces of sovereignty—ontotheological notions based solely on the interplay of the sovereign and the *homo sacer* as constitutive of the political domain in which they were conceived.⁷⁰ This previous model involved a theology of sacrifice and its requisite blood and functioned solely on the principles of (political) representation and exclusion (much as I discussed it within a Girardian framework earlier). The profanation of such models, on the other hand, and as Agamben continues to edge closer towards, constructs a theology almost unrecognizable to the historical discipline of theology proper because it is not wedded to a sovereign-transcendent political paradigm. Though this may appear to some like a headlong plunge into a form of political (or even theological) nihilism, in many ways what Agamben offers is a revelation for those who are able to see it, for those with ears to hear it, a dismantling of our most fundamental representational contents and yet a presentation (or revelation) of our true nature.⁷¹

REVELATION; OR, THE NAME OF GOD AS PRESUPPOSITION OF THE EXISTENCE OF LANGUAGE

Revelation, for Agamben, is not a theological matter of little worth today, in many ways shattered and left in pieces only to be discarded by the secularized world in which we live. To conceive of it as such is to grossly misrepresent the trajectory of his thought as it bends towards its ultimate goal of profanation, something drawn by him in stark contrast to secularization as well as the (often theological) materials with which he works, so diligently preserving their historical and conceptual implications.⁷² Indeed, as he will succinctly put it, it is the structure of revelation that conditions 'the very possibility of knowledge in general'.⁷³ Thus, again and again, Agamben will approach the bedrock of our linguistic being, the origin of language and its potential for exposition through the rich-

ness of the Western theological tradition, revealing it for what it is and with the full consequences of this revelation on display. In this regard, Agamben has chosen to focus his remarks on the manner in which language coincides with religious pronouncements on the nature of revelation, finding no complete similarity between them and yet no great difference either; that is to say, revelation expresses nothing if not the existence of language itself.⁷⁴ For this reason,

it is this radical difference of the plane of revelation that Christian theologians express by saying that the sole content of revelation is Christ himself, that is, the Word of God, and that Jewish theologians affirm in stating that God's revelation is his name.⁷⁵

Both traditions, in fact, participate in the same essential task: the return of all our discourses to the foundation of language. For Agamben, 'that there is language is as certain as it is incomprehensible, and this incomprehensibility and this certainty constitute faith and revelation'.⁷⁶

In these foundational terms, he conceives of language as the 'nullification and deferral of itself', hence rendering the signifier as 'nothing other than the irreducible cipher' of the 'ungroundedness' at the heart of religious thought.⁷⁷ This is a destabilization of traditional religious frameworks to be sure but also perhaps their only hope of survival. In this sense, Agamben is able to underscore the remarkableness of a recent shift in the borders separating philosophy and theology, for, though it was once thought that theology determined its content to be 'incomprehensible' to reason, it now stands to reason that the 'incomprehensible' object is the very foundation of all comprehension itself.⁷⁸ Despite this being the general trend of thought, however, Agamben seeks to go beyond this formulation and reawaken the true philosophical impetus to free thought of all presuppositions, even from the incomprehensibility that nonetheless remains along the margins of our world, supporting the world, as it were.⁷⁹ As such, Agamben intends to be free of theology, or at least of that historical discourse which has, and would, continue to attempt to comprehend what is, in the end, incomprehensible.

The Wittgensteinian proposition 'How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world'⁸⁰ gives Agamben the chance to attach new meaning to the claim that 'God is dead', or rather than 'dead', unknown just outside our world, which in a practical sense perhaps amounts much to the same thing. Our world is to be profaned, on track towards its 'absolute profanation', and it is as if God were really dead and as if that may or may not be expressing reality as such.⁸¹ This equivocity on the existence of God is really a claim intertwined with what could be called 'God's abandonment' of the world, something intriguingly close to Jesus's dying words on the cross ('My God, my God, why have you forsaken [or abandoned] me?'). As Agamben himself will substantiate the point, 'If God

was the name of language, “God is dead” can only mean that there is no longer a name for language. The fulfilled revelation of language is a word completely abandoned by God.’⁸² This is an attempt to reside in the sphere of the profane, of a world abandoned by God, but also the space where the revelation of language is fulfilled, something which reflects the claims of the *logos* to be a fulfilment of the revelation which preceded it and which was seemingly accomplished at that moment when God appeared to be absent (or ‘dead’). Hence, it would seem to be a fundamentally Christian theological presupposition that defines the structure of Agamben’s thought here, inasmuch as it is also a theological presupposition, he might otherwise argue, which attempts to disclose the (more) fundamental fact (in that it is ontologically prior) of our linguistic existence prior to any ontotheological presuppositions themselves.

In what appears to mimic the phenomenon of glossolalia (or ‘speaking in tongues’) and also the tongues which are spoken at the origins of the church in the moments soon after the *logos* had been fulfilled and thus departed (Acts 2:1ff.), Agamben ponders how humanity is left on its own to search for a way to communicate meaningfully—that is, ‘human beings are thrown into language without having a voice or a divine word to guarantee them a possibility of escape from the infinite play of meaningful propositions’.⁸³ There is only a radical sense of alienation, coupled indissociably with a profound sense of mission and energy, the rising, perhaps, of the potentiality of our being which refuses to become a concrete form in actuality. For this reason, the overlap between the seminal, biblical moments after the death of Jesus (the ‘death of God’) and its alignment with Agamben’s work are not to be underestimated, despite his, at times, only vague references to it. For Agamben, this is indeed the moment when no decision (historically aligned with the rule of sovereignty) need be made and the gamble to move towards our infancy must be realized:

Thus we finally find ourselves alone with our words; for the first time we are truly alone with language, abandoned without any final foundation. This is the Copernican revolution that the thought of our time inherits from nihilism: we are the first human beings who have become completely conscious of language. For the first time, what preceding generations called God, Being, spirit, unconscious appear to us as what they are: names for language.⁸⁴

Perhaps this is also why the apostle Paul will later on appeal so strongly to Agamben, for it is Paul who appears most forcefully to grind all representations to a halt through an entrance into what could only surface as a kind of cultural death.⁸⁵ This is the apostle who considered all representations to be as nothing and who considered the ultimate act of fidelity to the *logos* to be an embraceable death in imitation of this loss (Gal. 3:28; Rom. 7). This is, as much as it has always been, a welcoming of

the abandonment of God in order to work beyond speech through the activity of the Spirit (Rom. 8).

If Agamben is correct, what Paul was actually advancing was a genuine profundity for religious thought historically, beyond the bounds of any one particular tradition, an embracing of the 'nihilistic' tendencies that would see all political representations ground to a halt, their dialectics brought to a standstill in time. Like the curtain in the Temple that tore in half only to reveal that the sacred dwelling place of God was empty (Matt. 27:51)—an act of profanation if ever there was one—the only thing to be shown is the emptiness within, the fact that nothing was there except the words we had formed around the absent centre in order to demarcate a 'sacred space' in the first place.

This would be, for Agamben, the birth of a 'religious nihilism' in Paul that should only become more central to religious thought over time.⁸⁶ As he elsewhere stresses the importance of this fundamental shift:

Nihilism experiences this very abandonment of the word by God. But it interprets the extreme revelation of language in the sense that there is nothing to reveal, that the truth of language is that it unveils the Nothing of all things. The absence of a metalanguage thus appears as the negative form of the presupposition, and the Nothing as the final veil, the final name of language.⁸⁷

This last act of the Gospels, one ultimately of blasphemy, sacrilege, and profanation, was the essential gesture of a religious tradition brought to its pinnacle expression through the full disclosure of the *logos* that yet remains completely immanent to our world. Under these conditions, we may greet the *logos* as if nothing were transcendent to this encounter, because, truly, there is nothing transcendent within it. The *logos* is all that matters, as many a Christian commentator has been at great pains to demonstrate. But this realization is also a self-conscious revelation that Agamben cannot simply contend is a subtle retooling of the theological tradition, allowing it thus to continue along as if this revelation counted for little or nothing. As he summarizes the stakes:

This is why for us, any philosophy, any religion, or any knowledge that has not become conscious of this turn belongs irrevocably to the past. The veils that theology, ontology, and psychology cast over the human have now fallen away, and we can return them to their proper place in language. We now look without veils upon language, which, having breathed out all divinity and all unsayability, is now wholly revealed, absolutely in the beginning.⁸⁸

This is an interesting return to the *logos* in *archē* within a Western context wherein the 'religions' of the past are being jettisoned at a great pace. For Agamben, there is only a return to our infancy, to our 'being-without-God' that is the absolute profanation of the world, one that may yet harbour a silent transcendence along its borders, forever inaccessible

yet grounding everything that is said; one that exists, if at all, as if it did not really matter at all. To see things as such is to behold a revision of theology that might appear to some to amount to a practical form of atheism. Perhaps. Or it might appear as an absolute kenotic self-emptying of God to the world, perhaps even becoming the world itself, as it were. And these two positions are as radically similar as they are dissimilar.

In effect, what this situation testifies to is the fact that there are at least two theologies at work in Agamben's thought: the historical theology of the church, with the veils it seeks to throw over the eyes of humanity due to its failure to accurately articulate the 'other side' of our infancy, one in league with a certain historical legacy of ontotheology, and yet another 'theology', the possibility for another theology, one that remains as obscure as it is inexpressible and yet perhaps the only true path open to the possibility of a divine presence in our world.

In the end, Agamben seems to point most directly towards the 'idea of language' as a 'vision of language itself' as such, as an 'immediate mediation' which is the only way to reach the infancy of an 'unpresupposed principle', a 'pure potentiality' within our being.⁸⁹ We are returned, in no uncertain terms, to the thoughts of Aristotle, to Aristotle's thoughts on thought, to the thinking of thought itself and the principle of the 'unmoved mover' behind it all, the original ground of a form of deism or theism which Agamben appears in many regards to leave open as a genuine possibility. As he formulates this 'belief' in relation to the work of the early Wittgenstein, a reference point to which he returns again and again in contemplation of the linguistic immanence of our being: 'The proposition that God is not revealed in the world could also be expressed by the following statement: What is properly divine is that the world does not reveal God. (Hence this is not the "bitterest" proposition of the *Tractatus*).'⁹⁰ Not the 'bitterest' proposition, perhaps, because it leaves open the chance that God still does exist, though there is no way of knowing whether or not any such conjecture is possible. This point retains the silence of that which would be transcendent.⁹¹ Thus also are the terms traditionally reserved for theological dogma displaced and inverted, illustrating again the proximity of Agamben's thought to theology but also his absolute distance. As he himself will demonstrate,

revelation does not mean revelation of the sacredness of the world, but only revelation of its irreparably profane character. (The name always and only names things.) Revelation consigns the world to profanation and thingness—and isn't this precisely what has happened? The possibility of salvation begins only at this point; it is the salvation of the profanity of the world, of its being-thus.⁹²

And this remark is immediately followed by another parenthetical one: 'This is why those who try to make the world and life sacred again are just as impious as those who despair about its profanation.'⁹³

There is a new theological horizon opened up by this disclosure, one that perhaps is not as 'new' as it might seem: it is the only option left to this form of rationalism, one that Spinoza had detected many years ago and which is the only sufficient successor to the deistic model of Enlightenment thought.⁹⁴ This option is an immanent materialism, an immanent theology, as Antonio Negri has described Agamben's position.⁹⁵ It is potentially even a form of pantheism or panentheism, as difficult to discern in Agamben's work as it was in Spinoza's.⁹⁶ Yet everything in Agamben's thought seems only to draw towards this conclusion: 'The world—insofar as it is absolutely, irreparably profane—is God.'⁹⁷ And, perhaps, this is the real revelation that Agamben has been working towards all along.

CONCLUSION

As a theorist who works directly to end all forms of cultural and political representation, to bring about a pure presentation beyond representation as a philosophical task,⁹⁸ Agamben here comes closest to those theological frameworks (mainly feminist and postcolonial) which would envision some model of pantheism or panentheism as preferable to the transcendent-male-sovereign ones that have already dominated centuries of theological discourse. Indeed, feminist theology, for its part, has consistently looked towards pan(en)theism as a way to open up humanity to the immanence of our gendered being,⁹⁹ something which theology as a whole has been loathe to acknowledge but for which Agamben's formulations might provide yet another avenue of expression. The problem of merging such a view with a historically revealed religion, however, remains a central problematic needing to be more fully resolved.¹⁰⁰ Yet it is a problematic that Agamben's work situates within the confines of traditional onto(theo)logical arguments, thus, in a sense, attempting to provide a more 'solid' foundation outside these confinements than those critical discourses which would only seek to destabilize and not reconstruct the traditions they dismantle. For this reason, Agamben's theological profitability, I would conjecture, should only increase over time, offering a plausible ontological reworking for theological claims of representation, including those most dogmatic representations (i.e., of Christ's nature, of the Trinity, etc.) that seem perhaps otherwise forever unalterable.

NOTES

1. See the main monographs on his work to appear recently, including Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli, eds., *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007); Colby Dickinson, *Agamben and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2011); Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Catherine Mills, *The Philosophy of Agamben* (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008); Alex Murray, *Giorgio Agamben* (London: Routledge, 2010); Alex Murray, Nicholas Heron, and Justin Clemens, eds., *The Work of Giorgio Agamben: Law, Literature, Life* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008); Andrew Norris, ed., *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), Thomas Carl Wall, *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot and Agamben* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); William Watkin, *The Literary Agamben: Adventures in Logopoesis* (London: Continuum, 2010); and Thanos Zartaloudis, *Giorgio Agamben: The Idea of Justice and the Uses of Legal Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2010).

2. See the small but growing amount of writing which has attempted to deal with his more 'theological' claims, though mainly in relation to his work on Saint Paul, including Alberto Bertozzi, 'Thoughts in Potentiality: Provisional Reflections on Agamben's Understanding of Potentiality and Its Relevance for Theology and Politics', *Philosophy Today* 51, no. 3 (2007): 290–302; Colby Dickinson, 'Canon as an Act of Creation: Giorgio Agamben and the Extended Logic of the Messianic', *Bijdragen: International Journal in Philosophy and Theology* 71, no. 2 (2010): 132–58; and Fabio Presutti, 'Manlio Sgalambro, Giorgio Agamben: On Metaphysical Suspension of Language and the Destiny of Its Inorganic Re-absorption', *Italica* 85, nos. 2–3 (2008): 243–72. Despite these minor attempts, however, there has been little reflection yet made on the implications Agamben's work holds for theological study on the whole, as I am here otherwise attempting to investigate.

3. Agamben himself, of course, does not use either term to describe his writings, thus rendering any attempt to affix such a label to his work extremely difficult. His overlap on just such a point is no doubt akin to those attempts to discern what form of divinity is at work in Spinoza's philosophy, the source from which many of Agamben's reflections flow..

4. Especially KG, SL, and N. See the conclusions made in Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*; Dickinson, *Agamben and Theology*.

5. CC, 90–106; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge, 1996).

6. See 'The Thing Itself', in P.

7. CC, 76–77; emphasis in the original.

8. LD, 85–86.

9. See 'What Is a Paradigm?', in SA.

10. See 'The Idea of Language', in P; also SL.

11. LD, 86.

12. TR, 25.

13. LD, 26; Durantaye's choice to exclude *Language and Death* from his otherwise near-comprehensive survey of Agamben's work means that he misses an opportunity to explain how this work in particular frames so much of Agamben's subsequent research trajectory.

14. O; see also Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

15. LD, 26.

16. LD, 28.

17. IH, 11ff.

18. LD, 29.

19. LD, 29–30.

20. See Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

21. IH, 34.

22. See P; SL.

23. IH, 53.

24. IH, 54.

25. IH, 58. The term 'infancy' can be understood as more of a state that we dwell in rather than a chronological space that we regress to. In many ways, it comes to mirror the Christian language concerning one's 'rebirth' that similarly follows a regressive pattern of thought. See Watkin, *Literary Agamben*, 13.

26. IH, 59.

27. O.

28. IH, 59.

29. IH, 60.

30. CC; PR, 73–92.

31. LD, 63.

32. See Dewi Z. Phillips and Mario von der Ruhr, eds., *Religion and the End of Metaphysics* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2008).

33. LD, 63.

34. LD, 63–64.

35. LD, 64.

36. LD, 65.

37. LD, 65.

38. LD, 65.

39. KG.

40. 'Creation and Salvation', in N.

41. LD, 91; cf. RA.

42. Agamben's 'linguistic turn' engaged in relation to Kant is something which he is inspired to pursue based on the reflections of Walter Benjamin on language. See, among other places, IH, 50–51.

43. LD, 91.

44. LD, 91.

45. LD, 92.

46. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2009), 7f.

47. 'Paradigm', in SA.

48. LD, 92.

49. LD, 92.

50. 'On Potentiality', in P; See also Paolo Bartoloni, 'The Stanza of the Self: On Agamben's Potentiality', *Contretemps* 5 (2004): 8–15.

51. LD, 92.

52. PR.

53. LD, 92.

54. IP, 98; IH.

55. TR, 25.

56. LD, 93.

57. LD, 95.

58. LD, 95.

59. LD, 95.

60. It should be noted here, however, that it is precisely this issue of appearance (and of representation, then) that needs to be nuanced in relation to Agamben's own formulations. This is where, I would add, the Pauline 'division of (representational) divisions' plays such a fundamental role in Agamben's attempt to go beyond, though without discarding completely, the realm of representations on the whole.

61. LD, 96.

62. LD, 96.

63. IH, 32; CC, 80.
64. LD, 96.
65. O, 49–56.
66. See especially HS, SE, and RA.
67. Chiesa, 162.
68. LD, 96; cf. Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey Jr., and Ian McLeod (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).
69. LD, 97.
70. HS; SE.
71. The charge of ‘political nihilism’ in Agamben’s work has been levied by Ernesto Laclau, ‘Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy?’ and William Rasch, ‘From Sovereign Ban to Banning Sovereignty’, both found in Calarco and DeCaroli, *Giorgio Agamben*, 22 and 107, respectively. Catherine Mills also draws attention to the viability of his end to politics in the conclusion to her *The Philosophy of Agamben*.
72. PR, 77ff.
73. P, 39.
74. Cf. SL.
75. P, 39.
76. P, 42.
77. P, 44.
78. P, 44–45.
79. IP, 32ff.
80. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §6.432.
81. David E. Johnson, ‘As If the Time Were Now: Deconstructing Agamben’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 2 (2007): 265–90.
82. P, 45.
83. P, 45.
84. P, 45–46.
85. TR, 47ff.; cf. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).
86. See, among others, Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D’Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
87. P, 47.
88. P, 46.
89. P, 47.
90. CC, 91.
91. TR, 25.
92. CC, 90.
93. CC, 90. He continues, ‘This is why Protestant theology, which clearly separates the profane world from the divine, is both wrong and right: right because the world has been consigned irrevocably by revelation (by language) to the profane sphere; wrong because it will be saved precisely insofar as it is profane.’
94. Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, Selected Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 1992).
95. Antonio Negri, ‘Sovereignty: That Divine Ministry of the Affairs of Earthly Life’, *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 9, no. 1 (2008): 96–100. There is, of course, a deep resonance in Agamben’s thought with that of Gilles Deleuze precisely on this point. See Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone, 1990), as well as Deleuze, ‘Immanence: A Life’, in *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975–1995*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), 384–89. Agamben deals with these texts in his essay ‘Absolute Immanence’ in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).
96. Cf. Daniel A. Dombrowski, *A Platonic Philosophy of Religion: A Process Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), and Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003.)

97. CC, 90.

98. Alison Ross, *The Aesthetic Paths of Philosophy: Presentation in Kant, Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

99. See Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973); Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); and Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000).

100. Kenneth Surin, *Freedom Not Yet: Liberation and the Next World Order* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Clayton Crockett, 'The Truth of Life: Michel Henry on Marx', in *Words of Life: New Theological Turns in French Phenomenology*, ed. Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 168–77.

SIX

Agamben's Messianic Nihilism

Adam Kotsko

This chapter was my first attempt to grapple with Agamben's *Homo Sacer* project as a whole. At the time I wrote this, I had just finished translating *The Sacrament of Language*, and *The Kingdom and the Glory* was still several months from being published in English translation. Hence, most English-language readers were not yet aware of the twist Agamben was introducing into the previously tidy architectonic of the *Homo Sacer* series by means of these two quite unexpected 'part-volumes'. My real goal, however, was not simply Agamben exegesis but pointing towards the unique account of the relationship between philosophy and theology that he was putting forwards—an account where the most important dividing line is not between the two disciplines but rather a kind of 'cut of Apelles' that divides the very difference between them. In a later chapter 'Theology, Sovereignty, and Economy' I return to the problem of the coherence of the *Homo Sacer* series in the wake of *The Highest Poverty* and *Opus Dei*, the two (surprisingly theological) volumes that I went on to translate—a problem that Colby also approaches from a different angle in '*Cur Deus Homo Sacer?*'

By now the interest of European philosophers in theology has surely made the transition from being a trend to being an established fact. Even in cases such as Alain Badiou's, where his investigation of Saint Paul's account of political subjectivity was avowedly a mere illustration,¹ claims of a deeper theological basis for his thought are granted a *prima facie* plausibility in a way that would not have been the case, for instance, if similar claims had been made about Derrida in the early years of his English-language reception. The representatives of this 'theological turn'

have enjoyed a wide audience in the United States, as a variety of constituencies have laid claim to them. These constituencies of course included students of European philosophy, for whom the 'theological turn' was the latest development in a debate they had long been watching unfold, but they also included various camps within academic theology and its fellow travellers—liberal or radical theologians and biblical scholars who were energized by the attention their fields were suddenly getting from some of the world's most prestigious minds and by the fresh opportunities for dialogue this attention opened up, traditionalist theologians who took the turn to theology as evidence that the great intellectual projects of secular reason had run aground and Christianity was now the only way to turn,² and even intellectually curious Christians looking for either a challenge or a jolt to their faith.

These more or less instrumentalizing approaches towards this broad philosophical trend have a certain plausibility in the context of the eclecticism that characterizes the most influential and normative American appropriations of continental thought. When one is engaged in a broad discussion of 'Paul and philosophy', for instance, it makes sense to mine the various authors of books on Paul (by now a kind of mini-canon: Badiou, Agamben, Žižek, Taubes) for insights and perhaps also to chide them for their inattentiveness to biblical scholarship.³ While such an approach has its virtues, it can also produce the temptation to project the reader's own occasionalism onto the authors under discussion, as though they just happened to have written something on a religious text they stumbled across and found interesting—or perhaps even wrote on theological topics in response to the very trend that, from the American perspective, they retrospectively embody.

When theologically oriented texts are placed within the context of the entire body of work of a given author, however, a different picture emerges. On the one hand, the texts nearly always show themselves to be tightly integrated into the author's own idiosyncratic project. On the other hand, once one attains a clear view of what those texts are doing in a variety of authors' projects, a pattern begins to emerge: these European investigators of theology are looking for a way out of Christianity. The scholarship on this point is perhaps most advanced in connection to Derrida. In response to John D. Caputo's pathbreaking *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*,⁴ which portrayed Derrida as a quasi-Christian, scholars such as Michael Naas and Martin Hägglund⁵ have shown that Derrida's appropriations of theology consistently aim towards a more radical and thoroughgoing secularism, which can only be achieved if the theological remnants that still shape our political institutions (such as the notion of sovereignty) are first recognized for what they are. I have attempted to demonstrate a similar thesis with regard to Slavoj Žižek's engagement with theology, arguing that for Žižek, the 'Christian experience' is fundamentally an experience of the most profound possible atheism.⁶ In both

cases, the impetus behind the turn to religion comes in large part from within their own intellectual projects—which could perhaps be briefly summarized as, respectively, a steadily expanding deconstruction of the Western heritage and the quest for a ‘nonideological’ political form grounded in a fusion of psychoanalysis and German idealism—but the end goal of their engagement with theology remains the same: to find a way out of religion, recognizing that ‘the only way out is through’.

This chapter is in part an attempt to demonstrate that a similar pattern is at work in the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben. His role in the ‘theological turn’ became most evident after the publication of his book on Saint Paul, *The Time That Remains*, but only with the appearance of *The Kingdom and the Glory* and *The Sacrament of Language* did it become clear how crucial an investigation of the Christian heritage of the West was his project in the *Homo Sacer* series.⁷ In retrospect, however, one can see that all along Agamben had been shifting fluently between the religious and the political, a procedure he rarely thematizes because the example of Walter Benjamin, perhaps his most significant intellectual influence, makes it seem like the obvious route to take. A significant portion of this chapter will be taken up with a rereading the *Homo Sacer* project with special attention to this continual slippage between the religious and the political. Yet for my purposes, Agamben’s account of the theologico-political structure of the West is less important than the means he proposes for escaping or suspending that structure, a means that I will characterize as ‘messianic nihilism’. Once I have established the basic outlines of Agamben’s diagnosis of what ails Western culture and his proposed way out, I will turn from the exegetical to the constructive task, considering Agamben as one of the most fruitful interlocutors among the representatives of the ‘theological turn’ for interrogating the relationship between theology and philosophy.

I

While the *Homo Sacer* project is daunting in its ambitious reach and numerous intellectual points of reference, I believe that its core insight can be stated quite simply. For Agamben, Western politics is a vast machine that attempts to capture and control life. Yet its self-appointed task is an impossible one and must, in the last analysis, always fail. Agamben’s analysis in the *Homo Sacer* books aims to locate those points at which the machine presses its claim too far and to trace out the destructive consequences of its overreach.

Agamben’s starting point in this investigation is Walter Benjamin’s suggestion in his ‘Critique of Violence’ that ‘it might be well worth while to track down the origin of the dogma of the sacredness of life’.⁸ Influenced by Martin Heidegger’s use of etymologies, Agamben locates this

dogma's origin in a puzzling figure from Roman law: the *homo sacer*, or 'sacred man', who cannot be sacrificed (or ceremonially executed) but whose killing is not considered murder. There is much that is interesting in this figure for Agamben, most notably the way that the *homo sacer* is paradoxically included in the social order by his very exclusion—that is to say, his exclusion from the protections and official punishments of the political order is the ultimate punishment, meaning that his exclusion from the political order is itself a relationship to the political order. Agamben sees a parallel insider-outsider structure at work in the figure of the sovereign authority, who is legally permitted to suspend the legal order itself so that the sovereign's extralegal action is paradoxically nonetheless legal.

In juxtaposing the *homo sacer* and the sovereign, Agamben traces the outer limit of the political machine's claim on life, a claim that culminates in abandoning what it excludes to total destruction. For the political machine, what is outside of it cannot remain indifferent: the logic of its totalizing claim dictates that what is outside cannot really exist. What the political machine wilfully excludes is given up to destruction and, in fact, is already virtually destroyed. The *homo sacer's* survival cannot be grounded in any positive law but is simply a reflection of the fact that no one happens to have got around to killing him yet. On the other side, if the political machine determines that the life it governs is slipping out of its grasp, as in a state of emergency where the laws no longer seem to be effective in regulating life, it can employ virtually limitless violence to subdue that life and vindicate its claim once again. These two figures are the poles between which the political machine operates: 'At the extreme limits of the order, the sovereign and *homo sacer* present two symmetrical figures that have the same structure and are correlative: the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns.'⁹

In earlier eras, the status of *homo sacer* and the state of emergency in which the sovereign could legitimately use all necessary means to restore order were more or less clearly delineated conditions. In modernity, however, Agamben believes that the political machine is breaking down in such a way that those distinctions become increasingly difficult to maintain: 'If today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually *homines sacri*.'¹⁰ In more familiar terms, this means that the political sphere of Western modernity is always virtually a concentration camp, with legal norms and citizenship serving as tenuous protections that could be removed at any time, reducing us to the 'naked life' that is exposed to the limitless violence of the sovereign.

The slippage between the religious and the political is clear in both of Agamben's terms. The parallels between the sovereign and God are well known to readers of Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology*,¹¹ one of the primary

sources for Agamben's investigation in *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception*. The crossing between the religious and the political is even more evident in the concept of the sacredness of life, which maintains its obvious religious overtones even though it stands as one of the guiding concepts of modern liberal politics. The dual reference is also evident in the notion of the *homo sacer*, who is withdrawn from religious rites (i.e., becomes a sacrifice) and from political protection.

Agamben absolutely insists on the simultaneously religious and political understanding of the term, devoting an entire chapter of *Homo Sacer* to demolishing interpretations of the *homo sacer* that start from the modern theories of religion. Modern theorists tend to posit the 'ambivalence of the generic religious category of the sacred'¹² or of the so-called numinous element—as in Rudolf Otto's famous *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*¹³—and for Agamben, this is worse than question-begging, revealing a profound triviality at the heart of modern concepts of religion: 'That the religious belongs entirely to the sphere of psychological emotion, that it essentially has to do with shivers and goose bumps—this is the triviality that the neologism "numinous" had to dress up as science.'¹⁴ This restriction of the religious to the private or psychological level is the signature gesture of liberal political theory, an artificial division that has blinded the modern West to its own deep structure. Implicitly, then, only an inquiry like Agamben's, which moves freely back and forth across the border supposedly dividing the political and the religious as the analysis dictates, can truly uncover the workings of the political machine.

Thus the finding of *Homo Sacer* is that the notion of the 'sacredness of life' does not, as common sense and liberal piety would have it, mean simply that human life is extremely valuable. Rather, it indicates the political machine's total claim on life. The use of the term in the abortion debate in the United States is illustrative of this point: while pro-life advocates intend to say that the unborn also deserve legal protection, the practical upshot of the pro-life position is that even what happens within the depths of a woman's body is the concern of the state. Adopting the pro-life position would be another step in a process that has long been underway, whereby positing the 'sacredness of life' as a transpolitical norm strengthens the claim of the political machine over life, a claim that necessarily exposes life to violence. Here as elsewhere, though, simple opposition to the pro-life position is not sufficient to get out of this general trend: the legalization of abortion also gives the state a kind of virtual claim over the womb, since what is legal can be regulated and perhaps even controlled.

Now Agamben argues that the claim of the political machine over life was not always so thoroughgoing. In the ancient Greek world, he claims, there was a clear division between naked or natural life (*zoē*) and the specific form of political life (*bios*)—the public life of the city was the realm of *bios*, while *zoē* fell within the nonpolitical realm of *oikonomia* or

'home economics'. The question that remains for the reader of *Homo Sacer*, *State of Exception*, and *Remnants of Auschwitz* is, what caused the transition from the ancient paradigm to the modern one? One can see that the seeds of our current extreme situation are already present in the constitutive relationship between the sovereign and *homo sacer*, but what caused those two figures to propagate themselves so aggressively beyond their initially well-defined boundaries?

Agamben's answer to this question is found in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, where he maps out the introduction into political thought of concepts previously reserved for *oikonomia*. This line of thinking emerged out of the demands of imperial politics. An emperor was caught between two poles. On the one hand, a single inflexible set of laws, even if supplemented by emergency powers, could not work for a large and variegated polity in the same way that it could for a small city-state. On the other hand, exercising direct authority over every dispute would be out of the question for the emperor—not only would it be impractical, but it would undermine his imperial dignity. The task of the emperor is then to set up a system that requires as few direct interventions as possible while still maintaining reliable expectations for his subjects. The solution was the establishment of a hierarchical system where those at each level were guided by broad norms but where the skills required in dealing with the levels under their authority were more akin to those associated with the management or governance of the *oikos*. The bureaucrats at each level were concerned less with applying strict laws than with maintaining a flexible approach to keeping various constituencies happy, much as the householder had to balance the needs of his wife, his children, his slaves, and his livestock and crops.

The crucial step in Agamben's account, however, was not simply the reconception of an empire as a kind of *oikonomia*. What gave the concepts staying power was their introduction into the Christian concept of God. Not only was the Christian God (or at least the version of the Christian God that would become normative) engaged in managing the '*oikonomia* of salvation', but God's very being was an *oikonomia* among the persons of the Trinity. It was this injection of the politicized concept of *oikonomia* into theology that allowed for its development throughout the medieval period, with scholastic theologians parsing out the details and implications of God's management or governance of the world by means of divine providence. Instead of directly controlling and determining everything, God set up certain broad rules (first causes) within which moral agents can act with real freedom (secondary causes)—and yet their free actions wind up moving towards the direction God is taking history. This understanding of divine providence cultivated in theology was then, in turn, transplanted back into the political realm at the dawn of modernity, as can be seen in such notions as the 'invisible hand' that guides the

selfish choices of individual economic actors towards the greatest general good.

The modern state is therefore explicitly conceived as an *oikonomia* from the very beginning and has as its task the management of life. The link between sovereignty and naked life was already implicit in the ancient paradigm of the polis but was kept in check by certain firm distinctions (above all *zoē/bios*). In the modern paradigm, it becomes the central principle of politics. Without repudiating his thesis on sovereignty and naked life, Agamben clarifies his position: 'What our research has, in fact, shown is that the true problem, the central secret of the political is not sovereignty, but governance, is not God, but the angel, is not the king, but the minister, is not the law, but the police—or the governmental machine that these form and keep in movement.'¹⁵ In this quote, as in the book as a whole, it is clearer than ever that theological and political concepts are not simply identical—in the Middle Ages, for example, political theory was based in the reality of the feudal model, while providence remained a strictly theological notion—yet they can easily migrate from one realm to the other such that one might be justified in calling the governmental machine a theologico-political one.

What is the basis for this easy transferability? For many modern scholars, the answer is clear: religious and political concepts can change places because the religious is at the basis of the political and indeed of all culture. In *The Sacrament of Language*, Agamben utterly rejects this interpretation. Instead, by means of an analysis of the phenomenon of the oath, he claims that both religion and politics have at their basis a certain experience of language. Agamben finds that the oath confounds all our commonsense divisions between religion and politics—it invokes God and at the same time produces civil obligations, for instance—and argues that this is because the oath reflects the moment in our becoming human or 'anthropogenesis' when the political and the religious were not yet separated.¹⁶

The experience that the oath recalls is centrally a matter of the human being taking responsibility for language by enforcing its claim on reality. In swearing an oath, one is attesting to the correspondence between one's words and reality—either in relation to an objective situation or a promised action over which the oath-giver has control. If one speaks in such a way as to undermine language's claim on reality, that is, if one swears falsely, then one becomes subject to a curse, to some kind of punishment or sanction. The claim of language over reality is basically identical in structure to the political's claim over life: the claim is total, and that which falls outside of it is subject to destruction.

This experience of language has provided the structure within which all of Western history has played out:

It is in the wake of this decision, in faithfulness to this oath, that the human species, to its misfortune as much as to its good fortune, in a certain way still lives. Every naming is, in fact, double: it is a blessing or a curse. A blessing, if the word is full, if there is a correspondence between the signifier and the signified, between words and things; a curse if the word is empty, if there remains, between the semiotic and the semantic, a void and a gap. Oath and perjury, bene-diction and male-diction correspond to this double possibility inscribed in the *logos*, in the experience by means of which the living human being has been constituted as speaking being. Religion and law technicalize this anthropogenic experience of the word in the oath and in the curse as historical institutions, sorting out and opposing point by point truth and lie, true name and false name, efficacious formula and incorrect formula.¹⁷

Yet just as the ancient paradigm of sovereignty gradually worked out its implicit consequences to such an extreme that the concentration camp has become the paradigm of modern politics, so too have the formerly stable expectations of the oath begun to break down, which

means that humanity finds itself today before a disjunction or, at least, a loosening of the bond that, by means of the oath, united the living human being to his language. On the one hand, there is the living human being, more and more reduced to a purely biological reality and to bare life. On the other hand, there is the speaking being, artificially divided from the former, through a multiplicity of technico-mediatic apparatuses, in an experience of speech that grows ever more vain, for which it is impossible for him to be responsible and in which anything like a political experience becomes more and more precarious.¹⁸

This breakdown of the structure of the oath does not lead to stasis, however:

When the ethical—and not simply cognitive—connection that unites human words, things, and actions is broken, this in fact promotes a spectacular proliferation, without precedent, of vain words on the one hand and, on the other, of legislative apparatuses that seek obstinately to legislate on every aspect of that life on which they seem no longer to have any hold.¹⁹

Yet as we have already seen, the machine has only one way to react to any perceived lack of control: the application of destructive violence. Ultimately, then, the Homo Sacer project traces the workings of a machine that is rotting from within and is increasingly able only to destroy that over which it lays claim.

II

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider how radically pessimistic Agamben's diagnosis is. Normally a narrative of cultural-political breakdown will have in mind some previous era where things were working—even if one frankly admits that it is impossible to go back, one at least cherishes some sense that things could have gone differently. In Agamben's account, however, the corruption seems to be essentially inevitable. However long the Western theologico-political machine managed to maintain a steady state, it was always, eventually and ineluctably, going to wind up where we are now. The reader of *State of Exception* could have been forgiven for assuming that the solution to the problem of sovereignty run amok was a return to some kind of 'normal' liberal democracy. In the wake of *The Kingdom and the Glory*, however, it becomes clear that it is precisely the advent of the liberal democratic state that allowed for the exaggerated forms of confrontation between sovereignty and naked life that we now see. More than that, in *The Sacrament of Language*, it is even claimed that our very relationship to language is the foundation for the machine. There is still a sense in which things could have turned out differently—we became human in a specific, contingent way—and yet everything we know, everything that gives us meaning, delivers us over to death.

Agamben's proposed solution to this problem is not to set the theologico-political machine back to a previous, less destructive stage, nor is it to let it run its course and attempt to build something new among the ruins. Rather, he contends that we need to find a way to stop the machine, to suspend its operation. In attempting to think what stopping the machine might mean, he draws upon a mode of thought that is itself at once theological and political: messianism. Here, as elsewhere, Agamben is heavily influenced by Walter Benjamin, inheriting from him what one might call a 'negative messianism'. In contrast to a more commonsense concept of messianism where a saviour arrives and establishes a utopia, Benjamin, drawing on his study of messianic texts guided by Gershom Scholem, regards the messianic revolution as a kind of brake on history.

What Agamben adds to Benjamin's account is his particular take on the relationship between potentiality and actuality in Aristotle. To put it very schematically, Agamben sees potentiality not as a deficient form of actuality (i.e., one that hasn't become actual yet) but as more primordial than actuality. Thus the messianic is that which restores actuality to its full potentiality. This is most vividly illustrated in Agamben's retelling of the rabbinic idea that the primordial heavenly law is nothing but the sequence of letters which have all possible meanings (and, Agamben extrapolates, therefore no meaning)—this is what becomes of the law in the messianic era. By being restored to its proper potentiality, the law is severed of its relationship with force. The following passage, drawn from

a discussion of Kafka in *State of Exception*, is particularly evocative in this regard:

One day humanity will play with law just as children play with dis-used objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good. . . . This liberation is the task of study, or of play. And this studious play is the passage that allows us to arrive at that justice that one of Benjamin's posthumous fragments defines as a state of the world in which the world appears as a good that absolutely cannot be appropriated or made juridical.²⁰

In light of his reflections in *The Sacrament of Language*, one can take a further step here: in the messianic age, the world also appears as a good that absolutely cannot be made meaningful. Indeed, in that book Agamben enters a plea—apparently paradoxical in light of his diagnosis of the destructive effects of the breakdown of the experience of the oath—that we radically rethink the prestige in which language is held in Western culture.

It is this radical evacuation of everything that we know as meaning that informs my claim that Agamben's particular form of messianism is best termed messianic nihilism. Yet the method of messianic nihilism is not an attempt at simple negation because the machine is much too all-encompassing for us to easily leap to a place where we can straightforwardly oppose it. Instead, the approach is one of critique in something like the Kantian sense: an operation that resolutely faces the fact that we are within the machine and attempts to trace out its limits from the inside. This method underwrites Agamben's fascination with contradictions within the theologico-political machine, such as the insider-outsider status of the sovereign and the *homo sacer*—those contradictions are the moments when the machine begins to undermine itself, signalling its limits. Often, Agamben presents the task as one of doing the machine one better, overloading it with one contradiction beyond what it can handle. For instance, he characterizes the status of the law in the messianic era as a kind of suspension of the state of exception—a double suspension that, far from abrogating the law, actually fulfils it by suspending its force along with its already-suspended content or meaning, effectively bringing it to a state of pure potentiality.

As *The Sacrament of Language* makes clear, however, the goal of the messianic operation is not simply to bring us to a halt for its own sake. Rather, the complete suspension achieved in the messianic gesture is the only way to open up a space for fresh thought in the face of the totalizing sway of the theologico-political machine. Using the term 'philosophy' rather than his more customary 'messianism' to refer to the kind of critical discourse he practices, Agamben concludes the book with an urgent exhortation:

Philosophy is . . . constitutively critical of the oath: that is, it calls into question the sacramental bond that links the human being to language, without for that reason simply speaking haphazardly, falling into the vanity of speech. In a moment in which all the European languages seem condemned to swear in vain and in which politics can only assume the form of an *oikonomia*, that is, of a governance of empty speech over bare life, it is once more from philosophy that there can come, in the clear awareness of the extreme situation at which the living human being that has language has arrived in its history, the indication of a line of resistance and of change.²¹

The understated phrase 'a line of resistance and of change' gets at one of the apparent paradoxes at the heart of Agamben's project: for all its sweeping ambition, its attempt to provide a unified account of the structure and necessary failure of the enterprise of Western civilization, his proposed solution is not the violent overthrow of the theologico-political machine. The messianic world is the same world in which we now live—as Walter Benjamin says, 'Everything will be as it is now, just a little different.'²² We will still be human, but we will have found a way to become human—and keep continually becoming human—just a little differently.

III

At this point, it should be clear that Agamben's use of theology is motivated by a desire to find a way out of theology, to suspend the theologico-political machine. What is particularly fruitful about Agamben's particular variation on this by now very common theme is his use of an explicitly theologico-political notion to name the operation of suspension. Messianism is not the only name he gives to this operation; as we have seen, he can also refer to it simply as philosophy. Yet the messianic is the guiding motif, the simultaneously theological and political name for the way back behind the machine, for the way to return to the moment of our 'anthropogenesis' so as to effect the minimal displacement that will represent the most truly radical change of all.

There is a sense in which Agamben is actually opposing the messianic to theology. In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, for instance, the theology that is in question is mostly one that is geared towards understanding God and the divine ordering of the world. At the same time, one could characterize Agamben's messianic nihilism in such a way as to make it indistinguishable from Christian theology; after all, what is the task of the Christian theologian if not to keep finding fresh ways back to the messianic event? Agamben acknowledges the messianic origins of Christianity when he calls the letters of Saint Paul 'the fundamental messianic text for the Western tradition'.²³ Yet it is clear that for Agamben, Christianity set

aside its messianic task, putting itself forwards as an institution and downplaying the Jewish context within which Paul's messianism arose and always remained.²⁴

Yet he is careful to note that the messianic element never entirely disappeared from Christian theology, because the divine governance of the world would eventually reach an end in the Last Judgement.²⁵ The messianic and the theological are not in perfect harmony: Agamben points out that the Christian identification of God with the *oikonomia* of salvation leaves open the embarrassing question of what God is to do after salvation has been achieved. Indeed, for Agamben, it is only the messianic endpoint that makes the machinery of divine providence bearable. In one of the most satisfying moments in his analysis, he implies that Christian theologians perhaps had some inkling of the radical hopelessness of our present global *oikonomia*, insofar as there is only one area where the machine of divine governance never rests: hell. Without the hope of a messianic suspension, eternal governance can only be hellish.²⁶

The indefinitely deferred messianic moment is small consolation, however, when one considers that the abandonment of its authentic messianic task meant that the 'displacement' effected by the Christian assumption and development of the logic of the *oikonomia* effectively displaced nothing at all, in the long run serving only to exacerbate the destructive contradictions at the heart of the theologico-political machine. Yet we might ask whether this kind of danger is present also in Agamben's messianic nihilism. In many ways, Agamben's own method is parallel to how he presents Paul's, whose messianism necessarily entailed diagnosing the contradictions in the political machine and proposing alternative ways of building human community. For later generations of theologians, however, Paul's diagnoses came to seem like prescriptions, and his alternatives were incorporated into the machine the messianic community was attempting to suspend, in the end increasing its destructiveness.

Could someone do the same with Agamben's work? Such a redeployment would go against Agamben's intentions, but there seems to be no sure way to prevent it.²⁷ Messianism can always collapse back into theology, and theology in turn can keep at least traces of messianism alive. Yet insofar as Agamben's messianic nihilism attempts to avoid such a collapse and to reawaken the messianic potentiality that lays dormant in the tradition, it begins to sound uncannily like Christian theology—though not just any kind of Christian theology. Agamben's analysis, when taken seriously, deprives theologians of the comfortable apologetic stance of criticizing liberalism and calling for a return to Christianity, making it clear that liberal modernity is the practical outworking of the traditional Christian concept of God, and in so doing it also renders redundant the well-intentioned attempt to develop a Christianity that would be compatible with the best of liberalism. The theology that corresponds to Agam-

ben's project is instead a radical theology that critiques the tradition from within so as to suspend its authority and free it for a new use—or for play. If this move seems to assimilate theology to philosophy, perhaps that is an indication that these two disciplines, which have always been uncomfortably intertwined, share the same dangers and the same promise. At their worst, they can both reinforce the claim of the theologico-political machine over life and can indeed offer it fresh resources to expand its grasp. Yet at their most radical, both set themselves the task of clearing a space in thought that can allow us to become human—again, differently—and to hope against hope that we may after all be delivered from this body of death.

NOTES

1. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).
2. Here one thinks primarily of Radical Orthodoxy, but the clearest illustration of this tendency is a lengthy book review in the right-wing Catholic publication *First Things*: Paul J. Griffiths, 'Christ and Critical Theory', *First Things*, August/September 2004, accessed 15 September 2007, http://www.firstthings.com/article.php3?id_article=372.
3. As, for instance, in many of the essays in John D. Caputo and Linda Martín Alcoff, eds., *Paul among the Philosophers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).
4. John D. Caputo, *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).
5. See Michael Naas, *Derrida from Now On* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), and Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).
6. See Adam Kotsko, *Žižek and Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008).
7. When in italics, *Homo Sacer* refers to the first book of the series; when in normal type, *Homo Sacer* refers to the series as a whole.
8. Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1978), 299; cf. my chapter on 'Reading the "Critique of Violence"' in this volume.
9. HS, 84.
10. HS, 115.
11. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George D. Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
12. HS, 80.
13. Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).
14. HS, 78.
15. KG, appendix (my translation from *Il Regno e la Gloria*).
16. Agamben specifies that this moment need not refer to a historical moment—instead, it's a logical presupposition of our actual history.
17. SL, §29.
18. SL, §29.
19. SL, §29.
20. SE, 64.
21. SL, §29.
22. Quoted in CC, 53.
23. TR, 1.

24. TR, 2.

25. On this point, see Agamben's somewhat surprising reflections in CK.

26. KG, chap. 6.

27. Indeed, I would be very surprised if there failed to be some member of the Radical Orthodoxy school who would take it upon himself or herself to selectively appropriate Agamben's work, particularly *The Kingdom and the Glory*, in exactly this way.

SEVEN

The Divisions of Sovereignty

Colby Dickinson

I have written elsewhere at length (in *Between the Canon and the Messiah*) about the relationship between Agamben's work and antinomianism, a label that seemingly both does and does not characterize his work. What is clear is that he not only uses a similar position in relation to the law, but he is heavily criticized as being essentially antinomian in his stance on political forms and institutions. I wonder, is this simply a replaying of the 'pantheism debate', as Eric Santner has called it, that occurs every so often throughout history? If his work signals the 'end of politics' as we know it, then such a reading is not difficult to hold. What I find more interesting, however, is how such a tendency to find a position 'outside' of law altogether, whether antinomian or not, aligns with regard to his repeated critiques of transcendence. Is his turn towards a form of 'absolute immanence' not part and parcel of his attempts to stand outside of the law, something which historically has been decreed into existence and legitimated vis-à-vis divine transcendence? This question, which seems justified to my mind, begs yet another question at the base of this inquiry, and which must, I feel, be addressed from a theological perspective as well: How are we to recover a notion of transcendence in theological terms without necessarily making room for a concept that merely reintroduces sovereign power in another guise, though Agamben himself does not pick up this challenge? Is this what the category of 'mystery' would allow us to do, though not perceiving it as yet another empty throne on which sovereign power relies, as he amply demonstrated in *The Kingdom and the Glory*? In this chapter, and though I am only really pointing towards a much larger area of work still needing to be done—much as Daniel Barber has recently suggested in his work on Deleuze in

relation to the theologian John Howard Yoder—is that we might consider an immanent political theology to be a task still before us, one that says very little about the nature of the divine (and whatever such a thing may or may not be) but which nonetheless becomes an essential tool in discerning how humanity might live alternatively in relation to the law, thus also making this theological move a philosophical and political one at the same time. Very much in accord with Adam’s analysis of ‘Agamben’s Messianic Nihilism’ in the last chapter, I am trying to understand the deconstructive implications of such an effort, here in the context of an ontology predicated on a dichotomous, political instituting of transcendence and immanence.

It is nearly a commonplace truth that the various contextual (‘critical’) theologies that have developed over the last half-century or so have done so through their unwavering commitment to what one might call an ‘immanent’ realm of existence as opposed to the ‘more traditional’ focus placed on the nature of more or less ‘transcendent’ beings. For example, feminist theologians have turned to gender-based, anthropological models of understanding humanity’s religious desires; liberation theologians have zeroed in on class divisions and economic models for understanding poverty; black theologians on racial polarizations; postcolonial theologians on colonial histories, tactics, and power; queer theologians on sexuality and inequality—and this list could go on to include many similar interventions in theological practice. Such contestations of hierarchical societal structures have been in many ways a welcomed relief to traditional theological methods and have likewise expanded our varied notions of the divine, including, from many of these corners, a renewal of certain pantheistic sentiments provided as hopeful points of contrast to those who would still depict a mighty, sovereign deity.¹

Related to such condemnations of modern conjectures on the being of God, I often wonder what Agamben is truly up to in his own musings on the nature of the divine, a point that *The Kingdom and the Glory*, despite its rigorous genealogical exploration of how God’s being has been framed in relation to political forms of sovereign power, seemingly does not help to clarify—truly cannot clarify, as it is solely a genealogical study. For example, Agamben’s ability to sketch a paradigm for perceiving the intertwined nature of politics and theology in the Western world, one that places transcendence and immanence in a dynamic opposition, does not address his own work elsewhere on the fundamental state of ‘absolute immanence’ that he takes up in its Spinozistic-Deleuzian register.² That is, I ask, can a form of philosophical (‘absolute’) immanence somehow escape the dualism of transcendence and immanence as posited through the inner workings of sovereign power (upon which, he claims, it is structurally dependent), much as he also claims that a form of ‘pure potentiality’ is somehow beyond the dualism of potentiality and actuality (and

which constitutes the very axis for the use of sovereign power)? His critical political work depends upon these polarized tensions (transcendence/immanence, actuality/potentiality), and his solutions (absolute immanence, pure potentiality) are said to somehow avoid them. Yet how exactly would such a form of absolute immanence or our pure potentiality be removed from our very real political and representational tensions?

To view this problematic from a historical-theological angle, we might pointedly ask, When he champions the positions of antinomian thinkers such as Saint Paul or Sabbatai Zevi or even Saint Francis of Assisi, who renounces monetary economies of the world, how is his version of antinomianism yet to escape being reinscribed back into a binary system of representations?³

This is, of course, no small point to suggest. It is rather, I am wagering, the central question and point of critique surrounding Agamben's work as a whole, his political, philosophical, literary, and theological speculations included. His turning away from traditional links, as with those which were established between transcendence and sovereignty, has him pursuing new, wholly immanent paradigms with no explicitly theological underpinnings and no clear political precedent. As such, his position has also generated a fair share of overtly critical comments regarding its realistic ('practical') viability.⁴

In order to work towards a clearer comprehension of what is at stake in his work, perhaps it would be helpful from the outset to recall that the 'limit point' of thought that Gilles Deleuze reached in his own work was one wherein he was able to consider the absolute indiscernability between immanence and transcendence, a point of vertigo where the inside and outside are virtually indistinguishable.⁵ As can be understood from even a cursory glance at what he has been up to in trying to discern a 'form of life' that renders the distinction between law and life inoperative,⁶ Agamben is certainly seeking to bring the (sovereign) economies of the world and their representations to a point where they are forced to grind their violent matrices of power to a halt. Such, it could easily be said, is what the *Homo Sacer* project was about from its beginning.⁷ Agamben's focus on the notion of 'bare life', as well as his transition to the notion of a 'form of life' later on in *The Highest Poverty*, is an effort to highlight 'the spectral dimension of the flesh correlative to a gap—a missing link—that haunts any narrative of the emergence of human subjectivity', as Eric Santner recently put it.⁸ Agamben's massive genealogical study, it would seem, has occupied this very terrain: it has been an attempt to frame the historical emergence and dominance of human subjectivity in all of its complex and interwoven political, philosophical, and theological registers.

For years now, one of Agamben's major concerns has been the fracture that lies at the heart of modern humanity (i.e., humanity's sense of sovereignty as its means to form a unique form of 'subjectivity'). This is

something he has described in a variety of contexts as that which divides the experience of something from one's knowledge of it.⁹ Due to such a fracture, we are no longer able to experience life as we ought to. The task of poetry (as it deals with our experiences), for example, is subsequently forever divided from that of philosophy (that which deals with our knowledge).¹⁰ Such divisions, I would add, have become the preeminent focus of Agamben's work, taking him on a quest against all forms of representation that would sever the 'thing itself' from its image. These thoughts, moreover, have taken him towards an inspection of similar divisions said to lie at the base of our perceptions of the divine (i.e., God's alleged sovereignty).

This is, for example, what motivates his investigation of the division between law and life in the more recent fourth volume of the *Homo Sacer* series, *The Highest Poverty*. It is also what drives his attempt to recover a force of liberation from our 'theological signatures' in the commodification of our bodies in *The Coming Community*. I would also argue that it might be what motivates him at times to proclaim a perhaps slightly different sense of 'glory' that sits uniquely apart from the glory wedded to a particular political and theological heritage which he discerns at the base of Western governmental forms in *The Kingdom and the Glory*.¹¹

The entire *Homo Sacer* project has worked along these lines of thought, and it should come as little surprise that this same focus on the fracture within our being lies at the heart of *The Kingdom and the Glory*. This is a division within the nature of power itself, whether it is detected at work in the human being or in our constructs of God. One of the major points underscored by Agamben in this work is that in fact 'power—every power, both human and divine . . . must be, at the same time, kingdom and government, transcendent norm and immanent order'.¹² The tensions that are created by this scission within us chart a course for 'humanity'—for 'being human'—as produced by an anthropological machinery that ceaselessly strives to articulate our existence and which he is intent on seeing brought to a standstill.¹³ And this would seem to explain why the creation of the human being or the cessation of its production has always been central to the political, philosophical, and literary tasks that Agamben continuously critiques.

Regarding the comparison between the political and the theological specifically, Agamben furnishes a unique model for the exercise of power through a consideration of the dualistic tensions that govern over (and attempt to conceal) the fractured nature of power itself. These are the dualisms inherent to the nature of representation itself and which he seeks to plunge deep into a zone of 'indiscernability' or 'undecidability' between the aforementioned polarized oppositions (i.e., transcendence/immanence, actuality/potentiality) in order to undermine their political hold over humanity. And this movement would also seem to explain the existence—and what appears as a necessary coexistence at that—of politi-

cal theology.¹⁴ To make power socially operative, theology became the first major 'institution' ('apparatus' or 'machinery' would also be appropriate terms here¹⁵) to put forth a particularly convincing paradigm to recuperate an Aristotelian definition of transcendence (God as at the origin of all things) in relation to immanence (the 'secondary actions and causes' of God's very being, that is, the praxis that results from God's nature).¹⁶ Aquinas's subsequent appropriation of such a model for its implicit political significance, we are told in this context by Agamben, is what marks Christian theology forever after, as it was intertwined with what became a specific form of political practice. God's transcendent being was inevitably offset by our immanent order of government, just as our world points only to God's being and with all of this being a 'necessary' circular economy within our social existence.

Theological speculations have historically only moved along an axis established by such a dualistic framework. Transcendence is ascribed to God's being when in reality it is a political concept we are pining for and seeking to see established within our world. For better or worse, these theological speculations on the nature of the divine (often posited via *analogia entis*) in reality dictate a political paradigm and could consequently be understood as a blueprint for (and justification of) human political systems. Theology as such provided a legitimized 'origin' for particular political and social institutions. Positions deemed more or less orthodox or more or less heretical will in reality only be fluctuations somewhere along a continuum established by institutional structures. As Agamben puts it:

This apparent contradiction is nothing other than the expression of the ontological fracture between transcendence and immanence, which Christian theology inherits and develops from Aristotelianism. If we push to the limit the paradigm of the separate substance, we have the Gnosis, with its God foreign to the world and creation; if we follow to the end the paradigm of immanence, we have pantheism. Between these two extremes, the idea of order tries to think a difficult balance, which Christian theology is always in the process of losing and which it must at each turn regain.¹⁷

The difficult and complex doctrine on the two natures of Christ is one such example that Agamben will isolate and elaborate on in this context as an effort to maintain such a precarious equilibrium. (The resonance with later Franciscan efforts to establish themselves outside the rule of law is likewise relevant here.¹⁸) Yet even a doctrine such as this one, from this viewpoint, is little more than another attempt to heal this same fracture at the heart of human identity, something often 'plugged' with the rule of law rather than with a 'form of life' lived out beyond the inscriptions of law. It is here that a sort of definitive economy of 'human being' is established, as 'immanent and transcendent order once again refer

back to each other in a paradoxical coincidence, which can nevertheless be understood only as a perpetual *oikonomia*, as a continuous activity of government of the world, one that implies a fracture between being and praxis and, at the same time, tries to heal it'.¹⁹ That is to say, it tries, but in the end fails, to heal the fracture, becoming instead dependent on normative claims (or 'laws') that dictate the essential core of what it means to be 'human'. Pushing back against the existence and political functioning of this dichotomy of transcendence and immanence—via his form of 'absolute immanence'—becomes the watershed moment of Agamben's overall political-theological contribution to Western thought.

Referring to the 'transformation of classical ontology' by subsequent Christian claims (and here relying heavily on Augustine's formulations), Agamben claims that Western politics has its origins in the Western theological grafting of classical models for thinking-politics that are at the same time an often undisclosed form of political praxis. To state things as such is to present the inseparability of thought and praxis that will ultimately allow for a form of 'pure critique' to develop in his work.²⁰ Such a critique has in fact become the hallmark of Agamben's thought and what generally allows him to move almost seamlessly between various disciplines and eras of history in an attempt to demonstrate the very real (practical) consequences of even the most abstract ('theological') matters. That is, there is no doctrine that theology could espouse which does not also contain a practical, political program. Political theology is therefore not an ironic appellation but an inherently necessary correlation.

Not only is the substance of creatures nothing other than the activity of the divine *dispositio*, such that the being of creatures utterly depends on a praxis of government—it is, in its essence, praxis and government—but the very being of God—insofar as it is, in a special sense, measure, number, and weight, that is, order—is no longer only substance or thought, but also and in the same measure *dispositio*, praxis. *Ordo* names the incessant activity of government that presupposes and, at the same time, continually heals the fracture between transcendence and immanence, God and the world.²¹

The fact that things often appear to us as if they should be a certain ('natural') way comes to us as a theological endorsement of divine providence.²² Even Karl Marx could be said to secularize this particular theological insight, as he perceived humans as having to posit themselves again and again through their own ceaseless praxis.²³ As Agamben makes clear on this point, modernity has not, however, removed God from the scene. Though it has turned to a repressed form of secularity, modern thought has only intensified theology's hold on humanity.²⁴

What I would want to draw our attention to at this point, and what has perhaps gone missing somewhat within this critique of the history of forming human subjectivity itself, is the possibility that Agamben's con-

tentions with sovereign power and its relationship to our conceptions of the divine may in fact be playing out the dynamics of what Santner has referred to as the 'pantheism debate' that comes to the fore every century or so,²⁵ something which can be easily discerned in the various contextual theologies to which I have already made reference. What I am pondering in Agamben's work is his uneasy (or perhaps just 'unstated') relationship with a variety of pantheistic sentiments, which he does not himself stress or necessarily advocate. Yet he flirts with the idea on more than one occasion, and the question of pantheism would certainly seem to be bound up within his ability to dodge the transcendence/immanence dichotomy. My question then is: To what degree are such evocations either directly or indirectly related to the pantheism debate that Santner refers to?

In 1990, for example, Agamben's remarks on God and the world in *The Coming Community* could be said to refer to some type of pantheism, a position certainly in keeping with his statements elsewhere on absolute immanence and other antinomian insistences.²⁶ His resonance with certain theologians who have resisted sovereign (patriarchal) claims in favour of pantheistic urgings, such as Grace Jantzen has done,²⁷ is more than simply notable. There seems to be a substantial, ontological resonance between them. This, taken alongside his stress on forms of 'absolute immanence', has the potential to offer searching political (contextual) theologians a workable philosophical basis from which to critique traditional forms of transcendence (as sovereign power) and to champion alternative (immanent, pantheistic, or even panentheistic) models of the divine, or what is left after more traditional forms of transcendence have left the scene.

So how do such tendencies lean towards being an occurrence of Santner's alleged 'pantheism debate'? For Santner, this largely philosophical debate rages between two factions: what he calls the 'biopolitical pantheists' (Gilles Deleuze foremost among them, and we would do well to note Agamben's insistence on Deleuze's work in determining his own notion of 'absolute immanence'), on the one hand, and the 'creaturely messianists' (including Walter Benjamin, whose influence on Agamben we have no reason to doubt, and Franz Rosenzweig), on the other. If Santner is accurate in labelling these contrasts as such, then Agamben's work might appear to be an attempt to unite these two diverse strands, much as his oeuvre often tries to unite its Deleuzean and Benjaminian elements.²⁸ Such a reading of the messianic as Agamben attempts to formulate it, and as one can see already in the case of Benjamin, is coupled with the ways in which time or even created matter itself could be said to interrupt our constructed versions of history—the nucleus of a philosophically, pantheistically inflected spirituality.²⁹ In good parallel form, and as with any 'object-oriented' approach, things themselves interrupt the varied constructions of our selves within history. As such, the force of the 'natu-

ral'—beyond our ideological constructs of it—is asserted over and against our conceptualizations of the world: a presentation beyond representation is consequently proclaimed to be possible in just this sense. Moreover, this would be the entrance of the 'transcendent' (as now with the biopolitical) into our material world (hence, 'pantheistic' in a certain yet unspecified sense)—the real mystery that humanity has tried to codify through its canonical impositions of anthropological construction but which remains forever disruptive to such attempts (hence its messianic nature), according to Agamben's claims.³⁰

This critique of history and of normative representations opens us up to the challenge of immanence as a path towards those forms of otherness that lie deep within us, interrupting our senses of self, community, history, sovereignty, and the like. It is a political theology in the sense of evaluating the political tensions within a given theological field, and hence the deep resonance that this line of 'object-oriented' thought shares with a good deal of recent philosophical and political-theological speculation. It is also, however, a study which ultimately says little—if anything—about any nature of the divine itself (and hence why I shy away from ultimately labelling Agamben as a pantheist, in that he is not really concerned with locating the divine within any of this). That is, it is a form of immanence that perhaps does not exclude the possibility for the existence of some form of transcendence altogether, though it would have to exist as entirely beyond our realm of knowledge. At the most, it is one that uncovers the immanent political stakes of a ('transcendentally') constructed field of operations, one that historically masked very real ruses for political power. This, I would conjecture, is Santner's real point, and this is why Agamben's critique of the immanence/transcendence machinery of our world (government/kingdom) will always appear as a separate and yet intimately related issue to his own musings on the 'real' nature of the divine (i.e., any presumed pantheistic sentiments within his more strictly ontologically constructive writings). It is also what makes his work fascinating for theologians, who might also choose to maintain a certain distance from his general conclusions.

However, Agamben's critiques of the political and anthropological machinery that rotate upon a dichotomous foundation and such as are registered in the *Homo Sacer* project seem to protect and preserve a space now made available for the entrance of an indefinable and indescribable possibility for transcendence insofar as it serves (as 'pure critique') to eliminate all false forms of transcendence. The accompanying criticisms of traditional forms of transcendence (which Agamben shares with many a contextualized, critical theologian) are therefore a welcomed corrective to a sovereign ('transcendent' and hierarchical) discourse, though they perhaps do not yet do away with such discourses completely.³¹

We have, in the end, not come face to face with any sort of deity, neither pantheistically nor certainly one transcendent to our world. In

reality, we are simply left with the failures of our representations (of God, of political forms of sovereignty, etc.) within which such tensions arise, ones that ever widen rather than restrict their scope.³² Rather than try to express such a world as one completely bent on locating a presentation beyond all representations—which is the language he uses at times—perhaps we are faced with the only presentation of the ‘thing itself’ that we are capable of realizing, one made possible only through the failure of our representations. It is in this sense that Agamben himself describes how ‘the only true representation is that which also represents the gap that separates it from the truth’.³³ Perhaps, within such representational failures and their recognition, there might also be a deepened encounter with the ‘mystery’ of our being (or even any possible ‘divine being’, though we really cannot go there on the grounds Agamben lays before us) that despite or because of this recognition remains ever elusive to us.

There is underneath this turn to an ‘absolute’ immanence what I will call a ‘political theology of immanence’ insofar as it is the collective voices of these critiques that merge with the ever-present possibility of what theology could be—an always present horizon for the divine to appear once again in the space traditionally occupied by (false) forms of transcendence (e.g., forms of very earthly sovereign power), though not necessarily as a completely immanent (pantheistic) deity, which Agamben, among others, has at times appeared to hint towards. Rather, such a reading is to envision a political theology of the tensions between immanence and transcendence as an investigation of the theological from within—the minimum gesture of self-reflexivity of which theology has often suffered a great lack.³⁴ Such a political theology is not necessarily, it should be said, a speculation on the ontological nature of the divine. To conceive of a self-reflexive theological method is certainly a challenge to those forms of theological discourse that are either purely ideological or based on a transcendent-sovereign, patriarchal, colonial, or racist (hierarchical) structure. It does not, however, rule out the entrance of an ultimate transcendent deity *tout court*.

To acknowledge this possibility is to admit that the conflictual dichotomous models constructed on the split between transcendence and immanence have often been grafted onto a reality that continues to exceed their representational limits, though it does not necessarily escape the realm of representations altogether. What we begin to see as Agamben’s answer to these dichotomies of power is his turn to the Pauline ‘division of division’ itself, that which seeks to highlight the failure of our representations (e.g., male/female, slave/free, Jew/Greek) in order to expose the fullness of the person beneath such labels.³⁵ If there is a person (or divinity!) floating underneath such failures, then may we all be blessed with such an encounter, but—and this is the important point, I believe, in all of this—such encounters are well beyond the scope of what such a political theology is capable of yielding. We should recall, in fact, how

Saint Paul himself dismissed claims to know the tongues of angels (1 Cor. 13:1) or what the 'third heaven' looked like (2 Cor. 12:2), as such things were not relevant in his reconstitution of the self that dies with Christ.

In fact, a political theology such as the one Agamben is trying to develop presents itself most prominently as a political theology insofar as it concerns itself with the contours of theology in the here and now, providing appropriate critiques of theological endeavours yet with an aim towards removing the political elements that are, properly speaking, outside the realm of whatever theology actually is (and which the history of theology may have had trouble ever engaging). Preserving the mystery that lies at the heart of all revealed truths, in this sense, may mean saying very little about it at all (especially as anything that might be called a 'mystery' in this context would most likely be considered simply as a 'mislabelled' experience of language by Agamben's count). As such, my hope—and here going beyond Agamben, who issues no such movement in the direction of formulating any actual theological commitments—would be that a political theology that exposes the tensions between immanence and transcendence as being a part of the political machinery that governs us above all else becomes capable of performing a certain justice to those excluded by or silenced within history (and its accompanying political representations). Theology, from this perspective, and though a host of its own tasks would yet remain before it, would be well served if it did little more than this.

NOTES

1. From Baruch Spinoza to Mary Daly, the list of those who have challenged dominant Western models of transcendence is long and varied. For a helpful discussion of this dynamic, see, among others, Michelle Voss Roberts, *Dualities: A Theology of Difference* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010).

2. I tried to address this theme explicitly in my *Agamben and Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011).

3. On his understanding of Saint Paul, see TR; on Sabbatai Zevi, see ME; and, on Saint Francis of Assisi, see HP.

4. See, among others, Catherine Mills, *The Philosophy of Agamben* (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008).

5. Giorgio Agamben, 'Absolute Immanence', in P, 228.

6. See his recently published fourth volume of the *Homo Sacer* series, *The Highest Poverty*, for more on the relationship between a 'form of life' and law.

7. See especially HS and SE.

8. Eric Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 76.

9. See IH.

10. For more on this theme, see my 'The Poetic Atheology of Giorgio Agamben: Defining the Scission between Poetry and Philosophy', in *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 45, no. 1 (2012): 203–17.

11. On a possible distinction within his notions of 'glory', see IP, 125–28, as well as KG.

12. KG, 82.

13. O.
14. Agamben's own unique formulation of 'political theology', though heavily indebted to Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin, among others, is in the end solely his own. On this, see Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso, 2012), 155–206.
15. Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).
16. KG, 84.
17. KG, 87.
18. See HP
19. KG, 89; cf. p 111.
20. See the lucid exposition of this concept in Thanos Zartaloudis, *Giorgio Agamben: Power, Law and the Uses of Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2010).
21. KG, 90.
22. KG, 111.
23. KG, 91.
24. KG, 286–27. On the phenomenon of secularity, see also Giorgio Agamben 'In Praise of Profanation', in *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone, 2007).
25. Santner, *The Royal Remains*, 138n63.
26. See the final section of CC.
27. Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).
28. This can be seen in Agamben's work, perhaps most notably in the essays that make up *Potentialities*.
29. See Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).
30. See his formulations in O and HS, among others.
31. On some more recent defences of ontotheology, see Chris Boesel, *Risking Proclamation, Respecting Difference: Christian Faith, Imperialistic Discourse, and Abraham* (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke, 2008), and Joeri Schrijvers, *Ontotheological Turnings? The Decentering of the Modern Subject in Recent French Phenomenology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011).
32. On the failures of representation, see Judith Butler's *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).
33. IP, 107.
34. On this lack of self-reflexivity in theological practice over the centuries, see Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011).
35. On this, see TR.

EIGHT

Perhaps Psychoanalysis?

Adam Kotsko

This chapter began as a presentation to the Psychoanalytic Practices Seminar of the Mahindra Humanities Center at Harvard University, where I was invited to speak by Frances Restuccia. When I received the invitation, I had just completed an intensive study of Sigmund Freud in a summer seminar with Eric Santner at the University of Chicago, a seminar that also included Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Glory* on the syllabus. Having done so much work from 'within' Agamben's project, I decided to use psychoanalysis as a kind of lens for rethinking his key concepts. As I specify in the introduction, however, my goal is not simply to point out how Agamben fails to live up to the high standards of psychoanalysis but to use a psychoanalytic reading as a catalyst for reformulating Agamben's project in a way that will help it live up to its own deepest insights. (I later presented a slightly altered version of this paper at the Actuality of the Theologico-Political Conference at Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities of the University of London, framed as a more general inquiry into the limits of political theology, with Agamben as the central example.)

There is a line in *Homo Sacer* that has always bothered me. In the introduction, after laying out the infamous distinction between *bios* and *zoē*¹ and stating his intention to reveal the 'hidden point of intersection'² between sovereignty and Foucauldian biopolitics, Agamben claims, 'The protagonist of this book is bare life.'³ To say that the claim bothers me is not to say that it is simply untrue. There is a level on which it is accurate—very few readers of Agamben's staging of the confrontation between sovereignty and bare life are likely to 'root for' sovereignty over

bare life—but it seems that Agamben wants to be saying more than this. That is to say, Agamben seems to want to say that bare life is not just the object or victim of sovereign power but that it somehow provides its motive force. Indeed, he devotes one of the longest chapters in *Homo Sacer* to an analysis of the ways that bare life is incorporated into the body of the sovereign himself, laying the groundwork for the seemingly paradoxical inclusion of the Führer among the figures of bare life in the conclusion of the book. Even here, though, bare life is always somehow at the service of sovereignty—guaranteeing its continuity after the death of its contingent bearer and generally legitimating its claims. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the sovereign is the active principle that moulds and shapes the passive raw material of bare life according to his needs, even though it seems plain that Agamben would not be satisfied with such a simplistic account.

As if to correct this lack, in *The Sacrament of Language*, Agamben makes perhaps his most concentrated effort to understand the ‘Western machine’ from the perspective of the subjects who are inscribed within it. Where the ‘bare life’ of *Homo Sacer* and *Remnants of Auschwitz* was almost always figured as purely passive, the subject of the oath necessarily possesses at least some degree of agency, and Agamben makes a compelling case that the phenomenon of the oath shows us that what is finally at stake in human language is not knowledge but ethics. Contrasting his view with Claude Levi-Strauss, who one-sidedly emphasizes the epistemological problems occasioned by the ‘inadequation of signifier and signified’, Agamben claims, ‘For the living being who found himself speaking, what must have been just as—perhaps more—decisive is the problem of the efficacy and truthfulness of his word, that is, of what can guarantee the original connection between names and things, and between the subject who has become a speaker—and thus capable of asserting and promising—and his actions.’⁴ All the various apparatuses of the Western machine, from law and religion to logic and science, arise out of this primordial demand to live up to one’s word.

Yet here another disconnect arises, because Agamben’s ambition is not merely to provide a unified theory of Western institutions but to find ways to transform them. He begins his analysis with the scholar Paolo Prodi’s observation that the oath seems to be losing its hold over contemporary society,⁵ and he ends it with the claim that philosophy is somehow able to find a different use of language that is not determined by the oath.⁶ In between, he puts forwards his investigation as a ‘philosophical archaeology’ that attempts to find in the oath some connection to the moment of ‘anthropogenesis’. At this point he uses examples from psychoanalysis and from the natural sciences: anthropogenesis exerts its influence ‘just as the child in psychoanalysis expresses a force that continues to act in the psychic life of the adult; and just as the “big bang,” which is supposed to have given rise to the universe, is something that never

stops transmitting its background radiation to us'.⁷ Yet he is quick to emphasize that unlike the 'big bang' (and presumably childhood), anthropogenesis is not a moment that can be located on a historical timeline but rather the presupposition of all history—though at the same time, anthropogenesis 'is not in fact an event that can be considered completed once and for all; it is always under way, because *Homo sapiens* never stops becoming man, has perhaps not yet finished entering language and swearing to his nature as a speaking being'.⁸

Here the problem is the inverse of the one I isolated in *Homo Sacer*—there the difficulty was that all the evidence seemed to point to a simplistic conclusion (albeit one that Agamben himself could not possibly accept), but in this case, the answer seems much too complicated. Anthropogenesis is by turns contingent and necessary, determinative for everything we recognize as history and yet somehow escapable. Agamben indicates that this complexity grows out of the relationship between the living human being and language, but he gives no concrete account of how it does so. What is it about the living human being and language that makes something like the oath possible, and what is it that gives us grounds for hope that a substantially different relationship between the two can be realized? The question is not so much unanswered as unasked.

I have come to see these two problems—the lack of an account of how the machine was able to contingently arise and the one-sided emphasis on the agency of the sovereign to the near exclusion of anything but a passive role for its subjects—as deeply interconnected. My purpose in this chapter is to argue that psychoanalysis, specifically as developed by Freud and Jacques Lacan, provides ways that we can think through this interconnection as well as resources for revising and extending Agamben's project in the *Homo Sacer* series so that it can better meet its apparent goals. Now to be clear, I believe we should give due respect to Agamben's desire to chart his own path and keep a distance from any particular school of thought—that is, after all, one of the most attractive aspects of his project. My intention is not to provide an extrinsic criticism of Agamben for failing to measure up to the standard of psychoanalysis but rather to show how his project could benefit from a more sustained engagement with psychoanalysis.

For such an approach to make sense, I first need to demonstrate that there are already 'points of contact' between Agamben's project and psychoanalysis—in other words, I need to show that Agamben's project is already 'translatable' into psychoanalytic terms. Hence I will begin by demonstrating that the logic of sovereignty and the experience of the oath are both homologous to the logic of the 'constitutive exception' that underlies the concept of the 'master signifier'. Yet if the critique is to be more than simply an extrinsic imposition, I need to show both that the ways that Agamben's project falls short are not merely contingent short-

comings on his part but that he falls prey to something like an inherent temptation of the conceptual field within which he is working. To achieve this, I will put forth the example of the work of Jean-Joseph Goux, whose famous essay 'Numismatics' attempts a broad synthesis of Western discourses centred on the 'master signifier' and evinces the same basic problems that I have diagnosed in Agamben. Finally, I need to be able to point to elements in Agamben's own thought that are already pushing against the limitations of his overall scheme. So again, what I am attempting is not so much a psychoanalytic critique of Agamben or a synthesis of Agamben's thought with psychoanalysis but rather an attempt to use psychoanalysis as a kind of catalyst for opening up Agamben's project from within.

I

The first part of *Homo Sacer* is devoted to the 'logic of sovereignty'. Starting from Carl Schmitt's famous definition — 'Sovereign is he who decides on the state of exception' — Agamben spends the first chapter investigating the concept of the exception, noting that 'the most proper characteristic of the exception is that what is excluded in it is not, on account of being excluded, absolutely without relation to the rule'.⁹ This point is relatively intuitive, since exclusion necessarily means exclusion from something, just as opposition always implies opposition to something. As the chapter unfolds, however, what began as a minimal 'not without relation' expands to take on a much more important role. For in the state of exception, the law is not simply abrogated or repealed — what is at stake is 'not the chaos that precedes order but rather the situation that results from its suspension. . . . Here what is outside is included not simply by means of an interdiction or an internment, but rather by means of the suspension of the juridical order's validity — by letting the juridical order, that is, withdraw from the exception and abandon it.'¹⁰

The exception is not, then, some contingent particularity that stands 'outside' the law in a merely negative sense. To put it differently, it is not like the situation of a concrete crime, which breaks with the law at some particular point and is thus confronted with some particular instantiation of the force of law. Rather, by means of the 'suspension' of the juridical order's 'validity', the exception somehow stands in a relationship to the juridical order as a whole. As Agamben says, 'What is at issue in the sovereign exception is not so much the control or neutralization of an excess as the creation and definition of the very space in which the juridico-political order can have validity.'¹¹ Further, 'the rule can refer to the individual case only because it is in force, in the sovereign exception, as pure potentiality in the suspension of every actual reference'.¹² The exception thus somehow gives us access to law as such — in suspending the

law's validity, the exception makes the law's concrete validity possible. As he says a few pages later, 'The law has a regulative character and is a "rule" not because it commands and proscribes, but because it must first of all create the sphere of its own reference in real life and make that reference regular.'¹³

Hence the exception is not merely external to the juridical order. Rather, precisely as external, it is foundational. In the logic of sovereignty, then, one might say that we are dealing with a constitutive exception—and here we find a clear 'point of contact' with Lacanian psychoanalysis, where the master signifier is described in exactly the same terms. The master signifier is meaningless, referring only to itself, but precisely thereby it founds the possibility of meaning. In this immediate context, Agamben draws an explicit parallel to precisely the structuralist linguistics that informs Lacan's work, comparing the relationship between the suspended law and its concrete application to that between *langue* and *parole*.¹⁴ Such parallels fill his work. He continually finds homologies to the logic of the exception in politics, linguistics, and ontology, and he moves promiscuously among the three fields. When reading Agamben's writings, it can often come to seem that every major Western discourse shares the same basic structure, that each field has its own 'constitutive exception', so that they must all be understood together.

One can see the same pattern in Agamben's account of the oath in *The Sacrament of Language*, which he explains in terms of performatives or 'speech acts'.¹⁵ There he emphasizes the 'self-referential character of the performative expression', which 'is not exhausted in the fact that the performative . . . takes itself as referent, insofar as it refers to a reality that it itself constitutes. Rather it is necessary to specify that the self-referentiality of the performative is constituted always by means of a suspension of the normal denotative character of language.'¹⁶ Any denotative statement can become the dictum of an oath, but when that happens, its denotative content is no longer what is really at stake—instead, it is a matter of the very connection between language and facts. At this point, Agamben draws a direct parallel to sovereignty: 'Just as, in the state of exception, the law suspends its own application only to found, in this way, its being in force, so in the performative, language suspends its denotation precisely and solely to found its existential connection with things.'¹⁷ The oath is the exception to the normal run of language that actually makes that normal condition possible, and indeed, Agamben claims that all Western discourses ultimately derive from it. Again, all the features of the master signifier (its self-referentiality, its lack of concrete meaning, its foundational role) are represented, so that we might even say that the oath is the attempt to render every signifier a master signifier.

I have focused on *Homo Sacer* and *The Sacrament of Language*, but the parallels with the master signifier are not limited to those volumes. *The*

Kingdom and the Glory is ultimately oriented towards giving an account of the complex interplay between glory and glorification, so that glory emerges as the empty, self-referential centre that legitimates the activities of the Western machine—and again, it is presented as having an explanatory power that extends across all the major discourses. One could say the same of the role of liturgy, office, or duty in *Opus Dei*, where *officio* names a self-referential pure effectivity that gives us insight into religion, law, and ethics, among many other fields. And while *State of Exception* is more narrowly focused on politics, it makes sweeping claims concerning the logic of sovereignty, which allows us to understand the political dynamics of the Roman Republic as much as the foreign policy of George W. Bush. For all their diversity and their wide-ranging erudition, then, these books all circle around the same basic centre and all wind up telling the same story, albeit from different perspectives and different starting points. The first volume of *Homo Sacer* and the various texts that make up its second volume all offer a series of overlapping ‘theories of everything’, and the master signifier that grants them unity is precisely the repeated redeployment of the logic of the master signifier itself.

II

Jean-Joseph Goux’s classic essay ‘Numismatics’, initially drafted during the events of May 1968, offers us an example of a project of similar ambition and scope which is also structured around the logic of the master signifier. Moving at a dizzying pace, Goux’s highly compressed essay attempts to demonstrate the fundamental interconnection among all the major Western discourses—and to give an account of how all these discourses were able to arise. Unlike Agamben, he finds his starting point in Karl Marx’s description of market exchange and the emergence of money, but like Agamben, he works by means of homologies among the ‘master signifiers’ of each discourse: money in economics, the sovereign in politics, God in theology, and so on. Moreover, he broadly shares Agamben’s critical, subversive, and transformative goals and believes that his investigation of the structure of Western discourses lays the groundwork for a complete overturning or overcoming of those discourses, and yet, I will argue, his project runs into problems similar to those I have diagnosed in Agamben.

My purpose in drawing this parallel is not merely to show that someone starting from similar premises ends up in a similar place, but rather to use the differences between Goux and Agamben as a way of gaining a clearer vantage point on the source of their shared problems. The advantage of Goux’s account in this regard is that he is much more explicitly in dialogue with other major critical discourses that Agamben only addresses in enigmatic asides, including not only psychoanalysis but also Marx-

ism and deconstruction—and my claim is that Goux's one-sided emphasis on the master signifier ultimately leads him to misread those discourses in revealing ways.

Goux's stated ambition is to 'create a ground-breaking discipline, a semiotics that could claim scientific status'.¹⁸ Perceiving that 'Marx's analysis held the lineaments of a general and elementary logic of exchange which far exceeded the sphere of economic value for which it was initially produced',¹⁹ Goux came to believe that the mutual relationships among signifiers 'could be conceived in terms of the phenomenon of exchange, for the semiotic, economic, and psychoanalytic horizons all emphasized the question of substitution and its correlative, value'.²⁰ In Goux's scheme, this logic of substitution or exchange is founded on a lack: 'It is always through replacement that values are created. Replacing what is forbidden, what is lacking, what is hidden or lost, what is damaged, in short, replacing with something equivalent what is not itself, in person, presentable.'²¹ In the course of this chain of substitutions, certain key signifiers begin to emerge which organize the field. Hence 'a hierarchy (of values) develops, a principle of order and subordination which places the great (manifold and polymorphous) majority of "signs" (products, actions and gestures, subjects, objects) under the sacred command of a select few among them'.²² Marx's theory of money provides the model, but other privileged signifiers (God, ruler, father, phallus, etc.) function similarly in their respective realms.

Broadly speaking, we can draw a parallel to Agamben's account of how the experience of the oath grows out of the gap between language and life, and how this experience then gives rise to a range of different discourses all organized around their own master signifiers. Yet Goux believes he is able to provide a more detailed account of the sequence of events leading to the installation of the various master signifiers, claiming that Marx's account of the origin of value in the opening chapters of *Capital* provides the key to the 'genesis of the value form'.²³ He lays out the four steps of Marx's logical derivation of money: first, an arbitrary juxtaposition of two commodities whose value is supposed to mirror each other; second, an indefinite chain of comparisons with no privileged centre or point of reference; third, the choice of a particular commodity to serve as a 'general equivalent' for practical purposes; and finally, the emergence of the money form proper. Yet it is difficult to see what Goux views as the difference between the third and final steps, a problem that is exacerbated by his tendency to use the term 'general equivalent' for money when it actually refers to the stage prior the emergence of money proper.

This lack of clarity carries over to his analysis of all the other fields that he has united through the homology of the privileged signifier modelled on the concept of money. The development of all those fields is supposed to take the same four steps—and the same problem of the

difference between the third and fourth steps emerges each time. The problem is clearest in the case of Freud, where he posits a mysterious fourth phase beyond the famous oral, anal, and genital phases.²⁴ Yet there is more at stake than the proper reading of Freud or any other figure he discusses. This insistence on an ineluctable four-step process that always arrives, lockstep, at the master signifier seems to be at odds with his critical and emancipatory agenda. If this is just how human society always works, in every field of human endeavour, what hope do we have of ever changing anything?

Here we see the disadvantage of starting from the master signifier (God, the ruler, money, etc.)—everything must proceed on the master signifier's own terms. If we were to step back and ask why this developmental sequence happens, it seems that there is no possible answer except 'in order to produce a master signifier'. Goux claims that the privilege of the master signifier represents a 'fetishism' that 'originates in *the erasure of a genesis, the obliteration of a history*'.²⁵ Yet why should the master signifier wish to cover up a history that points always and everywhere to its own necessity? And further, is that history even covered up at all? Everyone with a basic knowledge of economics, for instance, is familiar with the story whereby the difficulties of barter eventually give rise to the use of money. Far from being a scandalous secret, this myth of the overcoming of barter is a key part of the ideological self-legitimation of market economies.

The problem is a basic misreading of Marx's intentions in the analysis of commodity fetishism. Goux believes that Marx is attempting to show the 'genesis of value', but Marx's ultimate goal is to show that market exchange can never actually produce value. The market is where value is realized but not where it is produced—it always presupposes a value that comes to the market from elsewhere, namely from the workshop or factory. It is true that Marx shows how money emerges as a tautologous signifier whose value is precisely to represent the promise or demand for value, but the true source of value comes from that paradoxical commodity that is worth more than it costs, that produces surplus value over and above what it takes to replace or regenerate it: namely, human labour power. Hence where Goux sees the logic of exchange as originating from a lack, one can read Marx as saying just the opposite: it arises out of the inherent excess of human labour, its inherent ability to go beyond the boundaries of the merely necessary and create a surplus. Yet for Goux, labour is characterized by passive pain and suffering, for which value compensates.²⁶

The pattern repeats itself when he attempts to explain the emergence of gold as a universal equivalent, making a surprising use of the Derridean concept of *différance*, which unites synchronic or spatial difference and diachronic or temporal deferral: 'Exchange being possible only on the basis of a *différance* in consumption, only those commodities whose

use may be deferred—indefinitely deferred—happen to be available for exchange at any time and, consequently, to claim the status of general equivalent.²⁷ The play of *différance*, normally put forwards as a destabilizing factor that continually threatens to subvert every order, appears as a kind of inert perpetual availability at its foundation. As with labour, an unruly, active principle is converted into a passive one.

Most strikingly—and most importantly for our purposes—Goux also misses the dynamic of excess at the root of the Freudian apparatus, with its infinitely demanding, inescapable drives. In Goux, they instead appear as inert commodities that are organized and exchanged under the watchful eye of the paternal or phallic signifier.²⁸ The contrast with Freud extends also to his starting point and his narrative of historical development. Goux begins from lack and substitution, where Freud begins with a realm that knows no negation or contradiction, a realm where each drive insists on its implacable demand. Goux gives us a straightforward four-step process to arrive at the *telos* of the master signifier, while Freud tells us a fraught narrative where more or less stable compromises emerge to manage an inherently unmanageable problem.

The comparison with Freud lets us see that all of these reversals go together and share the same root—Goux starts from the master signifier and extrapolates backwards, instead of starting from the drives and laboriously working his way forwards. This starting point completely hobbles his investigation, all the more so in that he, with Agamben, wants to say something like ‘the protagonist of this book is bare life’. He insists on the need to invert the structure in order to subvert it, but insofar as he is viewing it from the perspective of the master signifier, he consistently figures the ‘bottom’ of the structure as passive and victimized. Hence his reversal threatens to devolve into the empty moralism of denouncing the oppressor.

III

From a certain perspective, Agamben’s project can seem to have ended up in the same place. The third volume of the *Homo Sacer* series (which was actually published before *State of Exception* and the subsequent parts of volume 2) is *Remnants of Auschwitz*, which focuses primarily on the difficulties of bearing witness on behalf of arguably the most thoroughly victimized group in human history, the Muselmänner of the Nazi concentration camps, who had ‘touched bottom’ and lost all human dignity. Agamben claims that he wants to begin responding to the ethical questions raised by the camps, but it is difficult to understand what one would do in response to his argument other than bear witness—and there is something faintly obscene about claiming that Hitler has revealed some deep and heretofore unknown ontological truth of humanity.

Agamben can't possibly be claiming that the state of the Muselmann is the starting point for the coming community, but then what is he claiming?

There is a sense in which Agamben's project runs aground at this point, and the figure of 'bare life' accordingly recedes from view in the books that were published subsequently (although for the most part they come 'before' *Remnants* in the architectonic of the series). Even here, though, we see signs that Agamben is trying to make good on his claim that bare life is the protagonist of his investigation. Most obvious is the startling reversal at the end of the book, where, despite giving the impression that being a Muselmann was always a terminal condition, he transcribes the testimony of people who had emerged from the Muselmann state.

I want to focus on another element of the book, however, one that is more subtle but more pervasive. Namely, throughout the book, one gets a sense of the Muselmann as a kind of embodiment of inert, implacable demand. They are not purely passive victims but somehow exist beyond or before the distinction between active and passive so that one is forced to say that they exert force precisely by virtue of their passivity, that they embody a kind of agency without agency. This is what makes them so unbearable to be around, so impossible to sympathize with, so inassimilable to any social structure. The only possible response to this inhuman core of the human is to reject it, to destroy it—or else to testify to it.

At this point, it seems to me, we have a more productive point of contact between Agamben's project and psychoanalysis than the master signifier provides—that is to say, here Agamben's project touches on the level of drive. The homology is not perfect. Most notably, Agamben lacks any notion of the multiplicity of the drives, and so he still cannot provide an account for how the Western machine could have arisen out of the drives, only of how it can reveal the level of drive in the limit situation of absolute degradation.

One might draw a parallel to Lacan's Seminar VII, where he attempts to think through what an ethical response to the experience of psychoanalysis might look like. This leads him, quite counterintuitively, not to any of the texts where Freud discusses ethical concepts or problems but rather to a close reading of the *Entwurf*, which marks the beginning of the shift in focus from desire to drive that will be definitively achieved when he enthrones drive rather than desire among the four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis.²⁹ His investigation of the figure of Antigone might then serve as a parallel to the Muselmann, as she is pushed to the limit of social exclusion and degradation and thus lays bare the level of the death drive. Yet Lacan can, for now, go no further than to testify to Antigone as revealing the threshold of the symbolic order, much as Agamben is not able to say much more than that the inhuman element revealed in the Muselmann somehow calls forth language. If this parallel

holds, it might indicate that one could correlate the subject's testimony to the inhuman with the account of 'anthropogenesis' in *The Sacrament of Language*—but just as in Lacan, we don't seem to get past the threshold.

One can see a similar drive-like dynamic in Agamben's account of monasticism in *The Highest Poverty*. In this text, we are dealing not with bare life as the product of the Western machine but with an attempt at a form of life that exists somehow alongside it, autonomous of the system. It is not excluded but simply withdraws from the machine's claims, rendering them inoperative for the monastic community. Agamben even figures the monastic impulse precisely as a demand, a demand to live without the mediation of any juridical or doctrinal apparatus. His ultimate goal in the book is to document how monasticism failed to develop a viable alternative to the Western machine, insofar as both the early monasticism that wound up crystallizing in the *Rule of St. Benedict* and the later, more radical monasticism of the Franciscans were both co-opted by the ecclesiastical-juridical order.

Agamben's primary emphasis is on the Franciscans, who attempted to escape the juridical order with their claim to be so radically poor that they lack the very ability to own anything. He provides a detailed account of the ways that the Franciscans allowed themselves to be drawn into the juridical order despite themselves, insofar as they failed to develop a positive theory of what it is they are actually doing with things other than 'not owning' them—or in Agamben's terms, to develop a theory of 'use', which the final volume of the *Homo Sacer* series, *The Use of Bodies*, works towards. This analysis is interesting on many levels—in fact, I believe that it can be read as a kind of clarification of Agamben's persistent and yet enigmatic gestures towards accounting for the failures of the Left in the twentieth century—but for my present purposes, the treatment of the earlier monastic movements is more pertinent.

The account of the reinscription of early monasticism into the existing juridical order is intriguing because the failing seems less purely contingent, less a matter of an intellectual failing on the part of the Franciscan theorists debating against the various popes who wanted to tame them. Rather, the failing is somehow intrinsic to what the monks were doing, insofar as their attempt to develop an autonomous form of life wound up generating out of itself a perpetual and totalizing liturgy—which the ecclesiastical-juridical order was able to use as a preexisting point of contact. This is all the more ironic in that Agamben is at pains to demonstrate that monasticism is something fundamentally different from law, something existing alongside it in a way that may well have rendered the claim of law over the monk genuinely inoperative. He shows that the monastic rule does not constitute a legal code, that entry into the monastery is not normally accompanied by a binding oath, and that consequently the temptation facing the monk is not a matter of the law and its transgression.

That is to say, the early monks really did concretely escape the legal apparatus. The real temptation of the monks, however, is 'the will to construct their life as a total and unceasing liturgy or Divine Office'.³⁰ In an exhaustive and exhausting exploration of every aspect of monastic practice, Agamben shows us how totalizing that will could be. Monasteries were the first institutions to develop rigorous timekeeping devices for the full temporal articulation of every day—and the demand is even exaggerated to the point of demanding the monks become 'living clocks' whose recitation of the psalms is so exact and regular that, as with Kant's legendary daily walks through Königsberg, one can set one's watch by it.³¹ (This reference to Kant is not accidental, as Agamben traces the origins of Kantian ethics to Christian concepts of liturgy in the companion piece to *The Highest Poverty, Opus Dei*.) Even necessary physical labour was reconceived as a form of worship, as monks were expected to memorize the psalms in order to recite them mentally on a continual basis. Work and worship, economy and glory enter into a zone of indistinction in the monastic life.

This analysis relies on Agamben's account of the relationship between economy and glory in *The Kingdom and the Glory*. To put it briefly, the 'economic' for Agamben indicates a flexible logic that attempts to manage competing, incommensurable demands—and here one thinks immediately of Freud's persistent use of economic metaphors to account for the complex interaction of the drives. The original setting for *oikonomia* was the Greek home, but the word soon found its way into other metaphorical contexts where some kind of coordination of the incommensurable was necessary—for instance, the practice of rhetoric or the administration of a multicultural empire. The challenge in all these settings is to mobilize a range of competing immanent principles in the pursuit of some overall goal that transcends and yet includes them. The successful paterfamilias, for example, must bring together the very different needs of his wife, his children, his slaves, and his animals and crops in order to enrich himself—which is the same thing as enriching the household. Hence this term was a natural fit for the theological problem that Christianity had set itself, namely that of coordinating between the contingent events of history and God's goal of redeeming the world—which is, as in the household example, at the same time and inseparably about vindicating his own justice and goodness and about increasing the good of his creation. Every economy, Agamben concludes, is an economy of glory.

Both of these analyses, of course, presuppose the existence of some transcendent point of reference, some master signifier. The monks do not simply retreat into the desert for the sake of doing so—they want to serve God in some way. Similarly, the household never exists without the father, the political body without the emperor to rule them or else the rhetorician to persuade them. We have the drives on the one hand and the master signifier on the other, and the economy is what coordinates

between the two. What Agamben continuously points out, however, is how strangely superfluous the transcendent element always turns out to be. If the father's good is simply identical to the good of the household, for instance, why do we need the father? What does the father add? The answer is glory, which in Agamben's analysis comes to seem like a kind of *Aufhebung* of superfluity into necessity itself. The transcendent, glorious goal that mobilizes all the immanent, economic forces towards itself serves ultimately to cover up the fact that there is no transcendent, glorious goal of humanity. Humanity is essentially inoperative, it has no natural 'work' to do—and this very inoperativity is what allows the economic-glorious machine to capture humanity and render it so productive.

Here we can seem to be returning to the pattern of Goux's attempt to account for the rise of the master signifier, insofar as the pre-master signifier situation is figured in terms of a lack. In *State of Exception*, Agamben had criticized Emile Durkheim's *Suicide* for its claim that lax social regulation leads to a greater number of suicides, which Agamben believes is 'tantamount to postulating (as he does without providing any explanation) a need of human beings to be regulated in their activities and passions'³²—but it seems that one could level the same charge at Agamben. In reality, though, what he says about inoperativity is much more complex than the negative phrasing might initially imply. In a particularly enigmatic passage in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, he claims that 'inoperativity is the political substance of the Occident, the glorious nutrient of all power'—yet it is a fuel that somehow exceeds the apparatus, insofar as it always produces 'waste products'.³³ Like the Muselmann, it is not fully assimilable, and the very passivity of inoperativity seems to be a kind of demand—and in a remarkable verbal parallel with Freud's definition of a drive, the demand is precisely a 'demand for work'.

There is something strange about Agamben's argument in this passage, however. He claims that the revelation of the inoperativity hidden behind the veil of glory shows why

festival and idleness return ceaselessly in the dreams and political utopias of the Occident and are equally incessantly shipwrecked there. They are the enigmatic relics that the economic-theological machine abandons on the water's edge of civilization and that each time men question anew, nostalgically and in vain. Nostalgically because they appear to contain something that belongs to the human essence, but in vain because really they are nothing but the waste products of the immaterial and glorious fuel burnt by the motor of the machine as it turns and cannot be stopped.³⁴

Yet Agamben seems to be following the same nostalgic and vain strategy, insofar as his isolation of inoperativity grew directly from his analysis of the ultimate utopia of festival and idleness, namely the heavenly kingdom that comes after the definitive end of the economy of salvation. As a

last step in my psychoanalytic rereading of the *Homo Sacer* project, then, I will return to the site of Agamben's definitive separation of economy and glory—namely, hell.

IV

There is a deep irony in the structure of *The Kingdom and the Glory*. On the one hand, it opens with a complex rereading of the debate between Carl Schmitt and Erik Peterson over the possibility of political theology, a rereading that turns precisely on what both thinkers wish to exclude from consideration at all costs: namely, the economic realm, which for both is inextricably tied to the nihilism of liberal modernity. This focus leads Agamben to break decisively with the obsessive focus on the homology of divine and human sovereignty that has marked the discipline of political theology, saying, 'What our investigation has shown is that the real problem, the central mystery of politics is not sovereignty, but government; it is not God, but the angel; it is not the king, but ministry; it is not the law, but the police—that is to say, the governmental machine that they form and support.'³⁵ Yet at the crucial turning point of his investigation, the chapter titled 'Angelology and Bureaucracy', he brings economy and glory into immediate contact only to repeat Schmitt and Peterson's gesture and dismiss the economic realm as beyond redemption, turning instead to the glory of the sovereign as the true site of redemption.

Much of the chapter is taken up with a study of Pseudo-Dionysius and Aquinas's speculations on the hierarchy of angels who serve and glorify God. A theme that emerges is the persistent question of what God will do after the economy of salvation has run its course. This is particularly embarrassing for Christianity, insofar as it has identified God so closely with the economy. Indeed, the divine Trinity itself is figured as an economy so that the Christian God in a real sense just is the economy of salvation, without remainder. In Agamben's account, two concurrent processes continue after the Day of Judgement marks the end of the economy. The first is that the angels and saints are eternally glorifying God, with no further work to do. The second is that the demons are eternally punishing the souls in hell. Faced with this duality, Agamben feels compelled to make a choice, and he chooses to side with glory over the demonic economy.

In making this choice, he takes a swipe at contemporary democratic capitalism, pointing out that 'from the perspective of Christian theology, the idea of eternal government (which is the paradigm of modern politics) is truly infernal'³⁶—in short, we neoliberal subjects are living in hell. However richly deserved this assessment is, Agamben's rare indulgence in humour serves to cover up a deeper question: Why should we adopt

the perspective of Christian theology? After all, has Agamben's whole argument not indicated that it is precisely Christian theology that provided the conceptual preconditions for just this hellish regime of eternal management? Even laying that aside, however, Agamben immediately points towards a deeply disturbing facet of the Christian perspective, quoting the very passages from Tertullian and Aquinas about the joy of watching the damned suffer in hell that Nietzsche made famous in his analysis of Christian resentment in *The Genealogy of Morals*. 'Curiously', Agamben says, 'this eternal penitentiary government, this penal colony that knows no expiation, has an unexpected theatrical implication . . . the blessed and the angels with whom they contemplate it are not allowed to feel compassion before this atrocious spectacle, but only enjoyment, insofar as the punishment of the damned is the expression of the eternal order of divine justice'.³⁷

Later, Agamben will demonstrate that glory is constitutively empty, having no content other than the very gesture of glorification itself. Yet if we take seriously the notion that the infernal economy of punishment and the glorification of God are both equally eternal, and indeed that part of the joy of heaven is precisely in watching God's enemies being tormented, then perhaps it is too simple to say that the two realms can be separated—indeed, perhaps the demonic tortures in hell show us something like the concrete 'content' of glory.

We must proceed cautiously. It is not enough simply to reject the tortures of the damned as unacceptable sadism because in so doing, we still paradoxically remain within the Christian perspective that stands enraptured by their pain. This is because the ones carrying out the punishment are precisely demons, fallen angels whom God has expelled from the heavenly host. God himself is outraged at their evil ways—and that's precisely why the demons have been condemned to hell! Agamben explores this ambiguous role of the demons in the endnote to the chapter, where he claims, based on a reading of Paul, that the 'angels, as a cipher for the divine power of government of the world, also represent the dark and demonic aspect of God, which, as such, cannot simply be expunged'.³⁸ Yet despite recognizing what Martin Luther might call 'the left hand of God', Agamben interprets it in terms of the theme of inoperativity, which already presupposes the separability of the demonic tortures from the divine glory. He is, in short, still taken in by the Christian perspective, still demonizing the demons.

I propose that we have only one choice if we want to get outside of the Christian perspective and avoid the centrifugal force of the sovereign master signifier: we must identify with the demons. I do not mean that we should identify with evil, nor that we should imagine that Satan offers a desirable alternative to God. I am speaking of the demons in precisely the situation that Agamben describes in this passage, eternally punishing the damned (hence both active and good, insofar as they are serving

God's justice) and yet suffering their own punishment at the very same time (hence both passive and evil, insofar as they are rebels against God's will). They do not provide an alternative to the system—indeed, their thorough integration into it is precisely what makes them so interesting.

A demonic political theology radicalizes Agamben's previous attempts to shift focus away from the sovereign God and shows why they were inadequate. Identifying with the bare life of the damned is not enough, because we would still be tempted to figure them as passive victims of sovereignty—that would be just another variation on the same self-defeating inversion that we've already seen in Goux and, to a lesser extent, in Agamben's earlier work. Yet identifying with the angelic bureaucrats is not enough either, because they exist only to serve the sovereign power. What the demons offer us is the possibility of doing both at once, of identifying with the abjected vessels of wrath who are nonetheless God's servants. The demons are not evil, but beyond or before good and evil, just as they are beyond or before activity and passivity. They are the unruly drives from which notions like good and evil or activity and passivity arise as the system begins to articulate itself in response to their implacable demands.

To fully flesh out this claim would mean supplementing Agamben's account of the development of the providential machine by filling in the decisive role that the devil and the demonic played at every step of its development—starting with the emergence of the apocalyptic worldview out of the tensions in the Hebrew prophets' interpretation of world history, which put forwards a vision of the evil pagan rulers of this world as God's unwitting servants, chastising Israel for unfaithfulness only to be punished in their turn as well. Under the pressure of brutal regimes that sometimes punished the Jews precisely for being faithful to God's law, the prophets' unwitting servant evolved into a conscious adversary of God whose defeat would signal the emergence of a new heaven and a new earth. It was within this apocalyptic paradigm that Christianity developed, as witnessed by the famous story where Jesus refuses the devil's offer to grant him all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would only fall down and worship him—a temptation that can only be taken seriously if we understand the devil as really holding power over the world.

Agamben's method in *The Kingdom and the Glory* is to avoid such moral valuations in order to focus on the underlying economic structures, and hence the devil's role as the de facto ruler of the world in early Christianity and patristic thought never comes into view. As it happens, though, the devil's providential role does come under discussion in a passage where, like the reference to hell, it is played up for laughs. In *Opus Dei*, while discussing the Catholic principle that the priest's actions are effective simply by virtue of having been properly performed, with no reference to the priest's own worthiness as a person, Agamben points out that the technical term for this doctrine—the *opus operatum* (work

done, as opposed to the doer of the work)—appears to have been coined in a passage where the scholastic philosopher Peter of Poitiers was trying to conceptualize the relationship between the devil's wicked deeds and the divine plan of salvation. Peter writes: 'God is offended by the devil's action, but not by the act itself; God does not want the devil to do that which God commands him to do in the way he does it. . . . Even if the devil does what God wants, he does not do it as God wants and for that reason, he is always sinning.'³⁹

It is certainly humorous that Satan serves as a model for priestly action, but as with the tortures inflicted by the demons, which God excoriates even as they bring him eternal glory, it seems there is something else going on here. If we decline to adopt the viewpoint of God and instead look at the whole situation from the outside, it seems more plausible to read God as making an empty claim over something he does not control. One is reminded of one of Freud's *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, where he discusses the ego's complex strategies for dealing with the drives: it can attempt to repress them; it can provide for some type of compensatory outlet—or it can watch helplessly as they express themselves and then provide some kind of rationalization after the fact. The punishments in hell reflect a similar strategy, as they are purportedly grounded in some concept of justice and retribution but, in their eternal repetition, appear strangely drive-like in their disconnection from that ostensible meaning.

This parallel between the demonic and the Freudian drives works from both directions, as Freud repeatedly characterizes the drives as demonic forces and goes so far as to worry that he has become an *advocatus diaboli* in one of his most searching explorations of the theory of the drives, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. And from a Freudian perspective, it seems meaningful that the demonic always appears as the butt of a highly uncharacteristic joke on Agamben's part—and in both cases, Agamben is precisely, if jokingly, placing the demonic at the root of the orders (democratic capitalism and bureaucratic-priestly Christianity) that he is most concerned to critique. In his jokes about the devil, the problems of focusing too much on the master signifier and neglecting the question of origin both appear together in a single act of dismissal.

The demonic need not replace or supersede the other figures of drive in Agamben's work—the Muselmann, the monk, and inoperativity—but rather supplement them. Nevertheless, I would propose that a rewriting or extension of Agamben's enterprise along the lines of the psychoanalytically inflected internal critique I have carried out should start from the demonic as the repressed and yet inescapably active foundation of the divine order. Such a recasting of Agamben's analysis would help us to see the existing order not simply as an imposition but as an ultimately ungrounded compromise formation—an unstable structure that arose out of forces that could have been directed otherwise and that are in fact

continually shifting in new directions. Now such a focus would not provide a straightforward solution to the problems Agamben is addressing. After all, the theory of the drives and the complex relationship between phylogeny and ontogeny it implies are among the most difficult and most frequently revised aspects of Freud's theory. At the very least, however, it would finally give Agamben the protagonist he has been looking for.

NOTES

1. HS, 1.
2. HS, 6.
3. HS, 8.
4. SL, 68.
5. SL, 1.
6. SL, 71–72.
7. SL, 10.
8. SL, 11.
9. HS, 17.
10. HS, 18.
11. HS, 19.
12. HS, 20.
13. HS, 26.
14. HS, 21.
15. SL, 54ff.
16. SL, 55.
17. SL, 56.
18. Jean-Joseph Goux, 'Numismatics', in *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*, trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 1.
19. Goux, 'Numismatics', 3.
20. Goux, 'Numismatics', 2.
21. Goux, 'Numismatics', 9.
22. Goux, 'Numismatics', 10.
23. Goux, 'Numismatics', 11.
24. Goux, 'Numismatics', 23–24.
25. Goux, 'Numismatics', 33; emphasis in original.
26. Goux, 'Numismatics', 59.
27. Goux, 'Numismatics', 27.
28. Goux, 'Numismatics', 24.
29. I owe this account of the shift from the early to the late Lacan to Mladen Dolar.
30. HP, xii.
31. HP, 20.
32. SE, 67.
33. KG, 246.
34. KG, 246; translation altered.
35. KG, 276.
36. KG, 164.
37. KG, 164.
38. KG, 166.
39. Quoted in *Opus Dei*, 23.

III

Methods, Economies, Theologies

NINE

Genealogy and Political Theology

Adam Kotsko

Having critiqued Agamben from the perspective of psychoanalysis in the previous chapter, now I attempt to defend him from a Marxist critique. In both cases, the centre of attention is *The Kingdom and the Glory*, arguably Agamben's most sprawling and difficult work to date—and the work that I have grappled with most intensely ever since I learned Italian in order to gain access to Agamben's investigation of the kinds of patristic and medieval texts that were at the heart of my dissertation research. As the juxtaposition of these two pieces shows, I'm still not entirely sure what to make of this text, which seems to me simultaneously crucial and yet flawed. At the same time that this piece is positive, however, it shares with the other chapters in this section—most notably Colby's chapter on gender that immediately follows—in attempting to mobilize Agambenian concepts and insights to deepen and radicalize Agamben's project.

The field of political theology has not yet been rigorously defined. It is more a field of affinities than a clearly delineated disciplinary space—a kind of 'zone of indistinction' between theology and political theory where the terms of debate are still very much up for grabs.¹ Even as the range and shape of political theology as a field of inquiry remain somewhat inchoate, however, there are points of reference that already seem more or less obvious or obligatory. The work of Giorgio Agamben is surely one of them, a status that *The Kingdom and the Glory* will just as surely reinforce.²

Rarely has the work of documenting parallels between the political and the theological been carried to such a fine-grained level. Where much work in this field focuses on the sovereign decision and its analogies with

the acts of God, here we are treated to visions of angels as God's middle managers and of political ceremony as an echo of the acclamation that calls divinity into being. Yet at the same time as the analogy on which the field of political theology depends is filled in with such detail, the very notion of 'political theology' (as developed by Carl Schmitt) is displaced in favour of the competing paradigm of 'theological economy' (associated with Erik Peterson), and the miraculous 'state of exception' fades in importance when compared to the providential 'invisible hand'. By the end of Agamben's analysis, it seems that the exemplary figure for what we call political theology is no longer the sovereign president, with his power to declare alleged terrorists *homo sacer*, but the technocratic central banker, whose invisible hand moves the entire economy through actions that few notice or even understand.

Hence it seems likely that *The Kingdom and the Glory's* influence will lead political theologians to devote greater attention to economics and to the concrete workings of government, and it is hard to object to such developments. Yet I believe that this work has something more fundamental to contribute to the field of political theology: its genealogical approach can point the way to greater methodological clarity in a field that too often relies on vague structural homologies.

Rather than directly laying out Agamben's approach to genealogy, however, I will proceed by responding to a critique recently levelled against Agamben by the Marxist philosopher Alberto Toscano, for whom Agamben's interest in economy is long overdue—and in many respects inadequate.³ In this context, I will primarily be defending Agamben from Toscano's attacks, but my purposes is not to 'correct' Toscano nor to suggest that a Marxist critique of Agamben's 'left Heideggerianism' is not warranted.⁴ I choose to focus on his critique here because in my view, Toscano misconstrues Agamben's project and its relationship to theology and does so in a way that could easily lead some in the field of political theology to embrace Agamben for the wrong reasons. On the other hand, however, Toscano's attempt to play Agamben's approach to genealogy off against more 'standard' exemplars of the method like Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault points towards ways that Agamben's argument in *The Kingdom and the Glory* could be expanded and deepened by future scholars.

I

In a strange way, the method Toscano uses in critiquing Agamben mimics an aspect of Agamben's method that has often left readers sceptical: his focus on tracing the fates of individual words.⁵ For Agamben, it is an urgent political task to trace the origins and vicissitudes of such key concepts as the sacred, the exception, or economy. Similarly, in Toscano's

politically charged critique of Agamben's work, one suspects that it comes down to tracing the effects of a key word: namely, 'theological'. In a sense, once Toscano takes note of Agamben's description of *The Kingdom and the Glory* as a 'theological genealogy', the die is already cast. A covert theological apologetics and an ahistorical concern for origins and unchanging essences follow automatically in its train.

First, let us consider the accusation that Agamben is doing apologetics. For Toscano, the goal of Agamben's 'theological genealogy' is to claim that 'the atheism or secularism which nominally characterize contemporary philosophy—be it liberal, conservative, or Marxist—are surface effects beneath which lie the compulsions of a theological matrix'.⁶ Political theologians will immediately recognize this style of argument, which has been forcefully deployed by the Radical Orthodoxy school of theology. In this perspective, modernity turns out to be nothing but a derelict form of Christian heresy, which only a theological approach can allow us to properly diagnose. Indeed, it is probably inevitable that at least a few theologians sharing that 'sensibility' will rush to claim Agamben as one of their own on the basis of his work in *The Kingdom and the Glory*.

Whether from a polemical or positive perspective, however, such a view of Agamben's project here does not square with the rest of his work. I have tried to show, in the chapter 'Agamben's Messianic Nihilism', that Agamben's method, drawn from Walter Benjamin, systematically ignores the line between the religious and secular.⁷ In *The Sacrament of Language*, for instance, he frequently castigates theorists of religion who too easily demarcate 'the religious' as a purely separate sphere,⁸ expanding on *Homo Sacer*'s scathing polemic against nineteenth- and twentieth-century conceptions of the 'ambivalence of the sacred'.⁹ In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, he argues that the 'secularization debate' shares in a similar misunderstanding. His dismissal of the latter may, as Toscano says, be 'haughty'—Agamben's work is, to put it lightly, characterized by ample self-assurance—but it does not indicate any kind of preference for the religious over or against the secular.¹⁰

Rather than indicating an attempt to discredit secular modernity—and hence Marxism—it thus seems to me that the phrase 'theological genealogy' indicates simply that Agamben is carrying out the theological portion of a (hypothetical) complete genealogy of 'economy and government'. That is, he is particularly concerned with the fate of the concept of *oikonomia* when it goes through a kind of hibernation in the rarefied realms of scholastic philosophy, providing only a tentative account in the concluding appendix of how it reawakened in the thought of key early moderns, from which it would spring again into practice in the concrete techniques of governance. Even if Agamben admittedly does not fully articulate this bridge into modernity, it seems to me that his brief discussion of Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' in terms of his 'theological genealo-

gy' is enough to demonstrate his argument's relevance for the economic debates that shape all our lives.

II

All this is to say that Toscano's methodological critique of Agamben's work is not so easily dismissed. Echoing many who have found Agamben's project to be ahistorical, Toscano argues that the procedure of *The Kingdom and the Glory* is too 'substantial' and 'idealist' to count as a proper genealogy.¹¹ Here again, the notion of a 'theological' genealogy assumes prime importance:

This has to do with the idea of a theological origin. Behind this reference lies not only Agamben's sympathy towards the Schmittian notion of secularization but the conviction, mediated by a pervasive Heideggerianism, of a historical-ontological continuity which allows one to argue that our political horizon is still determined—and worse, unconsciously determined—by semantic and ideational structures forged within a Christian theological discourse.¹²

In Toscano's view, such a stance again puts Agamben dangerously close to embracing the Christian apologetic claim that the Christian patrimony has been somehow 'stolen' by modernity and needs to be restored to its rightful place. Yet the problem is also more fundamental: he is ultimately arguing that a 'theological genealogy' is a contradiction in terms.

To support this contention, Toscano turns to the example of Foucault. This is not simply one example among others. Agamben has repeatedly put Foucault forwards as a primary interlocutor for his project in the *Homo Sacer* series, and so Toscano's accusation that Agamben has betrayed Foucault's legacy is a serious one. The basis of this accusation is the claim that for Foucault, genealogical research 'is concerned with dispersed events of heterogenesis and truncated lineages' so that 'the search for continuities which defines the history of ideas is to be subjected to unsparing critique'.¹³

Before turning to Foucault's own work, which Agamben himself has discussed at length in his recent book *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, I believe it will be helpful to turn to Foucault's own source: the genealogical ur-text of Nietzsche. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, one finds the following methodological credo:

There is for historiography of any kind no more important proposition than the one it took such effort to establish but which really ought to be established now: the cause of the origin of a thing and its eventual utility, its actual employment and place in a system of purposes, lie worlds apart; whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it; all events in the organic

world are a subduing, a becoming master, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous 'meaning' and 'purpose' are necessarily obscured or even obliterated. . . . The entire history of a 'thing,' an organ, a custom can in this way be a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and adaptations whose causes do not even have to be related to one another but, on the contrary, in some cases succeed and alternate with one another in a purely chance fashion.¹⁴

The emphasis here is clearly on discontinuity. The thing that has 'somehow come into being'—a phrasing that obviously displaces the question of origin—becomes caught up in a power struggle whose results could not have been predicted, and it is the aleatoric path of that power struggle that is of real interest. Yet it is not at all clear that a reference to something like an origin and an at least provisional continuity are actually being excluded here. The thing that gets caught up in the power struggle has, after all, 'somehow come into being,' and over the course of the power struggle it remains, in some sense, still recognizably that thing. It is, however, not that thing in the sense of a persistent substance or concept that would exhaustively determine in advance the kinds of relationships it would enter into or the uses to which it would be put—hence Agamben's use of the term 'signature' to indicate this less strictly defined point of continuity.

Genealogy does reject the easy continuity posited by something like the 'history of ideas,' but that doesn't mean there is no continuity whatsoever. At the same time that genealogy is concerned with discontinuity and rupture, it also reveals what might be called inertial effects. One can see this in Nietzsche's *Genealogy*: certainly no one would have predicted that the logic of debt would get tangled up in the bad conscience and become guilt, but at the same time, the logic of guilt is still recognizable as a descendant of the logic of debt.

With this basic structure in mind, we can see that the same pattern repeats itself in Foucault's work. Clearly it is jarring and surprising to learn, as we do in *Discipline and Punish*,¹⁵ that the same basic conceptuality that informs modern prisons is also at work in schools—indeed, this shock is what grants the book much of its rhetorical power. At the same time, the story Foucault is trying to tell simply wouldn't make sense if there was not some form of continuity at work here, if there wasn't a recognizable shape to penal practices that has been transferred into schools. Similarly, it is counterintuitive that the same logic of sexuality that was mobilized to reinforce the nuclear family would lead, as Foucault demonstrates in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*,¹⁶ to the development of countercultural forms of sexuality that would come to contest that very model. Here again, though, the argument would not make any sense if there wasn't something recognizably continuous be-

tween the two phenomena. It is only against the background of that continuity that the discontinuity becomes salient.

In this sense, I would argue that Agamben's genealogy is very much in the spirit of the 'classic' genealogists. Who would have guessed that *oikonomia*, a concept of household management, would be pressed into the service of imperial administration? And from there, who could have possibly anticipated that it would become an important point of reference for Christian articulations of the inner life of the Trinitarian God, then supply the paradigm for God's indirect providential governance of the course of world history, only to wind up as a guiding principle for the management of people and things towards the end of endless accumulation of capital?

Even if one can scarcely make out the remains of ancient Greek 'home economics' in the grim realities of the global economy, it is nevertheless the case that across each transition something of the previous articulation of 'economy' remains recognizable. The shifts are strange and vertiginous, and the new contexts significantly change the character and function of 'economy', yet this discontinuity is not simply a Heraclitan flux — the power struggle which seizes upon 'economy' and variously transforms it is itself continuous. One can trace the 'signature' called 'economy' through it, and one must do so precisely because one cannot locate a stable concept or essence of 'economy'. To deny this particular kind of continuity would not only be a betrayal of the genealogical method but would render any kind of intelligible historical account impossible.

III

While I don't agree with Toscano that Agamben betrays the genealogical method, it is difficult to deny that Agamben's 'pervasive Heideggerianism' is problematic in several respects.¹⁷ The difficulty with this, however, is not so much that the influence of Martin Heidegger leads him to a too-substantial view of the concepts or 'signatures' at play in his genealogy as that his Heideggerian ambitions lead him to flatten out the historical field through which they move. As the *Homo Sacer* project has unfolded, moreover, it has become increasingly clear that Agamben envisions it as a kind of reworking of the Heideggerian *Seinsgeschichte* — and even an attempt to do Heidegger one better.¹⁸

Whatever the differences in Agamben's approach, the field over which it unfolds is substantially the same. Like Heidegger, Agamben seems to view 'the West' as an unproblematic historical unity, for which the advent of modernity represents at best a particularly extreme development. He certainly does not appear to regard the Christian era as something notably different from the late classical era, and his account of

the history of Christian thought treats the patristic and medieval periods as essentially one undifferentiated field.

Agamben's fidelity to the genealogical task pushes against this Heideggerian oversimplification, but the Heideggerian influence does artificially limit the number of 'pivot points' in his narrative. It is clearly the case that Agamben has more work to do in connecting up his 'theological genealogy' with modernity, but in my view he also still has more work to do in fully developing the 'theological genealogy', with greater attention to the twists and turns of the history of Christianity and of Christian thought.

I would argue in addition that he needs to cast a wider net in terms of filling out the context within which the notion of 'economy' operates in any given era—for instance, 'economy' is central to the way the patristic writers understood the salvation that God had brought about in Christ, and so why couldn't Agamben look at some of their narrative accounts of how that plan was supposed to have been carried out? The very significant difference between patristic and medieval narratives of salvation would have made it clear that no easy continuity can be found between the two eras' notions of 'economy'.¹⁹ The patristic writers, such as Irenaeus and Gregory of Nyssa, put forwards a vision of Christ's saving work that would strike contemporary Christians as very strange indeed. Rather than providing vicarious punishment for our sins, Christ in this narrative came to set humanity free from the devil, to whom our first parents had voluntarily submitted when they chose his advice over God's commandment in the Garden of Eden. By sending a fully human saviour, born of a human woman and thus formally under the control of the devil, who is nonetheless also divine and hence beyond the devil's power, God manages to undercut the devil's rule from within. For the patristic writers, such a circuitous plan is necessary because God by definition cannot be violent—he must work only through persuasion, and hence he must accept the actual-existing relationship between the devil and humanity as at least provisionally legitimate.

By contrast, Saint Anselm's hugely influential model has Christ redeem us from our bondage to God, whose honour has been infinitely insulted by human sin and who must thus demand an infinite payment that finite humanity can never pay. The solution is, once again, the union of divine and human in the saviour, who is simultaneously infinite and subject to human obligations. Here we see very explicit concepts and metaphors from what we would recognize as the 'economic' sphere—specifically the sphere of debt. Such imagery is not absent from the earlier patristic model, but it takes the very different form of attempting to 'pay off' the devil by purchasing humanity (albeit in a way that proves to be a ruse, since the devil's payment, namely the divine-human Jesus, is not something the devil can actually possess). In both cases, theological concepts are immediately economic concepts, but that plays out in distinc-

tive ways in the patristic and medieval eras. Agamben's account could surely be enriched by attending to such differences and discontinuities.

From a more Marxist perspective, one might also ask after how the shifting theological concepts of 'economy' may have affected what we would recognize as the material 'economic' sphere. Agamben begins to lay the groundwork in *The Highest Poverty*, which draws explicit parallels between monasticism and capitalist production and centres on the Franciscans' attempt to vindicate their claim not to own any property against the church hierarchy, which wanted to fold them into the existing economic-political order. The concept of economy is not an explicit focus in this volume, but I attempt to draw out some potential connections in my later chapter 'The Theology of Neoliberalism'. In any case, Agamben's investigations in *The Highest Poverty* and *Opus Dei* give the lie to the accusation that he is inattentive to concrete historical practices.

Overall, then, far from betraying the genealogical tradition in favour of an ahistorical idealism, Agamben provides an exemplary model of genealogical inquiry. In its emphasis on continuity, Agamben's method serves as a natural fit for the project of political theology, which has always been concerned with unexpected continuities across the Western political tradition. At the same time, Agamben's deployment of surprising discontinuities is a salutary reminder that the political-theological enterprise cannot content itself with a narrow focus on the problem of divine and human sovereignty. Political theology must seek out unexpected resources and connections elsewhere—drawing on the example of Agamben, who draws on everything from the Greek household to the doctrine of the Trinity—if it is to reach its full potential as a critical discourse.²⁰

NOTES

1. For a sense of the sheer heterogeneity, cf. Hent de Vries, ed., *Political Theologies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006.)

2. Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

3. Alberto Toscano, 'Divine Management: Critical Remarks on Giorgio Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Glory*', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 16, no. 3 (2011): 125–36.

4. For an extended defence of Agamben's 'left Heideggerianism', see Matthew Abbott, 'No Life Is Bare, the Ordinary Is Exceptional: Giorgio Agamben and the Question of Political Ontology', *Parrhesia* 14 (2012): 23–36.

5. For another example, see Derrida's infamous critique in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 1, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

6. Toscano, 'Divine Management', 125.

7. For more on this, see chapter 6 in the present volume.

8. Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language: An Archeology of the Oath*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

9. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 75–80.
10. Toscano, 'Divine Management', 127.
11. Toscano, 'Divine Management', 128 and passim.
12. Toscano, 'Divine Management', 128.
13. Toscano, 'Divine Management'.
14. Friedrich Nietzsche, "'Guilt," "Bad Conscience," and the Like', second essay of *Genealogy of Morals*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 513, §12.
15. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).
16. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).
17. Toscano, 'Divine Management', 128.
18. This perhaps becomes clearest in *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).
19. I carry out a detailed comparison of patristic and medieval accounts of the narrative of salvation in *Politics of Redemption: The Social Logic of Salvation* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010).
20. Cf. 'Perhaps Psychoanalysis?', chapter 8 in this volume, for a full elaboration of this claim.

TEN

The 'Absence' of Gender

Colby Dickinson

Giorgio Agamben has claimed over the past decade or so that the work of Michel Foucault has been very helpful to him, both in terms of conceptual development (i.e., biopolitics, governmentality, etc.) and in his own genealogical methods. However, despite the acknowledgement of such an influence, Agamben has had little foray into the world of sexuality and gender, which Foucault found central to his own oeuvre. Yet if anything has had a greater impact on our understanding and performance of sexuality and gender, it is the 'anthropological machinery' that Agamben critiques time and time again. His analysis of this machinery should in fact signal a complete rethinking of the particular oppressions that such machinery has historically often created. What I am trying to demonstrate in this chapter is that his remarks on the nature of the body (in relation to the speculative 'glorious body') made in *Nudities*, much like his defence of 'whatever being' in *The Coming Community*, actually allow us to rethink our embodied being in relation to categories such as gender and sexuality but also to push beyond them in creative and instructive ways. I would suggest, in this sense, that Agamben's insights here might actually assist us in reassessing theories of gender and sexuality, at least insofar as both deal with binary categorizations that severely limit our ability to embrace those 'forms of life' lived beyond the borders within which we are typically inscribed. Living beyond such gendered and sexual economies produces another, more radical way forwards for both philosophical and political thinking, and, as Adam pointed out in the previous chapter, I believe it also allows us to see a new methodology at work in continental theoretical interventions: a new use for the history of theology and theological methods. If my reading has any weight to it, then the

questions of immanence and divinity that I am here pursuing within his work are justified in coming to the fore of my analysis.

The prophet, we are told, is directed towards the future, speaking and living in anticipation of a messianic present. The apostle, in contrast, speaks only after the Messiah has come, that is, speaking in the time that remains left to us (*kairos*). This is of course to live outside of the historical representations which litter that other sense of time in which we dwell and in which the prophet lives (*chronos*).¹ Such a difference within our understanding of time in fact serves to underscore the reason why taking an apostolic pronouncement as a prophetic gesture—that is, as an attempt to alter future patterns of activity within our world—fails to understand the true vocation of the apostle. Seen in this light, this reasoning is perhaps also why Paul’s radical statements on identity revocation in Galatians 3:28 (‘there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female’) have yet to be fully comprehended, let alone brought into the modern biopolitical context in which we live, one where the once prominent figures of sovereignty have seemingly gone ‘underground’ into the very bodies that make up any social, cultural, or political context.² If the work of Agamben is to be given its fair share of regard, however, we can only marvel at how far we are from realizing the radicality of Paul’s revocation of our most basic normative divisions, ones that represent our common sources of cultural intelligibility. Consequently, we can see how far we are from understanding the nature of those messianic claims which would otherwise throw a wrench into the construction of the human being today, that is, what sense of self is formed within the anthropological machinery of our age.

With all of these ideas in mind, the conclusion that I am hoping to present in this chapter, and that I believe Agamben’s work profoundly illustrates, is that this difference between prophet and apostle is key to understanding how a messianic vision of history runs counter to the social, cultural, political, and religious boundaries that humanity has constructed and continues to construct in order to identify itself—its ‘anthropological machinery’, as it were. To see things thus of course brings before us a profound critique of the historically dominant ontotheological speculations on what makes these boundaries a reality for most, as well as a near complete reenvisioning of what constitutes theological practice. Though Agamben’s work has received a great deal of political and philosophical comment, it would seem that it is his theological engagements, especially in recent years, which have the potential to disseminate themselves with a greater cultural impact.³ Yet despite what will at times appear to be a complete jettisoning of the theological endeavour as we have known it (through his later emphatic calls for a ‘profanation’ of our world), I believe that Agamben’s presentation of the messianic reveals to us how no definition of the human being, including our bodies, sexuality,

and gender, can be properly articulated without a necessary theological account being given of it. Also, and in contrast to traditional Christian teachings, this theological account need not be an affirmation of a transcendent, hierarchical deity but rather an immanent opening to the divinity that permeates any image of God.

The consequences of such an understanding, then, contain the possibility for reenvisioning not only theology but the manner in which we conduct any philosophical inquiry of religion in general.⁴ As Foucault's genealogical method illustrated many decades ago, and as I intend to demonstrate herein, to address the biopolitical means addressing the sexual bodies that we are, a fact which has received little attention in secondary literature on Agamben. For this reason, I intend to disclose through his more recent writings on the theological and the 'glorious body' how the core of our sexual being is the site which Agamben's work does indeed point towards, à la Foucault, and which must now be placed within the broader context of his work on the whole.⁵ Though I will not go into great comparative depth in terms of illustrating this affinity, I aim at least to gesture towards the undisclosed affinity which Agamben's work shares with certain feminist thinkers who likewise attempt to push beyond the boundaries and divisions that linger in our world as a result of the political and cultural acts of signification that still continue to define our world as we understand it today.

SIGNIFICATION AS ONTOTHEOLOGICAL MARK

I will begin with a consideration of the role of signification in Agamben's work because it is his comments on the use of symbols and language which most aptly set the stage for the encounter between acts of signification and their (albeit often veiled) theological nature. This is the place wherein our bodies are inscribed with a given gender or ethnicity, for example, and it is also the place from whence we might better frame the often problematic relationship between poetry and philosophy, a tension that reveals, according to Agamben, a fracture at the base of the modern subject.⁶ In essence, and as his starting point for these reflections, it is the medieval love poets for whom poetry first became a pronounced location 'where the fracture between desire and its unattainable object' was allegedly to be healed.⁷ In an early work titled *Stanzas*, Agamben studies those poets who were attempting to get behind the problematic nature of poetry itself, including its myriad attempts to unite the poetic object with an admiring subject, something no less difficult in our day than in theirs. By focusing on this particular division, however—one often manifest in certain romantic forms of poetry—these poets were to put poetry in the place of spirit, as mediator between the visible and invisible. This is not, however, to suggest that poetry resolves the split once and for all; indeed,

the division between poetry and philosophy is of such a nature that they will never be reconciled within the reality of language and its limitations. Rather, the nature of all symbolic utterances dictates that things be forever fractured in language, caught somewhere between understanding (philosophy) and experience (poetry). For this reason, Agamben will illustrate how 'the symbolic, the act of recognition that reunites what is divided, is also the diabolic that continually transgresses and exposes the truth of this knowledge'.⁸ Using a very popular and recurring image in his work, the symbol, or language itself, is seen as both poison and antidote, the revealing of humanity's greatest problematic and yet the present solution to it.

What we are thus confronted with is the fundamental ambiguity of signifying, one embedded in the nature of language that, we are told, 'resides in that original fracture of presence that is inseparable from the Western experience of being'.⁹ Linking these remarks both to Martin Heidegger's formulation of being as at once a presence and a concealment, or deferral and exclusion, and to those Greek conceptions of revelation as a play between presence and absence, Agamben is content to conclude that 'only because presence is divided and unglued is something like "signifying" possible; and only because there is at the origin not plenitude but deferral . . . is there the need to philosophize'.¹⁰ This summation in turn leads Agamben straight towards understanding the fracture of presence as the origin of signification itself. And this realization in turn allows him to state that 'metaphor, as the paradigm of signifying by improper terms . . . becomes thus the principle of a universal dissociation of each thing from its own form, of every signifier from its own signified'.¹¹ Parting signifier from signified is conceived as a liberation of the thing itself from its signification, that is, from its indebtedness to the representations that have been placed on it. It is also, however, what Agamben will elsewhere define as the state of 'original sin' that categorizes and divides humanity.¹² The emancipatory power of metaphor is, in the end, unleashed and exposed as being—at one and the same time—a paradoxical because ambivalent attempt to resolve the fractured nature of our existence.

This situation would of course also serve to explain why the use of metaphor has not always been openly received on the part of theology. If explored through the history of theology, God, as the master signifier par excellence, becomes the supreme emblematiser, rendering creation as a series of mysterious symbols, some elusive combination of those subjects and objects that are thereby signified through God's sheer determination to make it so. And this is a fact which specific eras of theology have certainly embraced. By subsequently exploring Christian iconography in a medieval context, Agamben concedes that, as Peter Lombard once put it, metaphor henceforth reigned in theological thought as a 'region of unlikeness'.¹³ It is in this sense the *regnum peccati* ('kingdom of sin') come

into our world.¹⁴ It is also no wonder then that the Catholic Church even today balks at the notion that metaphor might rein in the realm of scripturally generated social, cultural (e.g., gendered) ontological significations, threatening what would otherwise appear as the sovereignty of God in rendering such divisions.¹⁵ Despite this reticence, however, Agamben uncovers within this same tradition another angle from which to perceive the fundamental problematic: if God, as creator of the world of symbols, was to use metaphorical devices in the act of signification, then perhaps the use of metaphor contained an alternate potential for liberation and redemption, a fact which seems hard to deny given the prominence of metaphorical usage within a scriptural context. Thus, because God was an emblematiser engaging in the creative use of metaphor, Agamben can see how 'according to the implicit wisdom of the emblematic project, this displacement is also a token of redemption, this unlikeness a superior likeness', metaphor's perceivable, liberating potential.¹⁶

Hence, there arises the perceived problematic nature of the liberating potential behind the dissociation of signifier from the thing signified – the feared loss of cultural intelligibility contrasted with the potential for justice to be enacted. This is perhaps somewhat akin to a recurring motif found more prominently in the deconstructivist school of thought, another philosophical movement that first arose out of these structuralist and poststructuralist considerations of signification.¹⁷ One need only think casually of how this form of deconstructivism has been applied to gender studies, for example, in order to grasp some of the concrete consequences of what this theory implies, as well as, no doubt, the theological hesitation to admit such a liberating potential harboured within the same location as sin's alleged entrance into the world.¹⁸ This dissociation raises significant cultural, political, and theological questions for our age; and, from the status of refugees to newly formed culturally hybrid identities, this problematic certainly appears as globally significant today.¹⁹

Here Agamben presses up against the limits of structuralist thought, at the point where, in his eyes, it most directly illustrates its nearly hidden theological dimensions. Yet it is only through his subsequent evolution to a more established political theory that he is able to discern a clearer difference between his views and those embedded deeply within the history of theology. This is something that becomes visible, for example, when he takes up the distinction between the exclusion and the example, a distinction central to his *Homo Sacer* project on the whole.²⁰ In short, and as it functions within this context, signification takes place through the implementation of exclusions. Something is signified as belonging to a certain set of symbolic relations and not to any other. The entire realm of the political is thereby shown to exist on this most fundamental logic of exclusions and the forced exposure of a 'bare life' revealed at the core of our humanity.²¹ In contrast, and here using one of Agamben's major themes in his work, 'forms of life' beyond the violent

hold of signification are given through the use of singular examples.²² The example, as that which is absolutely singular and thus can only be presented and not represented through an originary act of exclusion, therefore works beyond the logic of sovereignty, outside of its grasp. A sense of exemplarity is of course also present in theology, as is a form of sovereign power that functions through exclusionary measures and thus runs counter to it.²³ As his work on politics has amply demonstrated time and again, the relationship of the sovereign ruler to the obverse figure of the *homo sacer* is dependent on a logic of exclusion, one that plays upon the fracture of our being and accordingly founds the realm of representations, whereas ‘forms of life’ move on the margins of society, championing other forms of life lived as exemplary beings in homage to no particular representation, rather presenting themselves as the singularities that they are.

ONTOTHEOLOGY AND ITS ANTHROPOLOGICAL MACHINERY

The role of signification in our world ultimately unfolds in Agamben’s work within the sphere of politics, for it is the ‘division of life’ that takes place through signification that the anthropological machinery governing our world’s representations ceaselessly enacts. It is in essence this ceaseless need to rearticulate the boundaries between human and animal or between human and divine—these boundaries whose real existence we have great difficulty establishing—that are hereby exposed as the goal of the anthropological machinery that institutes what we have come to call ‘humanity’. These are essentially the boundaries that are dependent on humankind’s ability to signify its own image within a more originary zone of indifference, as Agamben will put it. It is precisely this zone of indifference, what he will elsewhere call a ‘zone of indistinguishability’ or a place of ‘pure potentiality’, that the anthropological machine engages in a ceaseless ‘articulation between human and animal, man and non-man, speaking being and living being’.²⁴ Humankind establishes (‘signifies’) itself as sovereign within (‘over’) the animal kingdom through the exclusion of animals, indeed even of its own animality within itself, as it alone can draw a distinction of some sort between the human and the animal. This is done of course despite the reality that no substantial or quantifiable distinction can really be established as such. It was in fact this very lack of identifiability which led taxonomists such as Carl Linnaeus to attempt a categorization of humans as the animal which has the capacity to recognize itself, and therefore a human is ‘the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human’.²⁵ There is, as one can observe, little of a specific ontological determination within this definition. It must rely on a metaphysical, (onto)theological legitimization of its sovereignty, such as the kind once dispensed by kings or by God but

which has now seemingly gone underground into the biopolitical disciplines of our day.²⁶

Despite these attempts to grant our most culturally normative divisions a theological imprimatur, however, what becomes evident for Agamben is that a deep ontological rift is in fact opened up through this investigation into the boundary between animal and human, a rift which likewise threatens to engulf the entirety of the Western rational and onto-theological project. As he summarizes the nature of the problematic:

It is as if determining the border between human and animal were not just one question among many discussed by philosophers and theologians, scientists and politicians, but rather a fundamental metaphysico-political operation in which alone something like 'man' can be decided upon and produced. If animal life and human life could be superimposed perfectly, then neither man nor animal—and, perhaps, not even the divine—would any longer be thinkable.²⁷

This is an attempt to reveal an ontotheology functioning in its purest form (as the divisions enacted within our cultural worlds) and is perhaps the reason Agamben seems to be dealing with nothing but theology at all points throughout his work, though he also seems to be dispensing with theology or the role of the divine in our world to be sure. It is theology, however, which has historically been the most interested in pursuing these rigid demarcations between humanity and its animality and especially between humanity and any sense of divinity. Theology, or rather, ontotheology, has been ceaselessly engaged in the invention of *Homo sapiens*, those beings which are 'neither a clearly defined species nor a substance'.²⁸

Henceforth, and as we will see unfold in the later volumes of the *Homo Sacer* series, it would seem to be theology that concerns Agamben nearly above all else.

Never drifting too far from a heavily traversed theological vocabulary, Agamben will subsequently—and within the same context as his remarks on the animal-human divide in his work *The Open*—seek an ending to this machinery's production of humanity, an ending which Heidegger himself foresaw, we are told, and which Agamben advances to its next logical conclusion. It is through the presence of messianic forces working within history that this task can be accomplished, according to Agamben, because as we have already seen, the messianic stands outside of the normal progressive understanding of historical time.²⁹ This is so because as he will elsewhere claim, the messianic is an entrance into that 'zone of indifference' where the human-animal and human-divine divisions are created. Yet it is also an entrance that reveals the true nature of such a zone as the content-less, unpronounceable potentiality that exists within all created things which no vocation can ever exhaust.³⁰ The messianic disruption (or deactivation) of the anthropological ma-

chinery is accomplished through a return (or 'regression') to the blank slate upon which so many of our significations have been carved.³¹ It is what he will elsewhere call a prelinguistic state of our infancy, the real 'revelation' that awaits us if we are willing to accept it.³²

For this reason, he is able to take up the 'messianic vocation' elsewhere as 'a movement of immanence, or a blurring of the line between immanence and transcendence, or even, if one prefers, a zone of absolute indiscernability between this world and the future world'.³³ Not a prophetic task, then, oriented towards some future goal but rather an apostolic reenvisioning of the present time in which we all remain after the Messiah's coming: the 'time that remains'. The messianic likewise issues in a 'generic potentiality', a 'being-without-content' as such, which more accurately presents created things by not identifying or representing them—that is, by not pursuing an anthropology in any sense beyond our biology.³⁴ The messianic vocation is therefore also the 'revocation of every vocation' and a dwelling in the indiscernability of our nature which is ultimately all we have.³⁵ It is also, however, the only viable ethical option present to humanity, if humanity is yet willing to embrace this coming political task. As he will put it:

To render inoperative the machine that governs our conception of man will therefore mean no longer to seek new—more effective or more authentic—articulations, but rather to show the central emptiness, the hiatus that—within man—separates man and animal, and to risk ourselves in this emptiness: the suspension of the suspension, Shabbat of both animal and man.³⁶

Like the messianic act of dividing division itself—something which Agamben discerns at work in the writings of both Saint Paul and Agamben's own stated forerunner, Walter Benjamin—this zone of indistinction must not be foreclosed upon in lieu of perpetuating violent representations but must be kept open; it must be allowed to expose itself for what it is.³⁷ This exposure is where the only true ethical task may be carried out as a ceasing of our indebtedness to the 'anthropological machine' and its ontotheological justifications. If there is an ontology at work here, it is to be found in this movement of openness, a certain regression beyond representation or a poverty of being that (in Heideggerian terms) shares with the animal's poverty of world.³⁸ It is an ontology severed from its theological mystifications—it is a 'bare life' shorn of its sovereign master (or master signifier). In this manner, it is also a willingness to enter into a poverty of being that the messianic points towards, what has elsewhere been suggested as resembling a certain 'Franciscan' ontology in his work.³⁹

His task is to bring a halt to the machinery that would otherwise dictate the exact coordinates of what makes us human beings, a machinery that has only become more insidious in our contemporary age where

the power of sovereignty has gone 'underground' into new biopolitical forms that dictate again and again how our bodies are to be shaped and culturally represented.⁴⁰ What I would like now to demonstrate is that this general scheme of messianic disruption in Agamben's work has a direct relevance not only for providing testimony to these excluded political figures of 'bare life' in our world today, but that it also has relevance for a vast reenvisioning of the nature of the human body as a sexual body, a point which has remained somewhat muted in Agambenian scholarship thus far.⁴¹ If anything, the sexual bodies that we inhabit, that we love and care for in their finite creatureliness, are not understandable apart from their theological determinations, which need not, in the end, be ontotheological in any sense, though what this looks like or should appear to us as such remains unclear. As the Catholic Church has somewhat recently put it, for example: 'The human dimension of sexuality is inseparable from the theological dimension.'⁴² And I do not think that Agamben would disagree with the truth of this statement in the least. His only possible point of contention would seem to lie in what one considers theology to be, perhaps as an ontotheology then but perhaps also as a theology beyond or without theology, which Agamben seems to be working towards.

The problem now seemingly lies in understanding how we have wedded our 'bare life' to a sense of sovereignty that need not accompany it any longer. Rather than proceed from this zone of pure potentiality to a realm of actuality made possible through a sovereign decision (God as the *Actus Purus* of Thomas Aquinas, for example), Agamben wishes to collapse actuality upon potentiality, a movement of regression that affects our understanding of our bodies no less than our understanding of our politics. If there are seeds in his thought for overcoming contemporary forms of the biopolitical, they lie within a more thorough contemplation of the place of the theological in our world, a fact that yields insight into why Agamben's work has steadily drifted towards theology.⁴³

THE 'GLORIOUS BODY'

The problem of the glorious body, Agamben tells us, is the 'supreme subject' of theology, classified as such because it deals with the ultimate ends of humanity.⁴⁴ This statement, made in an essay propounding the history of the 'glorious body' throughout the various ages of theological speculation, is a good indicator of how Agamben's focus on the biopolitical reality of our world today—a fact which reveals the centrality of the plight of the *homo sacer*—is not something altogether new to our age but rather is itself rooted in the oldest and deepest questions concerning our understanding of what constitutes the human being. That is, his insight is something revealed only through a contemplation of what constitutes the

human body. Accordingly, Agamben undertakes a genealogical inquiry that ranges from Origen to Aquinas, wherein he analyses the various theological descriptions given for the form in which the glorious, resurrected body will appear. Historically envisioned as the form in which the body will be raised from the dead on the 'last day', the glorious ethereal body becomes an idealized version of the bodies we inhabit daily, a body that is said to be in complete control of the desires which otherwise run rampant over our bodies throughout our lifetime. It is in this sense a vision of the body sovereign.

What Agamben is seeking to underline through such a study is the fact that the glorious body actually serves as a paradigm for thinking through the possible figures and uses of the human body here and now, in whatever historical context they are situated and not just as a fantasy of our resurrected being.⁴⁵ This is not to dismiss any historical-theological ruminations on the glorious body as pure speculation, or as superfluous to the living earthly body. The glorious body is 'ostensive' to be sure, a functionless spectacle as it were; yet it is also the means by which we are given over to contemplate the pure idleness which resides within our being, an idleness that mirrors our potentiality and has certainly crossed many minds reflecting upon a possible eternity of inactivity. As Agamben will phrase it, 'The glorious body is an ostensive body, wherein its functions are not executed but displayed and it is in this sense that glory is in solidarity with idleness.'⁴⁶ The physiological functions of the body are not needed by this resurrected body; rather, they are only on display, as it were, removed from any economy of the body itself. This maintenance of an idleness (*désœuvrement*), which the glorious body preserves in its eternal being, is something it shares, according to Agamben, with pornography, a genre of pure spectacle which likewise dismisses the functionality of the sexual organs, preserving their ostensive function only. Like the first-time viewer of pornographic images taken in by the pure display of sexuality removed from any economic reality before the eyes, Agamben perceives how 'there is perhaps nothing more enigmatic than a glorious penis, nothing more spectral than a doxological vagina'.⁴⁷

The reference to pornography in this context may lead one to believe that Agamben is mocking the theological tradition—claiming, as so many do, that it is secretly obsessed with sex. Yet despite the linkage between pornography and the glorious body, which might otherwise seem to be nothing more than a critique of a worrisome theological imagination, Agamben is rather attempting to demonstrate a profound truth of our humanity often lost in contemplation of its own potentiality: the present idleness within each of us that threatens to bring down a torrent of boredom, the negation of our active selves or our busy realities, an idleness, in short, that we fear but have little true understanding of. As many mystical or contemplative traditions teach us still, however, there is something more to what appears to be nothing but idleness.

In contrast to a fear of eternal idleness, then, Agamben discerns how it is a state that is not simply a 'letting be' of a thing but rather the only manner in which to comprehend a possible new use of it.⁴⁸ Idleness is a suspension of the actual to be sure, a Shabbat among the other days of the week. But it is also the pure potentiality of a body which remains forever within this state and which does not pass over into a state of actual being ('actuality'), making itself sovereign in some sense. What this reading signals for Agamben is not the absolute separation between these two bodies, the economic and the glorious, the functional and the idle, the actual and the potential; rather, his reading points towards the underlying potentiality of the human body itself, a potential which is not displaced in any sense by projections of a glorious body in the afterlife. As he will conclude the essay, 'The glorious body is not another body, more agile and more beautiful, more luminous and more spiritual: it is the same body, within the act where an idleness freed from enchantment and open to a new common usage is possible.'⁴⁹

The idleness of our genitals in the glorious body does not mean that it is ridiculous to contemplate the possible existence of a glorious body, just as it is not ridiculous to conceive that pornography thrives as an attempt to access this space of potentiality despite its failure to unite it fully with our daily lives. Rather, we must learn to see how the glorious body, in whatever form it is presupposed, is not to be severed from the earthly, creaturely body that we inhabit daily. This is of course also the limit of the pornographic fantasy, the moment when reality must intrude like a crying infant. The two bodies, the glorious and the earthly, are one and the same. They are two facets of the same body, which we have more than a little trouble attempting to define. The relationship of the glorious body to the human body is, therefore, and in a very direct sense, an outworking of the philosophical problematic that exists in the transition from potentiality to actuality, the foundational problematic of philosophical reasoning for Agamben.⁵⁰ Their relationship, in fact, comes to mirror the present divisions between animal and human, or human and divine, for that matter. Theology is, moreover, the name given to the historical task of aligning potentiality with actuality, that is, of attempting to bridge the gap between them and hence of signifying reality itself despite its possible political dangers, as we have seen. Conceiving a philosophy of religion or theology itself, then, that would address such an understanding therefore becomes essential to comprehending the 'human' situation as a whole and would likewise seem to explain Agamben's frequent forays into the theological.

Just as the relationship between nudity and clothing coincides with the central theological dialectic between nature and grace, a relationship which Agamben elsewhere explores, so too does the relationship between the earthly body and the glorious body dictate a fundamental outworking of the essence of theology, in this case, its ability to dictate

the boundaries of the human being in the first place, the very thing that Agamben is here calling into question.⁵¹ Hence, just as Agamben can state that 'nudity, in our culture, is inseparable from a theological signature', so too is the history of speculation on the glorious body inseparable from our contemplation today of the earthly bodies that we inhabit.⁵² Our failure to understand the complexity of pornography in our world (its 'secret alliance' with the glorious body) is but one example of our failure to grasp the fundamental connections at stake in our depictions of ourselves. And so, despite our attempts to 'secularize' any formulation of the body in this age, to strip it from its religious (and gendered) significations, its theological signature remains, often writ large across our cultural landscape. In this sense once again, we can state that there is no culturally recognized sexuality without its accompanying theological justification, whether an ontotheological one in need of jettisoning or one stemming from a theology about to be profaned, a 'theology without theology', as it were.⁵³

CONCLUSION

As in the beginning, it would be appropriate in conclusion to stress the apostolic nature of these remarks. The dwelling of the body in a state of pure potentiality is a movement towards what Agamben early on called our 'infancy', a term which he takes up on multiple occasions to define this location of our being in a glorious state of pure potentiality.⁵⁴ It is a regression to an innocence prior to the signification of our bodies, a presentation of the self as a seemingly 'glorious' body beyond any social, cultural, or theological representations we might otherwise later attach to it.⁵⁵ What Agamben's work points us towards is an exposure of being, a form of nudity that is without presupposition or ontotheological preinscription, a shedding of all ontotheological pretence and hence an absolute profanation of our being beyond any religious signification.⁵⁶ In this manner, a profound connection, heretofore dormant, that lies between Agamben's work and feminist/gender studies is revealed as an accessible and radical critique of gendered and sexual significations. It is also, however, an exposure of our being which may actually produce a new way of seeing 'the divine' through the body, if Agamben's hints in this direction are here read correctly, thus accessing new forms of sacrality through the stripping of the body beyond its culturally given representations.⁵⁷ There is no doubt though that such a 'divinity' would be purely immanent, perhaps even undistinguishable from the world in which we find it. A form of immanent divinity, then, in contrast to an ontotheological transcendence, is perhaps possible if we are to comprehend more fully the nature of our bodily being.⁵⁸

If Agamben does not provide a detailed history of sexuality as Foucault once tried to do, this is not because our bodies are unimportant to him. In this sense, there is an effort here to see the body presented beyond its ostensive functions, which are either ontotheological (to demonstrate the glory of God as master signifier) or pornographic (to demonstrate the glory of humans as signifiers), with both yet descending from the same attempt to signify or circumscribe a reality that is seemingly forever doomed to be fractured from within. It is to behold bodies with penises and vaginas, or both or neither or 'whatever being' we might actually encounter—beings not preinscribed with a fixed list of stated characteristics, thus given over neither to the dictates of 'common sense' nor to stereotypical pronouncements on our 'gendered being'.⁵⁹ What we have before us is a presentation of the body that leads to a presentation (not representation) of the divine within us, one seemingly beyond theological description, an opening of theology to a new vocation which is the revocation of all of its former vocations, the messianic task par excellence. In many ways, if I can dare to suggest it, this is nothing if not the essence of an exposed, naked Christ on the cross, marred beyond recognition or representation, misunderstood, and seemingly abandoned to this world without any sense of sacrality attached to it. And yet within this most emphatic gesture of 'bare life' there is a disclosing of the fundamental truth of how we might begin to live beyond the marks of an anthropological machinery made upon our bodies, something which Agamben's profaned theology (his 'atheology', even) seems keen to indicate.

NOTES

1. See Agamben's remarks on the prophet and the apostle in relation to *chronos* and *kairos* in TR, 61.

2. Ward Blanton, 'Disturbing Politics: Neo-Paulinism and the Scrambling of Religious and Secular Identities', *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 46, no. 1 (2007): 3–13.

3. See the engagement with Agamben's work developed in Durantaye. Durantaye's examination concludes by pointing towards the messianic nature of Agamben's work, something which has only recently been demonstrated as essential to understanding his work on the whole. In this sense, Agamben's theological interest is only just beginning to be considered as a topic of study.

4. See Jeffrey S. Librett, 'From the Sacrifice of the Letter to the Voice of Testimony: Giorgio Agamben's Fulfillment of Metaphysics', *Diacritics* 37, nos. 2–3 (2007): 11–33, and Fabio Presutti, 'Manlio Sgalambro, Giorgio Agamben: On Metaphysical Suspension of Language and the Destiny of its Inorganic Re-absorption', *Italica* 85, nos. 2–3 (2008): 243–72.

5. Cf. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1, *La Volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976). At present, any established connections between Agamben's work and the field of gender studies are minimal. Those few attempts to connect sexuality with his work, however, are somewhat removed from the theological, except as one finds in the work of Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). See also Ewa Płonowska Ziarek, 'Bare Life on Strike: Notes on the Biopolitics of Race and Gender', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 1 (2008): 89–105, and Emma R. Jones, 'In the Presence of the Living Cockroach: The

Moment of Aliveness and the Gendered Body in Agamben and Lispector', *PhaenEx* 2, no. 2 (2007): 24–41.

6. IH, 15–17.

7. S, 129.

8. S, 136.

9. S, 136.

10. S, 136.

11. S, 142.

12. IH, 37.

13. S, 143, and Peter Lombard, cited in Robert Javelet, *Image et ressemblance au XII^e siècle: Saint Anselme à Alain de Lille* (Strasbourg: Université de Strasbourg, 1967), 240.

14. S, 143.

15. See the 31 May 2004 Catholic Church document 'Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World', Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF); especially §9, where the emphasis on biblical images as 'much more than metaphors' is placed.

16. S, 143–48. This is a fracture of presence that we are told also explains how Freud could manage to see the 'uncanny' (*Unheimlich*) in the 'estranged familiar' (*Heimlich*) (144). Indeed, this dimension in our linguistic existence is what conditions metaphor to become 'in the realm of language what the fetish is in the realm of things' (148, deemphasized from the original).

17. One sees this movement towards justice in the later work of Jacques Derrida, for example, *The Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994). Agamben's relationship to Derrida, however, is quite problematic in its own right and has spawned a great deal of scholarship in order to ascertain precisely where their differences, which Agamben says are great, lie (cf. Simon Morgan Wortham, 'Law of Friendship: Agamben and Derrida', *New Formations* 62 [2007]: 89–105; David E. Johnson, 'As If the Time Were Now: Deconstructing Agamben', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 2 [2007]: 265–90; Catherine Mills, 'Playing with Law: Agamben and Derrida on Postjuridical Justice', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 1 [2008]: 17–35).

18. The work of Judith Butler, for example, seems to run counter to the Catholic Church's stance on gender. See Butler, *Gender Trouble* (London: Routledge, 1999); also CDF, 'Letter', §1f.

19. Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State?* (Oxford, UK: Seagull Books, 2007).

20. HS, 7.

21. S. Agamben's theory on the state of exception is itself indebted to the insights of German political theorist Schmitt given in his *Political Theology*.

22. HS, 7; SA, 9–32; and Ulrich Raulff, 'An Interview with Giorgio Agamben', *German Law Journal* 5, no. 5 (2004), 609–13.

23. SA, 22. Agamben in fact cites the Benedictine order and their notion of exemplarity in following Christ's teachings as a model for depicting this 'form of life' beyond the sovereign/*homo sacer* relationship.

24. O, 37–38.

25. O, 26; deemphasized from the original.

26. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

27. O, 21.

28. O, 26.

29. Colby Dickinson, 'Canon as an Act of Creation: Giorgio Agamben and the Extended Logic of the Messianic', *Bijdragen: International Journal in Philosophy and Theology* 71, no. 2 (2010): 132–58, and Catherine Mills, 'Agamben's Messianic Politics: Biopolitics, Abandonment and Happy Life', *Contretemps* 5 (2004): 42–62.

30. TR, 25–29.

31. IP, 31–34; Anthony Downey, 'Zones of Indistinction: Giorgio Agamben's 'Bare Life' and the Politics of Aesthetics', *Third Text* 23, no. 2 (2009): 109–25.

32. See 'The Idea of Language', in P, 39–47.

33. TR, 25.

34. TR, 26.

35. TR, 23, and P, 239. This messianic vigour, then, seems to condense what Agamben has defined elsewhere as a Deleuzian-Spinozistic reduction of philosophical investigation to a plane of 'absolute immanence'. As he considers it, 'Theōria and the contemplative life, which the philosophical tradition has identified as its highest goals for centuries, will have to be dislocated onto a new plane of immanence. It is not certain that, in the process, political philosophy and epistemology will be able to maintain their present physiognomy and difference with respect to ontology. Today, blessed life lies on the same terrain as the biological body of the West.' See also how Agamben's reading merges with that of Deleuze.

36. O, 92.

37. TR, 49.

38. O, 49–56.

39. As Chiesa has put it, 'The heroic *homo sacer* of politics is silently turned into the *homo messianicus* of Christian religion. Furthermore, according to this interpretation, Agamben's notion of "weak" [*faible*] being, a being characterized by a "presentative poverty," could qualify his ontology as "Franciscan"'. See Lorenzo Chiesa, 'Giorgio Agamben's Franciscan Ontology', *The Italian Difference: Between Nihilism and Biopolitics*, ed. Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano (Melbourne, Australia: Re.press, 2009), 162; also Alain Badiou, *Logiques des mondes: L'Être et l'événement 2* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 584.

40. Kam Shapiro, *Sovereign Nations, Carnal States* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

41. Compare the central discussion of testimony and witness given in Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz*.

42. 'Letter', §8.

43. See especially KG, SL, and N.

44. 'Le corps glorieux', in *Nudités*, 147. At the time of writing, I was working with the French edition. All translations henceforth given from the French are my own. The corresponding page numbers for the English edition are given second. Cf. 'The Glorious Body', in N, 91.

45. *Nudités*, 148; N, 92.

46. *Nudités*, 159; N, 98.

47. *Nudités*, 160; N, 99.

48. *Nudités*, 161; N, 100.

49. *Nudités*, 166; N, 103.

50. P. On the significance of the relationship between potentiality and theology, see Alberto Bertozzi, 'Thoughts in Potentiality: Provisional Reflections on Agamben's Understanding of Potentiality and Its Relevance for Theology and Politics', *Philosophy Today* 51, no. 3 (2007): 290–302.

51. *Nudités*, 102; N, 60.

52. *Nudités*, 97; N, 57.

53. The overlap here between what Agamben is seeking to develop and the Derri-dean notion of a 'religion without religion' in the work of John Caputo, for example, is necessarily identified.

54. IH.

55. SA, 81–111.

56. PR.

57. See the manner in which Agamben speaks of the 'exposure' of our beings as an ethical task in ME.

58. On Agamben's relation to immanence, see the enigmatic references to God as the world in the appendix to CC, 89–105.

59. CC, 48. Agamben's claims in this regard are clearly approximate in some sense with those of Butler, for example, whose work on the precariousness of our existence in relation to the vulnerability of our gendered identities has been at the forefront of the myriad attempts to confront the 'anthropological machinery' of our age. Cf. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004); Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Routledge, 2006). The proximity that Butler and Agamben share in this regard remains an unexplored but perhaps very fruitful encounter between these sometimes conversational partners.

ELEVEN

The Theology of Neoliberalism

Adam Kotsko

Not entirely unlike Colby's chapter on gender, this chapter attempts to show how something apparently absent in Giorgio Agamben's work—in this case, the concrete realities of contemporary economic life—is actually a helpful point of reference for understanding the direction his project is headed. It began as a talk for the Paul of Tarsus Interdisciplinary Working Group at Northwestern University, where I was invited to discuss my recently completed translations of *The Highest Poverty* and *Opus Dei*. I took the opportunity to try to situate Agamben's project in terms of the contemporary neoliberal economic order (as I understand it) and thereby to clarify his often enigmatic relationship to Marxism. The present version attempts to preserve the more casual style of the original lecture, but it has been considerably expanded. In its current form, it represents my most thoroughgoing attempt to bring all extant volumes of the *Homo Sacer* series into some kind of consistent synthesis, a task that is greatly facilitated precisely by clarifying its contemporary stakes. If Colby is more focused on hermeneutics and I tend towards exegesis, this chapter may be the point at which the two tasks enter into a 'zone of indistinction'.

In 2007, just over a year before the global financial crisis, Agamben published *The Kingdom and the Glory*, a sprawling investigation of the ways that Christian theologians took up and developed the Greek concept of *oikonomia* (the root of our 'economy') in their attempts to understand the nature of Christian community, the relationships among the Trinitarian persons, and God's providential governance of the world. Like the works that made Agamben world-famous in the late 1990s and early 2000s, *The*

Kingdom and the Glory was simultaneously very timely and very untimely, addressing the most urgent concerns of the day via the indirect route of painstaking philological work on ancient texts. Here, however, the approach was more indirect than usual. Even if the relevance to contemporary life of Greek and Roman models could be called into question, there was something basically intuitive about Agamben's investigation of the structure of sovereignty by way of legal and political concepts in *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception*. By contrast, the implicit claim of *The Kingdom and the Glory* that an engagement with economics requires a shift into theological terrain may seem very puzzling.

Agamben has subsequently doubled down on this claim in a closely related pair of works, *Opus Dei* and *The Highest Poverty*. A detailed study of Christian concepts of liturgy and their unexpected modern relevance, *Opus Dei* provides the groundwork for *The Highest Poverty's* investigation of the ways in which monastic movements were able to create fleeting and fragile spaces for a form of life that exists apart from the structures of law and liturgy. In the enigmatic final pages of *The Highest Poverty*, he elaborates the eschatological vision of Peter Olivi, suggesting that the decisive confrontation with the contemporary order may well need to take place within the theological space that Olivi maps out.

In this chapter, I will argue that we can most productively make use of Agamben's shift towards the theological if we understand the contemporary economic and political order to which he is responding not simply as the modern state or the capitalist economy but specifically as the inextricable intertwining of the two that is known as neoliberalism. My goal here is not primarily to demonstrate on a philological level that Agamben understands the contemporary order primarily in those terms—although the fact that Michel Foucault analyses the origins of neoliberalism at length in *The Birth of Biopolitics* does make it plausible that he does in fact have the concept explicitly in mind—but rather to use neoliberalism and Agamben's recent theological works as a starting point for conceptualizing our situation and for thinking about how we might best resist and transform it.¹ Carrying out this task will require us both to rethink connections between apparently disparate contemporary phenomena and to fill in gaps within Agamben's work.

I

I will begin by describing neoliberalism as I understand it. In this discussion, I will not rely on any particular theorist of neoliberalism but will instead attempt to put forth a broad synthesis that incorporates the main features of neoliberalism as presented in Foucault's *The Birth of Biopolitics*, supplemented by ideas drawn from more contemporary works such as David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*.²

The underlying claims of neoliberalism and its political project are more or less straightforward and familiar. It starts from the conviction that the only true source of political legitimacy is the economic realm. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault describes the way that this particular claim grew out of the experience of certain theorists under Nazism, which they construed as the ultimate demonstration that unfettered state power could not be trusted. For these thinkers, only a state that limited itself to fostering and managing the market economy could simultaneously maintain legitimacy and avoid the worst excesses of totalitarianism.

What makes neoliberalism new, however, is that it does not embrace the doctrine of *laissez-faire*. In some respects, the neoliberal theorists were actually much more realistic than typical American free-market ideologues in that they recognized that markets and market competition do not happen naturally—they are human constructs. Yet that does not mean that they are simply one option among many. For neoliberal theorists, the market is the setting that most closely approximates the ideal of unfettered human free choice. Hence they take a further step and claim that the duty of the state is precisely to construct markets wherever possible. This results in a political project of saturating all of human life with the logic of market competition.

Under neoliberalism, government services are, wherever possible, privatized and replaced by artificially constructed competitive markets. Similarly, anything that tends to make labour markets less competitive (regulations surrounding job security, labour unions, etc.) must be eliminated. This is not because privatized government services or precarious workers necessarily produce better results or greater efficiency—in many cases, it seems to be clear that they do not—but because markets are the realm of human freedom and hence desirable in themselves.

A clear example of neoliberal governance can be found in the project of 'education reform' in the United States. This program seamlessly combines the attempt to destroy teachers unions (hence increasing 'accountability' and allowing for greater competition among teachers) and to create a market for education through the proliferation of private 'charter schools'. The fact that charter schools have access to public funding may seem like a contradiction of the ideal of the 'free market', but it is completely consistent with the neoliberal belief that the state's role is to create and cultivate markets wherever possible. Other examples include Barack Obama's health care reform law, which was not an attempt to create universal coverage so much as an effort to make the market for individual health insurance function more like other markets, or the various 'cap and trade' proposals, which seek to minimize carbon emissions and other forms of pollution by creating a competitive market for the right to pollute.

Two trends that have proven helpful to the neoliberal program are globalization and financialization. Globalization, which allows multinational corporations to 'shop around' for favourable regulations and labour practices, subjects sovereign nations to competition among themselves. Financialization plays into both domestic and international neoliberal policy. As public services are cut and taxation is viewed as increasingly illegitimate, individuals and governments alike become more and more reliant on debt financing—which in turn increases the pressure to remain 'competitive' in the labour market in order to remain current in one's obligations and to maintain access to credit.

The supposed reign of unfettered freedom, then, actually requires that individuals and states alike be subjected to the unrelenting discipline of the market. The reason for this constant competition, this discipline without end, is not that it produces better results by some external measure but that it instantiates the market ideal. Unlike in previous eras, market competition does not legitimate itself by claiming that it delivers higher quality of life or greater efficiency—indeed, there is a case to be made that neoliberal governance most often actively undermines both. Instead, the market becomes a purely tautologous master signifier. We must have market competition because we must have market competition. Even the reference to 'freedom' does not break the tautology, because 'freedom' is defined as the kind of freedom the market offers.

Nowhere was this tautology clearer than in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. Even though the financial system that makes neoliberal policy possible had delivered the worst possible results, essentially every government rushed to save it, most often by purchasing equity in the failing companies and then maintaining a hands-off stance towards their day-to-day operations despite their new ownership role. In many countries, these bailouts vastly increased the public debt, resulting in an intensification of market discipline, most notably in small Eurozone countries such as Greece. In other words, even the worst failure of the neoliberal system only seemed to increase its hold.

There is a sense in which any master-signifier logic can be construed as 'theological', such that one might say that the market is effectively our God under neoliberalism. Yet even if the critique of religion is the beginning of all critique, such an easy homology does not get us very far. In fact, in this particular case, the homology may even be misleading, insofar as it occludes what is new and strange in the neoliberal paradigm. As Agamben shows in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, the role of *oikonomia* in Greek, Roman, and Christian thought was always that of intermediating between some kind of transcendent ideal or master signifier (the father of the household, the emperor, the God of philosophical monotheism or of Christianity) and the immanent realm of concrete particulars over which the transcendent is to rule. Similarly, in Foucault's account of the development of political economy in his various lecture courses at the Collège

de France, the goal of economic sciences is to enhance the wealth and glory of the nation.³

In both cases, then, there is something perverse about transforming the economy, which seems to be inherently intermediary in nature, into an end in itself. In his recent works, Agamben gives every indication of viewing this short-circuit as illegitimate and destructive. In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, during a discussion of what happens after the Last Judgment has come and the economy of salvation has run its course, he points out that there is one place where the economy persists—namely, hell, where the demons eternally punish the damned. Here he makes an uncharacteristically direct contemporary reference, pointing out that ‘this means that, from the perspective of Christian theology, the idea of eternal government (which is the paradigm of modern politics) is truly infernal’.⁴ In *The Sacrament of Language* as well, he diagnoses the contemporary epoch as one ‘when all the European languages seem condemned to swear in vain and when politics can only assume the form of an *oikonomia*, that is, of a governance of empty speech over bare life’, equating the unrestrained reign of economy with nihilism and meaninglessness.⁵ Finally, in *The Church and the Kingdom*, he repeats his equation of contemporary politics with the Christian conception of hell and claims that in this situation, there is effectively no legitimate authority left on earth.⁶

In both of the latter cases, Agamben draws special attention to the way that the law has been debased, hollowed out in its legitimacy through the dominance of the economy and descending into little more than meaningless violence in the permanent state of exception. Now it is certainly possible to see a decisive break between Agamben’s earlier works focused on sovereignty and the more economically oriented works that followed so that this juxtaposition could appear to be a bald assertion of a connection between the two. Yet already in *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception*, the grounds for connecting the logic of sovereignty with the logic of economy were being prepared—which is not surprising if we understand that Agamben’s project is not to vindicate the paradigm of sovereignty over against that of biopolitics but to show that the two are fundamentally identical structures. In *Homo Sacer*, we learn of the roots of Roman theories of sovereignty in the household, and *State of Exception* continues that analysis by pointing out that the Roman Empire was in an important sense one huge household with the emperor as its father. On a more contemporary level, *State of Exception* draws attention to the striking frequency with which emergency powers are used to respond to economic crises.

Along with its implications for the continuity of his project, we can also see that Agamben’s consistent juxtaposition of the reign of the economy and the permanent state of exception corresponds to a curious fact about neoliberalism: namely, that despite the early neoliberal thinkers’ goal of subduing the state, neoliberal governance has historically been

accompanied by increasingly repressive state violence. In other words, the deregulatory state and the national security state nearly always go hand in hand. To understand why this might be the case, it will be necessary to flesh out the connections between *The Kingdom and the Glory* and Agamben's earlier work on sovereignty.

II

Agamben begins *The Kingdom and the Glory* with a juxtaposition of two paradigms, political theology and theological economy. The former is identified with Carl Schmitt's theory of sovereignty, which Agamben uses as the starting point for his analysis in *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception*. The latter may initially appear to be identified with Schmitt's intellectual opponent Erik Peterson, but it eventually becomes clear that Peterson's abstract negation of Schmitt's thesis does not fundamentally escape from it. Instead of identifying the paradigm of theological economy with any particular thinker, Agamben chooses to allow it to emerge from an elucidation of the gaps and strategic omissions within Peterson's attack on Schmitt.

As a result of this convoluted argumentative strategy, the relationship between the two paradigms is never explicitly clarified. The reader is left with many questions: Are they two separate paradigms, existing alongside one another as discrete political options? Are they both equally fundamental, or does one exist as a subset of the other? Rather than attempt to resolve the apparent conceptual lacuna, as I have repeatedly returned to *The Kingdom and the Glory* over the years, I have come to believe that Agamben's indirect rhetorical approach may in itself be a more or less 'literal' presentation of the relationship between the two paradigms. To put it very schematically, by starting from Schmitt and Peterson's avoidance of theological economy, Agamben is trying to show that political theology is first of all an attempt to exclude or ignore the dynamics of theological economy. At the same time, by consistently showing how the workings of the theological economy tend to produce a purely glorious sovereign who is fundamentally inactive, Agamben portrays theological economy as a principle internal to the political theological, which tends to break it down or hollow it out while nonetheless requiring it to remain in place.

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben claims that sovereign power is founded in an act of separation or exclusion. The fundamental gesture of politics is not, as Schmitt claims, that of distinguishing between friend or enemy but of excluding the *homo sacer* from the polis. At the same time, he presents this gesture of separation as necessarily backfiring, insofar as the *homo sacer* remains related to the legal apparatus—indeed, related in a privileged way to the legal apparatus as such, as a whole. The attempt to separate

out inside and outside fails from the other direction as well, as the sovereign who founds the legal order nonetheless remains outside of its strictures. In later volumes, Agamben elaborates further systems of separation, most notably in his attempt to derive all Western institutions from the experience of the oath in *The Sacrament of Language*.

The most immediately relevant separation for our purposes is that between *auctoritas* and *potestas*, which Agamben discusses at length in *State of Exception*. What is at stake in this distinction is the relationship between an action (*potestas*) and its legal legitimacy (*auctoritas*). Roman law generally keeps these two elements separate. *Auctoritas* 'confer[s] legal validity on the act of a subject who cannot independently bring a legally valid act into being' so that it is 'as if for something to exist in law there must be a relationship between two elements (or two subjects): one endowed with *auctoritas* and one that takes the initiative in the act in the strict sense'.⁷ *Potestas* in this scheme is inherently impersonal and must be personalized through *auctoritas*, and at the same time, *auctoritas* is something that cannot be exercised vicariously but rather 'springs immediately from the personal condition of the *patres*', the fathers.⁸

Under the Roman principate, the emperor absorbed all *auctoritas* into his own person, creating a situation where ultimate *potestas* and *auctoritas* were united, and hence power was applied to life without any mediation or appeal—a situation that Agamben believes was duplicated under the conditions of twentieth-century fascism. From this parallel, Agamben derives a general rule: 'When [*auctoritas* and *potestas*] tend to coincide in a single person, when the state of exception, in which they are bound and blurred together, becomes the rule, then the juridico-political system transforms itself into a killing machine.'⁹ The separation enacted in the sovereign decision on the inside and the outside that produces the *homo sacer* is a terrible thing. The only thing that is worse—and seemingly inevitable, given its inherently unstable and paradoxical nature—is for that separation to collapse.

By contrast, the theological economy works above all through bringing together the seemingly incompatible. As outlined in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, the 'economic' for Agamben indicates a flexible logic that attempts to manage competing, incommensurable demands. The original setting for *oikonomia* was the Greek home, but the word soon found its way into other metaphorical contexts where some kind of coordination of the incommensurable was necessary—for instance, the practice of rhetoric or the administration of a multicultural empire. The challenge in all these settings is to mobilize a range of competing immanent principles in the pursuit of some overall goal that transcends and yet includes them. The successful paterfamilias, for example, must bring together the very different needs of his wife, his children, his slaves, and his animals and crops in order to enrich himself—which is the same thing as enriching the household. Hence this term was a natural fit for the theological problem

that Christianity had set itself, namely that of coordinating between the contingent events of history and God's goal of redeeming the world—which is, as in the household example, at the same time and inseparably about increasing and vindicating his own justice and goodness and about increasing the good of his creation.

Thus the logic of the economy always presupposes or produces some kind of transcendent point of reference—the father, the emperor, or God. Taking up a distinction that had become a major point of contention for Schmitt and Peterson, whose debate provides a kind of scaffolding for the book, Agamben names the economic-immanent aspect of the system Government and the transcendent-glorious aspect Kingdom. Yet the thrust of Agamben's analysis is always directed at how strangely superfluous the transcendent element always turns out to be. If the father's good is simply identical to the good of the household, for instance, why do we need the father? What does the father add?

Just as the political-theological system of separations inexorably collapses into a 'zone of indistinction' between its principles so too does the theological-economic system of articulation and mediation tend to produce an element that appears to be completely separable and dispensable. These two seemingly contrary movements meet precisely in the person of the Roman emperor, who over the centuries became less of an absolute dictator and more of a ceremonial personage, weighed down by increasingly fine-grained liturgical observances codifying every aspect of his everyday practice. At this point, Agamben reiterates the central question of *The Kingdom and the Glory*: 'If power is essentially force and efficacious action, why does it need to receive ritual acclamation and hymns of praise, to wear cumbersome crowns and tiaras, to submit itself to an inaccessible ceremony and an immutable protocol—in a word, why does something that is essentially operativity and *oikonomia* need to become solemnly immobilized in glory?'¹⁰ Such ceremonies cannot be explained on a practical level. For instance, if the goal is to display power, 'the mere exhibition of arms would certainly have been more appropriate for the task'.¹¹

In articulating the immanent and the transcendent, the glorious and the economic, the theological-economic machine is ultimately carrying out an act of separation, alienating the living human being from the inoperativity at its heart. As Agamben says,

Human life is inoperative and without purpose, but precisely this *argia* [lack of work] and this absence of aim make the incomparable operativity of the human species possible. Humanity has dedicated itself to production and labor, because in its essence it is completely devoid of work, because it is the Sabbatical animal par excellence . . . the governmental apparatus functions because it has captured in its empty center the inoperativity of the human essence. This inoperativity is the political substance of the Occident, the glorious nutrient of all power.¹²

Here we are back to the logic of the tautologous master signifier, which bestows meaning on everything while remaining ultimately meaningless (i.e., not referable to any broader context of meaning)—a logic elegantly captured in the proofs of the existence of God that turn God into a solution to the problem of infinite regress. To mobilize human beings, one must hide from them the fact that they have no set purpose (and hence no inherent need to submit to one's demands), but at the same time, one cannot help but reveal, in the last analysis, that one's own demands are in themselves completely purposeless. Power needs glory because it cannot fail to performatively enact its own pointlessness.

To return to the problem of the relationship between Agamben's work on sovereignty and his more recent theologically oriented work, one might say that the juxtaposition of the permanent state of exception and of neoliberalism's paradoxical shift towards economy as an end in itself represents a kind of dead end for the ongoing tension between the separative tendency of political theology and the unifying tendency of economic theology. The collapse of *auctoritas* into sheer *potestas* gives us the national security state, which exercises force for the sake of exercising force (and really does opt for a show of arms over any kind of ceremonial, as protestors increasingly experience), while the elevation of economy to the level of glory renders our everyday activities more and more meaningless. The creative tension between the two paradigms dissolves and the two processes seem to occur in parallel, united only by their shared tendency to extinguish all hope.

III

At this point, it becomes clearer why Agamben's turn towards questions of economy also required such a decisive turn towards theology: under neoliberalism, our economic activity is theological or liturgical in nature. Economic production is not 'about' production but about the ongoing glorification of the economy itself—which includes our own self-glorification or 'self-branding'. Despite many Marxist's strong objections to *The Kingdom and the Glory*,¹³ Agamben's core claim here is deeply Marxist, resonating not only with Marx's account of the metaphysical and theological subtleties of the commodity but with Althusser's (and later Žižek's) use of Christian liturgy as a lens for understanding the concrete performance of ideology.¹⁴

Agamben goes further in claiming a direct continuity, rather than a mere analogy, between Christian practice and modern economics. This is because he believes that the paradigm of theological economics, unlike that of political theology, militates against any line of separation between the theological and the political and hence against any need for an account (whether synchronic or diachronic) of the 'secularization' of theo-

logical concepts into political concepts. The theological concepts in economic theology were already directly economic—and by the end of *The Kingdom and the Glory*, it becomes clear that economic concepts were already directly theological in that they always presuppose a process of glorification. Once again, political theology proceeds by division, while theological economy proceeds by breaking down boundaries.

This direct connection between Christian practice and modern economics is clearest in Agamben's account of early monasticism in *The Highest Poverty*. The political-theological problems of the state of exception and the concomitant production of bare life have fallen into the background—indeed, Agamben is at pains to demonstrate that monasticism is something fundamentally different from law, something existing alongside it in a way that may well have rendered the claim of law over the monk genuinely inoperative. He shows that the monastic rule does not constitute a legal code, that entry into the monastery is not normally accompanied by a binding oath, and that consequently the temptation facing the monk is not a matter of the law and its transgression.

Rather, the real temptation of the monks is 'the will to construct their life as a total and unceasing liturgy or Divine Office'.¹⁵ In an exhaustive and exhausting exploration of every aspect of monastic practice, Agamben gives us what could be read as a vertiginous compression of the entire history of capitalist exploitation. Monasteries were the first institutions to develop rigorous timekeeping devices for the full temporal articulation of every day—and the demand is even exaggerated to the point of becoming 'living clocks' whose recitation of the psalms is so exact and regular that, as with Kant's legendary daily walks through Königsberg, one can set one's watch by it.¹⁶ In a foreshadowing of the neoliberal collapse of glory into economy, even necessary physical labour was reconceived as a form of worship, as monks were expected to memorize the psalms in order to recite them mentally on a continual basis, thus transforming their every action into a prayer. Work and worship, economy and glory enter into a zone of indistinction in the monastic life.

This tendency towards a totalizing liturgy, Agamben believes, is what allowed the early monastic movement to be folded back into the mainstream church against which it had originally rebelled—and thereby enter into an alliance with profane power structures as well. Agamben had already claimed in *The Kingdom and the Glory* that the ritual performance of glorification is the point of contact between the theological and the political, and here it takes on the additional role of providing a means to tame an unruly movement that had always taken its distance from the church's official liturgical practices. While the Carolingian monarchs favoured the monastic rules that seemed most akin to juridical codes and pushed for the formalization of oaths, the church increasingly borrowed from monastic liturgy to legitimize its own authority.

For Agamben, this history is important because he views monasticism, at least in its early stages, as an authentically messianic movement. If we take Agamben's reading of Paul as a point of reference, this makes sense insofar as the monks at their best concretely lived out the Pauline 'as-if-not' approach to legal structures. The original hermits and the communities that grew up around them lived in the 'desert' (in the sense of a 'wilderness' not under anyone's effective political control), and they set up their own practices and norms with apparently complete indifference towards their relationship with the official legal authorities. They weren't setting out to overthrow the law or rebel against it—they simply set to work building their own new type of polity 'as-if-not' under the already-existing law. If they were subsequently articulated into the existing order of power, then that shows that the really difficult problem is not at the level of the political-theological paradigm, but the economic-theological paradigm—it is not a matter of law but of economy and glory.

Already in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, we have hints that it may have been precisely on the matter of economy and glory that Paul's original messianic movement ran aground, becoming the unappealing compromise formation with which we are all familiar today. The Pauline community is (at least according to Agamben) always described in economic rather than political terms, for instance, and of course the Pauline corpus is a primary source for the doctrine of angels later articulated into an economy of glorification by Pseudo-Dionysius.¹⁷ The history of the Pauline communities is and must remain speculative, however, and much the same is true for the shift from early monasticism to its more institutionalized forms.

In order to more fully explore this problem of how a messianic movement collapses, therefore, he turns to Franciscanism, a movement whose history has been thoroughly documented and which, for Agamben, represents the most radical and promising form of monasticism. If we can determine what went wrong with Franciscanism that allowed them to be rearticulated into the church's glorious *oikonomia*, Agamben maintains, then we may be able to make some headway on the question of how best to deal with the global *oikonomia* with which we are faced today.

IV

In the final major division of *The Highest Poverty*, designated only by the keyword 'Form-of-Life', Agamben analyses the emergence and eventual capitulation of the Franciscan movement. His presentation can at times seem curiously organized, but much becomes clear if one keeps the problems of economy and glory in mind. The first thing he notes about the Franciscan movement is that it is precisely a movement—not a new institutional structure, not a new set of doctrines but one among the many

late-medieval attempts to live out the Gospel in an unprecedentedly direct way. The church's strategy vis-à-vis these movements was either to recognize them as new religious orders or else label them as heretics. For Agamben, though, this ecclesiastical strategy and the historiography that followed in its wake missed what was really at stake:

What remained unthought was precisely the originary aspiration that had led the movements to reclaim a *life* and not a *rule*, a *forma vitae* and not a more or less coherent system of ideas and doctrines—or more precisely, to propose not some new exegesis of the holy text, but its pure and simple identification with life, as if they did not want to read and interpret the Gospel, but only live it.¹⁸

In a sense this was always the goal of monasticism, but Saint Francis pursued it in a more radical way—that is to say, in a radically simple way.

Compared with traditional monastic rules, the Franciscan rule is extremely short and straightforward. The detailed articulation of life into a rhythm of constant worship is absent. Indeed, Francis is remarkably indifferent to the liturgical office that so thoroughly captivated his monastic forebears. For lay brothers, he simply assigns the Lord's Prayer; for ordained brothers, he encourages them to fulfil their obligations to the Roman Church without supplying any further guidance. In what could be read as a fresh implementation of the Pauline strategy of the 'as-if-not', Francis does not critique or attempt to overthrow the existing liturgical order—he simply assumes that his brothers should pray. If they don't know how, he sets about teaching them to do so directly out of the Gospels. If they are priests who already have the obligation to pray according to the Divine Office of the Roman Church, then that works too. Here one can hear an echo of Paul's recommendation that each remain in the state in which he was called—in the Franciscan community, worldly status (which here includes ecclesiastical status!) is rendered inoperative, a matter of indifference.

Hence for Agamben, the Franciscans succeeded in carrying out a messianic suspension of the order of glory. It also appears that they did so with regard to an area that we would recognize as primarily 'economic', namely the question of property. The 'highest poverty' of the title is the unique type of poverty claimed by the Franciscans—they do not simply lack all possessions, they lack the very ability to possess anything in the first place. Yet it is precisely at this point that the Franciscan movement will ultimately run aground. And the reason for this failure, in Agamben's view, is that the Franciscan movement allowed itself to become entangled with the very structure that the earliest monasticism had so successfully eluded: the law.

There are many levels of irony at work in the debate that Agamben documents and assesses in the final chapters of *The Highest Poverty*. The

first is almost too obvious to notice: the foremost advocate of the legal structure of poverty that seeks to invalidate the Franciscans' claims is precisely the pope, who claims to act on behalf of the Messiah who, according to Paul, came to suspend the claim of the law. The more fatal irony, however, is that Franciscan attempts to define the 'highest poverty' in legal terms only wound up further validating the law and setting them up for an eventual takeover. Agamben summarizes the tension as follows:

Beyond the diversity of the positions and the subtlety of the theological and juridical arguments of the Franciscans who intervene in the controversy . . . , the principle that remains immutable and nonnegotiable for them from beginning to end can be summarized in these terms: what is in question, for the order as for its founder, is the *abdication omnis iuris* ('abdication of every right'), that is, the possibility of a human existence beyond the law. What the Franciscans never tire of confirming . . . is the lawfulness for the brothers of making use of goods without having any right to them (neither of property nor of use).¹⁹

To put the paradox more concisely: the Franciscans want to argue that their status as living completely beyond the law is totally lawful. They claim to have a legal right to abdicate every right.

Agamben goes on to say that 'from the perspective that is of interest to us here, Franciscanism can be defined—and in this consists its novelty, even today unthought, and in the present conditions of society, totally unthinkable—as *the attempt to realize a human life and practice absolutely outside the determinations of the law*'.²⁰ In order to get at this aspect of Franciscanism, however, he must read the controversy against the grain, picking out the missed opportunities and the ways they might have been seized. I will focus on two points here, one negative and one positive.

First, the negative: Agamben believes that the strategy of claiming that the pope owned all the apparent Franciscan 'property' on their behalf was a dead end. The reason for this is not purely strategic (in the sense that it left them more vulnerable to the papacy's whims) but conceptual: it validated the principle of property as normative for the Christian life. What's more, it enshrined the principle of ownership despite the fact that Franciscan polemics against property clearly showed that they were aware of its inherently nihilistic nature. Agamben quotes a tract from a spiritual Franciscan that makes the observation that ownership is an end in itself, completely divorced from any kind of use value:

That using something for one's own pleasure [*ad delectationem*] does not constitute, in itself, the goal of the one who loves riches is evident in the case of the miser, who loves riches above all, yet does not use them for his own pleasure and in fact almost doesn't dare to eat, and the more the love of riches grows in him the more the use he makes of them diminishes, because he does not want to use them, but to keep them

and amass them as his own [*quia eis non vult uti, sed conservare ut proprias et congregare*].²¹

The fact that the pope is ultimately able to shut down the Franciscan arguments by equating the use of something that is ‘used up’ or destroyed, such as food, with ownership points in a similar direction: possession is ultimately the right to destroy.

More broadly, though, Agamben argues that the Franciscans fatally misjudged their opponent insofar as they believed that they could achieve legal recognition for their extralegal zone—and this is because incorporating what exists outside the law is precisely what the law does. The law recognizes many unowned objects but always as potentially owned, always as available to the first comer. Here one might look to the fragility of structures like the welfare state or even the Soviet economic apparatus in the face of neoliberal appropriation. Setting up a ‘liberated zone’ free from immediate economic pressures within the capitalist state or even instituting ‘socialism in one country’ is not enough—it just sets up a new field for accumulation, as we can see close to home in the profiteering that has emerged in higher education in recent decades. One can see a similar strategic failure in claims that, for example, universal health care or more robust Social Security benefits would spur further economic growth. Even though those claims are most likely true, they still concede the terms of argument to the opposition and make it more difficult to think of a thoroughgoing alternative.

Closely related with the failed strategy of ‘Franciscanism in one country’ is the failure to develop a concept that Agamben believes to be uniquely promising and that he is planning on devoting the final volume of the *Homo Sacer* series to: use. A quotation from Bonagratia clearly illustrates the argumentative strategy surrounding the concept of use: ‘As the horse has de facto use but not property rights over the oats that it eats, so the religious who has abdicated all property has the simple de facto use [*usum simplicem facti*] of bread, wine, and clothes.’²² The problem, in Agamben’s eyes, is that the Franciscan theorists failed to develop ‘a definition of use in itself and not only in opposition to law’—and the first place one would look to develop such a definition is precisely the letters of Saint Paul:

The preoccupation with constructing a justification of use in juridical terms prevented them from collecting the hints of a theory of use present in the Pauline letters, in particular in 1 Corinthians 7:20–31, in which using the world as not using it or not abusing it (*et qui utuntur hoc mundo, tamquam non utantur*; the original Greek *hōs mē katachromenoi* means ‘as not abusing’) defined the Christian’s form of life.²³

In my view, this would be both an application and a development of the Pauline ‘as-if-not’. It is an application insofar as the Franciscans would define what they mean by use ‘as-if-not’ in relation to the law, in total

indifference to its relationship or nonrelationship with a legal status or category. It is a development insofar as it would begin to give concrete positive content to the Pauline 'as-if-not', which like the Franciscan 'use' is still defined primarily negatively. The Franciscans not only needed to return to Paul, in other words, but to radicalize him in order to carry out the messianic strategy of the 'as-if-not' successfully against the three-pronged attack of law, economy, and glory. A positive development of use would also answer to the call to reject the strategy of 'Franciscanism in one country'—it would provide a model for an alternative relationship to things that potentially suspends the force of law and the regime of property for everyone, rendering it inoperative on a global level.

V

In order to clarify the relationship of *The Highest Poverty* to neoliberalism, I believe it may be helpful to address the ways in which its account of the Franciscans might be read as an oblique critique of Marxism—something I have already suggested in drawing parallels between the failings of the Franciscans and the failings of social democracy and Soviet communism. Agamben's relationship to Marxism is a fraught one, complicated by a certain opacity or strategic ambiguity when he addresses the issue. There are clear parallels, but there is always a twist that keeps one from identifying Agamben as a Marxist fellow traveller. For instance, we can take the final paragraph of the chapter on use:

The specific eschatological character of the Franciscan message is not expressed in a new doctrine, but in a form of life through which the very life of Christ is made newly present in the world to bring to completion, not the historical meaning of the 'person' in the economy of salvation, so much as his life as such. The Franciscan form of life is, in this sense, the end of all lives (*finis omnium vitarum*), the final modus, after which the manifold historical dispensation of *modi vivendi* is no longer possible. The 'highest poverty,' with its use of things, is the form-of-life that begins when all the West's forms of life have reached their historical consummation.²⁴

If we take away the Christian references, it seems that this paragraph could be at home in the 1844 manuscripts: Franciscanism is history's riddle solved, overcoming alienation and restoring us to authentic use value. Yet the twist comes in the last sentence—the eschatological form of life represented by Franciscanism is not the consummation of the West's forms of life but comes after that consummation. Perhaps Franciscanism is not so much history's riddle solved as history's riddle set aside.

One can find more direct remarks on Marx in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, such as when he says: 'It is curious that when the Hegelian Left breaks with this theological concept [of the providential economy of sal-

vation], it can do so only on the condition that the economy in a modern sense, which is to say, the historical self-production of man, is placed at the center of the historical process. In this sense, the Hegelian Left replaces divine economy with a purely human economy.'²⁵ Later, referring explicitly to the 1844 manuscripts, he writes, 'After having conceived of being as praxis, if we take God away and put man in his place, we will consequently obtain the result that the essence of man is nothing other than the praxis through which he incessantly produces himself.'²⁶ Yet by the halfway point of the book, Agamben has dispensed with economy as an ultimately infernal reality that has no redemptive potential—only when the economy of salvation is over and we are left to glory without economy do we begin to have access to the core of inoperativity that Agamben sees as the real potentiality for transformation. This inoperativity is not the dialectical outworking of the process of economy but something that emerges only when that economy stops.

In short, Agamben believes that the ultimate outcome of capitalism is not its self-overcoming in communism but precisely the dead end of neoliberalism. While Marxists castigate Agamben for his inattention to concrete economic facts, Agamben is obliquely pointing out that neoliberalism is what it concretely looks like for the economic to be determinative 'in the last instance', for every other possible point of reference—whether glorious or legal—to be collapsed into the economic and explained in its terms. When Marxists demand greater attention to the economy, they are knocking at an open door.

This is at the root of Agamben's suspicion of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's project in *Empire* and its sequels. In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben compares them to the infamous bishop Eusebius, who did so much of the ideological work of marrying his messianic movement to the fortunes of the empire.²⁷ In retrospect, though, we might better compare them to the Franciscan theorists trying to negotiate a space for their movement with the pope, the very embodiment of the collapse of the legal and glorious into the economic. Just as the Franciscans still perhaps believed that the pope as representative of the economy of salvation would recognize their claim even at the risk of undermining his own power, so also Negri and Hardt provide the latest version of the thesis that capitalism is preparing the ground for communism. The economy is still fundamentally one of salvation.

In his oblique way, Agamben is arguing that the economy will not save us. Here Agamben has clearly been deeply influenced by Walter Benjamin's critique of mainstream Marxism in his theses 'On the Concept of History' and, perhaps more decisively, the 'Theologico-Political Fragment'. Benjamin writes:

Only the Messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic. For this

reason nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything messianic. Therefore the Kingdom of God is not the *telos* of the historical dynamic; it cannot be set as a goal. From the standpoint of history it is not the goal, but the end.²⁸

Nevertheless, 'the order of the profane assists, through being profane, the coming of the Messianic Kingdom. The profane, therefore, although not itself a category of this Kingdom, is a decisive category of its quietest approach'.²⁹ While there is much in this brief fragment that is enigmatic, I believe that this messianic dynamic can be related back to the Pauline notion that the law—and, as Agamben argues, the entire economic apparatus of world history—was created 'for sin'.³⁰ Its function is to make us long for the coming of the messiah, even though it has no necessary relationship with the messiah. Here one could review the entirety of Romans 7, but I would simply highlight the messianic non sequitur in verses 24–25: 'Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!'

For Agamben and Benjamin, what is missing in the mainstream of Marxism is precisely that hiatus, that gap, that non sequitur. In the classic Marxist narrative, capitalism produces its own grave-diggers, who then seize power and produce the new classless society. In Pauline terms, the problem with that narrative is that it is precisely salvation by works: it ultimately remains within the terms of the economy of salvation rather than suspending it. The challenge Agamben's project issues to Marxists is to ask whether they still expect the economy to save us—and to ask those who believe they are beyond such illusions whether they are still ultimately too fascinated by the 'mystery of the economy' to consider what it could mean to succeed where Paul and the Franciscans failed, that is to say, what it might look like to render the economy inoperative so that we might become human again in a new and different way.

NOTES

1. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, ed. Michel Sellenart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

2. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990).

3. In addition to *The Birth of Biopolitics*, see Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, ed. Michel Sellenart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

4. KG, 164.

5. SE, 72.

6. CK, 40–41.

7. SE, 76.

8. SE, 80.

9. SE, 86.

10. KG, 195.

11. KG, 195.
12. KG, 245–46; translation altered.
13. As represented by Alberto Toscano, to whom I reply in ‘Genealogy and Political Theology’, chapter 9 in this volume.
14. See Althusser’s ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’, in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), and Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), along with my discussion in chapter 1 of *Žižek and Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008).
15. HP, xii.
16. HP, 20. This reference to Kant is not accidental, as Agamben traces the origins of Kantian ethics to Christian concepts of liturgy in *Opus Dei*.
17. See chapters 2 and 6 of KG, respectively.
18. HP, 94.
19. HP, 111.
20. HP, 110; emphasis in original.
21. HP, 129.
22. HP, 110.
23. HP, 139.
24. HP, 143.
25. HP, 46.
26. HP, 91.
27. HP, 11.
28. Walter Benjamin, ‘Theologico-Political Fragment’, in *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1978), 312.
29. Benjamin, ‘Theologico-Political Fragment’, 312.
30. See KG, 165–66.

TWELVE

Cur Deus Homo Sacer?

Colby Dickinson

The title of this chapter, in my opinion, expresses a good deal of the problematic reality that Giorgio Agamben's study of the figure of the *homo sacer* exposes. It is of course also a direct allusion to Saint Anselm's discourse on why God became human (or '*Cur Deus Homo*'). Though I am not directly taking up the question of whether or not Jesus himself fits Agamben's depiction of the *homo sacer*, I am certainly walking around the edges of this question and making some provocative suggestions towards how one might begin to sketch an answer to just such a question. What I am trying to steer the conversation towards is why any discussion of the *Homo Sacer* project must also take theology, its history and methodologies, seriously as a dialogue partner. As such, and picking up some of the threads already woven into the heart of this volume, in this chapter I want to bring together a variety of ways in which Agamben's finding a 'new use' for theology sheds a remarkable light on how philosophy can be done in an alternative key.

Among contemporary philosophers, there are few who have so wholeheartedly delved into the realm of theology as Agamben has. Though his work could be described as the somewhat typical continental-theoretical merger of philosophy, politics, and literary/aesthetic worlds (among other things), it has also drifted significantly over the past several years towards understanding the nuanced historical domain of the theological.¹ Though it could easily be said that his various studied genealogies of certain core constituent elements of both the Christian and Jewish faiths have major consequences for understanding the legacies of these traditions, his recent work has yet to be ingested into more traditionally

theological settings, properly speaking. It would be instructive then, and as I intend in this chapter, to rehearse some of the more significant insights which Agamben's work on the theological has uncovered — the full impact of which is only just now beginning to be comprehended, and even then only to slight and varying degrees. I do so, moreover, not only to illuminate what might be taken as his more significant considerations for political theology but so that we might also begin to rethink the tasks and focal points of philosophy, politics, and ethics as well.

* * *

With the introduction of *Homo Sacer*, the first volume in a series devoted to that figure who would straddle the boundary between the sacred and the profane, Agamben inaugurated a great enthusiasm for recovering humanity's most archaic configurations for an interwoven sphere containing the hollow roots of both the sacred and the political.² As such, he explicated the links between sovereign power (from an 'almighty' God, and though he is relatively silent on this in many respects, to kings and modern nation-states) and 'bare life' or that life which remains once all imposed social, cultural, religious, and political forms of life have been stripped of the 'creaturely life' that remains underneath it all. By focusing his energies on the ancient Roman character of the *homo sacer*, the person thrust into the grey borderlands ('zone of indistinction') between the sacred and the profane, Agamben positioned himself in order to determine just how our more basic communal identifications take root within our ability to exclude others.³ It is no surprise that even his most basic ethical formulations depart from this central insight.⁴

His discussion of Carl Schmitt and the political 'state of exception' (or that which remains the defining prerogative of the sovereign ruler) made up the initial second volume (2.1) of the series, *State of Exception*. It is this volume which thematically speaking follows closely on the heels of the first and which therefore devotes a good deal of time towards making those theoretical connections which underpin Agamben's work on the whole, such as his preference for a form of 'pure potentiality' versus a politically enacted, 'necessary' drive for 'actuality', the relationship between law and violence, and the way in which the state of exception is capable of producing those very subjects who subsist under the rule of sovereign power.

The heart of this analysis, especially as the final point is concerned, was subsequently carried over to his book *The Open*, where the 'anthropological machinery' which operates within this 'zone of indistinction' becomes the defining task of humanity in contrast to the sphere of 'animals' (and as we have already rehearsed in this present volume a number of times).⁵ By making this distinct operation clearer, Agamben links the 'defining' characteristic of humanity (its ability to separate or exclude

itself from animals, or perhaps rather the animals from us) as the same mechanism that has been operative all along within the varied theological and political speculations made throughout the centuries in determining human subjects who are created in opposition to the sovereign (politically, the king but also, I would add, theologically, akin to God).

Within this same context, the third volume of the series, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, took up this now infamous border—drawn likewise between the human and the inhuman—through the reduction of human life that once took place within the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. Through his evaluation of the mechanisms of testimony and witness, Agamben tried there to defend the voices of the many *homines sacri* that continue to mount up in our global context.

* * *

Before launching into the content of the more recent publications within the series, I first want to pause and say a word about some of the potentially more problematic issues that Agamben's work opens up to us at this stage, issues that have generally been in the foreground in criticisms of his work. I am speaking mainly about those reactions which have portrayed his attempts to render the 'anthropological machinery' (of theology) inoperative as little more than another layer of 'antinomian' sophistry which recurs every so often throughout history. In many ways, the focus on this issue in particular is completely justified. The question that Agamben has relentlessly pursued throughout multiple volumes preceding and making up the *Homo Sacer* series is in fact, how are we to deal with those antinomian impulses that arise in relation to the existence of law? His musings on Saint Paul, Sabbatai Zevi, and Saint Francis of Assisi, among others, relate directly to this heightened question, one that has become in many ways the central problematic his work attempts to address.⁶

However, rather than read him as advocating a complete dismissal of all things political, theological, or legal, as many have already done—and as I fear many more will in the future—I want to draw our attention to another work penned within the span of the *Homo Sacer* series but technically outside of it that might yield another perspective on the matter at hand: *The Time That Remains*. Depicted as a rereading of the Pauline corpus and as the solution to a particular riddle within the work of Walter Benjamin, one of Agamben's closest sources for his own work, this volume does more than simply provide a digression on a particular scriptural legacy. It offers us what I would call the interpretive key through which to read Agamben's 'solution' to the problem of law itself. The relevance of this reading, as I intend to highlight throughout what follows, cannot be underestimated in discerning the continuous thread that weaves throughout his many volumes.

In short form, the solution Agamben proposes to the various exclusions, divisions, unjust borders and boundaries, and various reductionistic representations that we face in our world today is to follow Saint Paul's logic of making a 'division of division itself', of taking the particular representation before us and exposing its failings, faults, and cracks in order not simply to have each structure fall to the ground but so that we might gain access to a 'universal' truth (or presentation, perhaps even presence) through the failure itself.⁷ This is what enabled Agamben many years previous to concede that the only accurate representation was one that exposed its own inability to accurately portray what it tries to represent.⁸ Understood as a guiding principle that does not necessarily seek to do away with our world's many institutional structures, political boundaries, legal codes, social normativities, and canonical measures, such a 'solution' may in fact be the only way to pursue ever more just constructs—a point which shares more than a passing affinity with certain religious proclamations and particular utopian dreams.

GENEALOGIES OF THE THEOLOGICAL

In a very short span of time, Agamben has expanded upon his *Homo Sacer* series with a number of highly profitable genealogical studies: *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2.2), *The Sacrament of Language* (2.3), *Opus Dei* (2.5), and *The Highest Poverty* (4.1).⁹ In this section, I want to take account of each of these volumes, pointing towards the major import of each volume as it relates to the themes I am pursuing at present, as well as elaborating on the significance that each study holds for comprehending the overall impact of Agamben's work for both theology and philosophy. Doing so, I feel, will not only assist us in further unifying the various strands of his thought but will also hopefully signal a profitable trajectory for theological and philosophical study in the foreseeable future. Let us begin, then, with his *The Kingdom and the Glory*.

* * *

Agamben's weighty tome on the liturgical and doxological history of Christianity, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, is not an easy book to summarize nor an easy one to comprehend, especially as its many nuanced views on the legacy of political theology interweave with so much of Western culture and society that it is often difficult to unravel their interconnections. The work, for example, branches out to explore many themes already familiar to readers of his work: the nature of the poetic, the technological, the political distinction between *bios* and *zoē*, the philosophical tension between potentiality and actuality, the Pauline version of 'messianic time', the search for an inoperative apparatus, the legacy of particular

signatures, and the ever-recurring scission between being and praxis as between transcendence and immanence, just to name the more prominent ones. It is for this reason, among others, that I feel this work will only increase its visibility among theologians in particular over the coming decades as it synthesizes his already theologically themed work with a rich study of some of theology's most central concepts.

In unison with its explicit genealogical approach, the book's basic thesis is a simple one: to discern the Christian theological basis for the two political paradigms of the West, namely 'political theology, which founds the transcendence of sovereign power on the single God, and economic theology, which replaces this transcendence with the idea of an *oikonomia*, conceived as an immanent ordering—domestic and not political in a strict sense—of both divine and human life'.¹⁰ Taking up this challenging dichotomy while simultaneously further extending the work on governmentality initiated decades earlier by Michel Foucault, Agamben tries to tackle the division between being and acting that Christian theological speculation opened up through its attempts to justify a trinitarian deity whose very being can only be described by its manner of performing itself (its acting). It is his unique contribution to this ongoing historical conversation that such speculations did more than simply identify the Christian God—they in fact generated a political paradigm shift that we are still playing out today. As Agamben words it: 'The mystery of being and of the deity coincides entirely with its "economical" mystery. There is no substance of power, but only an "economy," only a "government"'.¹¹ As such, it is the governance of an internal economy of the divine (the Trinity) that underscores the classic distinction between a kingdom (the sovereign, transcendent structure) and a government (the bureaucratic, immanent one). It is also that which reveals a hollow centre (a 'lack of being') within the Godhead itself, that which must be hidden from view as its true nature would undermine the united theological and political edifice upon which a good deal of our Western world has been built.

It is from this perspective that glory enters the picture as it is the concept used historically in order to try and reconcile the economic and immanent trinities, but also, and for this very reason, that which ends up ultimately veiling the hollowness at the core of the Godhead.¹² It has of course been a major task of Agamben's thought throughout his work to expose such empty centres, to 'profane' them one might say.¹³ This heavily influential structuring of reality is (again) based on the theological focus ultimately given to acting (governance) over being (kingdom). It is the fundamental 'caesura' that exists 'between God and his government of the world'.¹⁴ More precisely, the 'kingdom of providence' (transcendence) founds the 'government of fate' (immanence), with the latter making operative the order that the former has decreed.¹⁵

There is a symbiotic relationship between the kingdom and the government that cannot simply be effaced should one desire to do so, for the dynamic is one that lies at the centre of Western thought, much as Ernst Kantorowicz's study of *The King's Two Bodies* had once sought to demonstrate.¹⁶ What is established, however, is not simply a mechanism for producing and legitimating the lasting political structures of our world but an apparatus that in some sense regulates the breadth and length of our self-understanding. That is, such mechanisms concern the dispersal of grace as much as they establish the nature of law: 'And not only do the forms of government immediately correspond to the figures of grace, but the necessity for the gratuitous help of God, without which man cannot achieve his aim, corresponds to the necessity of government, without which nature would not be preserved in its being.'¹⁷ The dualistic theopolitical formulations of kingdom and government are thereby presented as a 'necessary' alignment of things and despite the fact that it has been their agenda from the start to appear as a necessary feature of reality (i.e., their 'natural' law of existence). Hence 'providence' enters the framework of Agamben's investigations as that concept which emanates from this schema of a necessary grace.¹⁸

From this angle, our modern Western governments form themselves in response to the political problem of why power is always already seemingly divided from within into its spiritual (but also transcendent, divine) and material (but also immanent, worldly) forms.¹⁹ Moreover, Agamben claims such a division immediately differs from medieval models of governance in that it draws directly from already existing Trinitarian formulations of *oikonomia* in order to legitimate the polarized dichotomy of kingdom and government that supports most of our political structures.²⁰ Even a 'consensual democracy'—which is aligned by Agamben with Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*—feeds off of the same economy of liturgical and doxological praxis that has driven theology for centuries.²¹ The 'glory' that political leaders seek (much as performers on the stage) is one that overlaps with the glory said to be given to God. And though much of the theological signature behind such ceremonial acts has been culturally repressed ('secularized'), its economic force remains active and determinate and very much in need of an act of profanation.²²

Agamben's 'archaeology of glory' subsequently takes on a monumental significance in that such an investigation is focused on demonstrating the 'unthinkable emptiness' (a form of 'Sabbatism') that remains upon the desolate throne of glory which is often heavily represented in Christian cathedrals.²³ Glory is sought after—both in political and theological terms—in order to conceal such a void and to veil its true nature, much as clothing conceals our nudity, a topic I already brought up in my previous chapter.²⁴ In the end, after so much deliberation on the fundamental trajectories of Western thought, Agamben is poised to conclude that 'the real problem, the central mystery of politics is not sovereignty, but

government; it is not God, but the angel; it is not the king, but ministry; it is not the law, but the police—that is to say, the governmental machine that they form and support'.²⁵ What we are to make of such a shift in focus, however, as well as how we are to deviate from such a course, is a topic that is only hinted towards at times and one that certainly needs to be spelled out more clearly.

The main question, I think—and it is one that Agamben does not consider directly in this almost purely genealogical study of the concepts—is what one should do to disrupt ('render inoperative') such mechanisms of power. It is at this point, as I have already suggested, that we must look back to the coordinates for disruption and suspension that he has already discussed elsewhere, for then we will begin to see just how he frames the matter at hand in *The Kingdom and the Glory*. In *The Time That Remains*, Agamben's 'solution' to the operativity of the anthropological machinery (the governmental apparatus par excellence) is to deactivate it through a Pauline messianic force that 'divides division itself'.²⁶ Rather than make a choice between the particular 'truth' and the universal 'Truth', Agamben, like Saint Paul had once done with Jewish identity, opts to introduce another division into those preexisting divisions that already categorize our world. Rather than look for a truth among a particular identification that is based on an exclusive categorization (e.g., Jew/Gentile, slave/free, male/female, etc.), we are diverted to perceive another fracture within the representations themselves (i.e., Paul's internal division of the Jew into one who exists in either flesh or spirit). Recalling such a 'solution' to the problematics of our worldly representations—their limitations, violence, and reductionistic labels—we are better poised to recognize the specific tension which arises in *The Kingdom and the Glory* between this Pauline solution and the Trinitarian economic solution, a tension that Agamben is subtly playing upon among his own theological reconsiderations.²⁷

What he is trying to reach, I am suggesting, both through his focus earlier on the figure of the *homo sacer* and now through an examination of the concept of glory, is that zone of indistinction between the religious and the juridical that opens us up to a 'form of life' beyond the division of law and grace (itself generated by the machinery that spawns the kingdom/government dichotomy).²⁸ This is not only a radical push beyond a rather tricky theological divide; it is a complete rereading of the line that theoretically divides Judaism from Christianity. If, therefore, Agamben's book *Homo Sacer* points towards his focus on the Franciscan 'form of life' in *The Highest Poverty*, it is this string of theological-genealogical explorations, from *The Kingdom and the Glory* to *The Sacrament of Language* to *Opus Dei*, that really get us there.

CONTRA-KANTIAN GENEALOGIES

The Sacrament of Language, which takes up an archaeology of the oath, not only continues along the path already laid out by Agamben in *The Kingdom and the Glory* but actually stretches further back, uniting many of his earlier strands of thought with these particular genealogical studies. The overlap between glory and the oath that we witness here is that both concepts arose historically as attempts to access the truly empty 'zone of indistinction' wherein our identities (or identifications of any kind, really) are formed—our very humanity as it were. The oath, for example, as neither purely religious nor purely juridical, crosses over into that zone of indistinction between our realms of existence.²⁹ Such is what Agamben lays bare before us: 'My hypothesis is that the enigmatic institution, both juridical and religious, that we designate with the term oath can only be made intelligible if it is situated within a perspective in which it calls into question the very nature of man as a speaking being and political animal.'³⁰

Recalling his writings elsewhere on the nature of revelation being that we are not able to express in language the existence of language itself,³¹ Agamben points towards the relationship between *logos* and the divine as a form of testimony 'given by language itself', one wherein 'the god names a potentiality implicit in the very act of speech'.³² As such, the nature of the oath contains a potential that historically shattered into the various forms of magic, religion, and law—all descendant straight from the oath's ability to portray this 'originary power' of language.³³ Indeed, religion and law were invented 'after the fact' in the sense that they were created to help justify the 'trustworthiness of the *logos*' manifest in the oath.³⁴ The name of the god given historically in a variety of contexts is therefore the seal that seemingly unites the relationship between words and things. Hence the deity is the event of language itself and that which remains entirely unnameable in language.³⁵ Though Agamben unfolds this discussion in the context of numerous and ancient religious traditions, he also notes the particular focus of Christianity on such a relationship, its divinization of the *logos* itself or that which hinges upon the sacrament made of language.³⁶

As one might suspect, the implications of such conclusions are major ones indeed. And Agamben is quick to reread the history of speculative thought in accord with his findings, as is his custom throughout these genealogical forays. By this count, ontotheology becomes a certain 'performance of language', and metaphysics is seen as a historical attempt to describe this experience of the oath.³⁷ The profanation of revelation that Agamben is trying to accomplish is one that he has rehearsed under a number of different guises, and moreover it is one that I have argued maintains a close proximity to certain readings of the Christian legacy.³⁸ It should also be noted that Agamben's interest in this matter is twofold:

he wants to show how human beings distinguish themselves as sovereign over the realm of animals and how we have subsequently governed such structures—that is, how such artificial divisions are perpetuated by the creation of law and religion in general. Tackling both issues at once is certainly nothing if not consistent with his overall thesis that it is the historical unity of these issues that we have overlooked and that we continue to ignore. On the other hand, however, it also appears to make his thesis doubly difficult to justify, as one issue bleeds into another and a particular theology becomes a particular philosophy, as an ethics becomes a politics, and so forth. And perhaps this is why the genealogical studies keep mounting up over time. . . .

* * *

In his more recent *Opus Dei*, a volume dedicated to addressing concepts central to Western religious and philosophical practice, such as duty (proceeding from a more theological definition of the 'office', that is, taken up in its liturgical sense) and effectiveness, Agamben understands the history of theology to constitute a series of unending tensions between Jesus's efficacious and unrepeatable sacrifice (as found in the Letter to the Hebrews, for example) and the daily liturgical offices (duties) of the subsequently founded Christian community (as stressed in the Letter of Clement).³⁹ Such tensions, he will maintain, are what lie at the base of those attempts throughout time to validate the activities of individuals who act on behalf of the institution we call the church, such as when the church decreed that grace is not conferred through the act performed by the priest but through the faith of the believer (*ex opere operato*).⁴⁰ It is this crucial distinction, moreover, that widens the gap between the intentions of the person who acts and the *opus Dei* itself (to be read here as aligned with being and as we encountered it in *The Kingdom and the Glory*) which could be said to be done through them.⁴¹ Hence the true 'liturgical mystery' (within this Trinitarian economy), we are told, is the one that exists between these two facets of the same human being—the 'mystery of operativity' itself or what he had earlier referred to as an *oikonomia*.⁴²

In this wide chasm between the desires and intentions of the subject and the functions of God's agent, we witness the focus given to the concept of duty within the Western paradigm, one that moves from ancient senses of propriety to a sort of zenith in the practical philosophy and ethics of Kant. (I would only add that Agamben's reckoning here with Kant constitutes, to my mind, one of the more profound critiques of Western thought he has recently offered.) One's duties in life, as rendered intelligible through the virtuous practices contained by the sphere of the officium, are what in fact make life governable. The virtues, by this count, are the very apparatuses through which such practices form and shape

the human beings that we are.⁴³ Agamben's critique of virtue-oriented philosophies is consequently sharp and seemingly without reprieve.

What is effective is what becomes actual, and this is precisely how being has been framed throughout the centuries. This interpretation of things, as a general reader of Agamben's earlier work on the Aristotelian concept of potentiality will note, contains a solid theopolitical use, one that he has merely repeated and intensified through these genealogical studies.⁴⁴ Medieval arguments regarding the effectiveness of the sacraments, for example, contain for him much more than simply stray comments on the Eucharist's ontological status: they dictate much of the political makeup of Western society, as we have seen already.⁴⁵ As such, the virtues become a proprietary unfolding of the claims of duty, the focus on one's being in relation to its theological underpinnings (the very definition of 'ontotheology') takes root and a certain sovereign power gives rise to the hellish bureaucratic governance of our world.⁴⁶ Likewise, the many imperative modes of command which attach themselves to those who hold an 'office' (liturgically but also politically, we might say) is entirely caught up within the machinery (apparatuses) which inscribe (even enlist) one into a world of particular, virtuous moral codes.⁴⁷ Theological attentiveness to the virtues has therefore held a supremely significant value in determining the particular flavour that Western philosophical reasoning has taken over the years, and it shows little sign of letting up.⁴⁸

Following Agamben's claims in this context, we see that 'the religious' further interweaves virtue and duty by making a virtue 'of necessity' itself and hence 'inclining' us to duty and 'obligating' us to virtue,⁴⁹ or as he soon thereafter puts it, the virtue that most perfectly fulfils the duties of the officium is religion itself by definition.⁵⁰ Religion, taking up this coincidence between the office and virtue, is inextricably linked by Agamben to the rise of law and even the legislator who oversees its institution. What is more, the rise of devotional practices would seem also to indicate something of this profound linkage between the religious officium and a virtuous living.⁵¹

Interestingly, and insofar as Agamben's own work could be read as opening the door to a sort of pantheistic stance possible through his espousal of an 'absolute immanence'⁵² (and though he himself does not take this route), this is why the pantheist is often mistaken for an atheist, as it is the pantheist who denies the divine governance of the world ('Providence') and who therefore also denies the essential premise underlying this theopolitical nexus of duty, virtue and religion.⁵³ In reality, of course, very little is generally said in such cases regarding any supposed reality of divine nature apart from our own political and theological musings. And this is a point well worth being reminded of as we read through Agamben's work and his critique of theology from a philosophical viewpoint.

What ultimately unfolds from these claims is a substantial critique of the Kantian ethical project that seems to have descended directly (though perhaps somewhat unknowingly) from Kant's own pietistic background. The Kantian preference for duty as the ethical language par excellence is one that becomes the dominant 'ontology of modernity'—a moral code of commands and juridical-religious institutions, according to Agamben.⁵⁴ The entire edifice of transcendental philosophy, regulative ideals and all, is folded within such a command-laced language devoid of actual substance and consisting entirely of imperatives.⁵⁵ What draws Agamben's attention on this point is the way in which the concept of 'the will', much like that of duty (and of 'glory' earlier), was historically constructed to account for the passage from potentiality to actuality, a movement that he would like to resist (or at least, go back before such a move was initially made).⁵⁶ Kantian ethics, he concludes, must be abandoned, as it was entirely indebted to a moral code of duties and virtues that are forever wedded to particular theopolitical justifications for power.

ENVISIONING A 'FORM OF LIFE' BEYOND DUTY

Abandoning such a central ethical and religious paradigm certainly would appear to leave us with a sizeable gap in our comprehension of just how we are to relate to the many 'others' out there whom we would stand before, be responsible for, and be exposed to. Accordingly, it is in the first part of the fourth volume of the *Homo Sacer* series, *The Highest Poverty*, that Agamben attempts to sketch out the 'form of life' that lives in resistance to such Kantian, virtuous structures. Here, he tries to envision a life viewed not as property but rather as something of 'common use' for everyone.⁵⁷ Separating use from ownership becomes the primary focus here, revealing the 'Franciscan ontology' that Alain Badiou, for one, has seen as centrally operative in Agamben's thought for some time now.⁵⁸

To do this, Agamben directs us into that realm where the boundary between life and rule is blurred so that we enter once again into the 'zone of undecidability' prior to the distinction between life and law when we encounter either a law that applies to the whole of one's life (and therefore fails to look much like what a rule by definition should look like) or a life that conforms itself entirely to a rule (and thereby ceases to resemble much of what we consider 'life' to be).⁵⁹ To illustrate such a movement, he draws heavily on the varied histories of monastic life, though he is careful to avoid any understanding of monastic rules as a 'legal apparatus', rather seeing them, as many of the monks did, as an 'art'.⁶⁰ Within such a context, the monk, who takes the vows of the order and who lives life as an 'uninterrupted office and liturgy'⁶¹ profoundly demonstrates

for Agamben another way to think through this impasse between law and life found throughout the history of religious thought.

In many ways, the real tension underlying these distinctions between life and law is the one encountered in the biblical narratives between the Mosaic Law and the Gospel message of grace, that which Agamben had previously taken up in *The Time That Remains*.⁶² The rules, or that which lies somewhere in-between advice and law and which entirely governs monastic life, are very much an attempt to mediate between law and grace by accessing a space prior to their division. Following from this, ethics and politics are both detached in some sense from this form of communal life wherein the habitus (or form) of monastic life takes on supreme importance.⁶³ What we witness through this exemplary model of monastic life, then, is a form of life that does not succumb to the political dichotomy between law and life. As Francis himself would struggle to articulate, the monk lived a form of life that did not quite seem to be either a 'life' or a 'rule'.⁶⁴

One could make much, then, of Agamben's subsequent claim that the Protestant Reformation was established as an attempt to make the monastic rule the definitive form of liturgy for all time.⁶⁵ What is essential to grasp, however, is that the monastic liturgy does indeed move against the (mainly Catholic) church's liturgy by making the progression from being to acting (and in contrast to the movement from acting to being, as we saw above in *Opus Dei*) and from law to life (instead of from life to law).⁶⁶ The more significant issue, as his examination of the vow of poverty will soon adduce for him, is not one of a particular article of faith (the 'rule' that guides life, so to speak) but of a particular form of life lived beyond both 'life' and 'law', lived both 'joyfully and openly', something he finds embodied in a particularly poignant way in the Franciscan order.⁶⁷

As he has elaborated elsewhere, the form of life lived by the Franciscans is one of a paradigm or example and not a rule or a law.⁶⁸ The goal of such an understanding, it would seem, and one emphasized repeatedly throughout history in the Franciscan struggle to articulate a use of things without claiming a right to them, was to recognize a form of life outside the dictates (and identifications) of the law.⁶⁹ The Franciscan order itself lives according to the exceptions of any given proprietary norm, outside the law, as a form of life lived beyond the coordinates of any given discourse on rights.⁷⁰ As Agamben is deftly able to point out, since the origins of monastic orders there has been a constant tension between the rule of the priest who lives according to the officium (duty) and the monk who lives a form of life outside the duties associated with the priestly vocation.⁷¹ The form of life in question is one that, according to Agamben, 'must be liberated from the signature of law and office', a task well worth undertaking and, I would suggest, well in accord with his entire critical project of profaning that which we once held to be sacred.⁷²

WHAT WAY FORWARDS? WHAT IS STILL 'TO COME?'

There appears at this point to be no immediate 'practical' solution to how we might live apart from the law, one might suggest, if for no other reason than that so many others have said something similar, as the criticisms of Agamben's project mount, each looking for a 'practical', immediate resolution to the problematics which his genealogies lay bare.⁷³

As a first response to such critical claims, we could of course direct our attention to his many repeated calls not to succumb to any demand ('command') to produce a 'necessary' answer. As Slavoj Žižek has likewise claimed, the truly appropriate response may in fact be to do nothing but rather to critically think through the issues and thereby, I would add, 'divide the divisions' put before us with an ever increasing adamancy.⁷⁴ I would also begin to search for another angle from which to view the impasse or tension itself. This is also what, I feel, Agamben has already done in his talk delivered in a Paris cathedral in March of 2009, published in English as *The Church and the Kingdom*, a book as striking for its rich imagery as for its concision and provocative conclusions.

It begins with a deceptively simple proposition that theologians have restated for centuries: Christians, from their earliest beginnings, considered themselves merely as 'sojourners' on earth, exiles amid a foreign people. Agamben quickly, however, delves into the implications which such a position held for the early church historically:

According to this position—which has always seemed blasphemous to me—the initial Christian community, expecting as it did the immanent arrival of the messiah and thus the end of time, found itself confronted with an inexplicable delay. In response to this delay there was a reorientation to stabilize the institutional and juridical organization of the early Church. The consequence of this position is that the Christian community has ceased to *paroikein*, to sojourn as a foreigner, so as to begin to *katoikein*, to live as a citizen and thus function like any other worldly institution.⁷⁵

Reiterating a good deal of the argument as it was formulated in *The Time That Remains*, Agamben presses the church's seeming betrayal of its original message (the 'blasphemy' he refers to is the expectation that there was more to come, when the essential thing had in fact already been given) and considers what form such a community might be able to take in our present age. What is clear is that the force of messianic time has been neglected, perhaps even repressed, and is in great need of rejuvenating: 'What is at issue is a time that pulses and moves within chronological time, that transforms chronological time from within.'⁷⁶ Transforms chronological time from within and thereby transforms those

structures that depend on such histories as are formed by this (chronological) time.

His roughly 'theological' commitments become more clear as he ranges across a broad spectrum of thought, at one point illustrating his argument through a reference to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, someone who 'denounced the false opposition of radicalism to compromise for the reason that both options consist in drastically separating ultimate realities from the penultimate ones which make up our everyday human and social condition'.⁷⁷ The penultimate realities, those that make up our everyday living in 'the time that remains', are radically severed from the ultimate realities, those that are truly not part of our everyday lives as they seem so far beyond them, perhaps too utopian for the present to ever embody (e.g., the kingdom of God, as theologians have imagined it). The two must coexist in a certain tension, one that comes in fact (or ought) to define our everyday reality. As he summarizes it:

In this context eschatology is nothing other than a transformation of the experience of the penultimate. Given that ultimate realities take place first in penultimate ones, the latter—contrary to any radicalism—cannot be freely negated. And yet—for the same reason—the penultimate things cannot in any case be invoked against the ultimate ones.⁷⁸

This reading of reality follows the course which Agamben has set for his own project almost from the start, as a hope for the only seemingly utopian to enter into and inform our world within the present moment, not as a concrete, historical utopia (which would only end in new forms of totalitarian rule, much as Jacques Derrida likewise claimed) but as that which transforms our perspective and understanding of the present context. It is what Thanos Zartaloudis has referred to as a form of 'pure critique' in relation to legal structures.⁷⁹

It is for this reason all the more significant that Agamben frames such a quest with a pointedly practical question: 'Where do we find such an experience of time in today's Church? That is the question that I have come, here and now, to pose to the Church of Christ sojourning in Paris.'⁸⁰ Perhaps somewhat startlingly, Agamben proclaims that he came neither to promote a radicalism in the face the church's institutionalized being (the 'antinomianism' many have accused him of harbouring) nor to portray it as simply being a 'Grand Inquisitor' in the Dostoevskian mould. Rather, there is another 'church' possible within the church that misses its calling and instead stands tall as a powerful worldly institution:

By placing origin and end in contact with one another, this force endlessly fulfils and ends time. Let us call this force Law or State, dedicated as it is to economy, which is to say, dedicated as it is to the indefinite—and indeed infinite—governance of the world. As for the second force, let us call it messiah, or Church; its economy is the economy of

salvation, and by this token is essentially completed. The only way that a community can form and last is if these poles are present and a dialectical tension between them prevails.⁸¹

This is to behold a form of church as a messianic, weak force moving through history, through the economies of law and state in order to undo them, to hopefully make them more just, and there is a hope for a community (perhaps another church) that can sustain itself by allowing such tensions to prevail and not to cover them over and ignore their vitality to the constitution of any genuine community.

Despite such hopes, however, Agamben declares that 'it is precisely this tension which seems today to have disappeared. As a sense for an economy of salvation in historical time is weakened, or eliminated, the economy extends its blind and derisive dominion to every aspect of social life.'⁸² Since there is no legitimate power in this world, he boldly claims, there are only those illegitimate powers that know themselves to exist as such and yet cannot end their feeble reign. The church, failing to embrace its original messianic calling, thus falls headlong into the rush of time, institutionalized as it is.⁸³ A solid, refreshing dose of a Franciscan 'form of life' is badly needed for our times. And this is exactly what appears to us when we abide by the Pauline 'division of division itself' — the gesture par excellence when faced with a seemingly insoluble dualism between law and grace.

NOTES

1. Leland de la Durantaye's introduction to Agamben's work still remains perhaps the best introduction to Agamben's work on the whole, though this book was written early enough to miss a good deal of the more recent 'theologically inclined' work. See Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009). In addition to the multiple volumes I will be mentioning below, there has also been the publication of a collection of essays on a variety of — mainly somewhat theological — topics, titled *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), with essays on 'The Glorious Body' and a theological reading of our nakedness.

2. At present, the series includes *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life; Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, *Homo sacer III; State of Exception*, *Homo sacer II, 1; The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath*, *Homo sacer II, 3; The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, *Homo sacer II, 2; The Highest Poverty*, *Homo sacer IV, 1*; and *Opus Dei: Archaeology of Duty*, *Homo sacer II, 5*.

3. For more on the centrality of the theme of 'exclusion' in Agamben's work, see his essay 'What Is a Paradigm?' in *SA*.

4. See, for example, his ethical and political stances developed in *Giorgio Agamben, Means without Ends: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

5. O.

6. See Thanos Zartaloudis, *Giorgio Agamben: Power, Law and the Uses of Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2010), on this, as well as my conclusion in Colby Dickinson,

Between the Canon and the Messiah: The Structure of Faith in Contemporary Continental Thought (London: Continuum, 2013).

7. Cf. TR and the convergence with Judith Butler on this point—that the only valid representation is one that shows its own failure—in her *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).

8. IP.

9. The numbering of *Opus Dei* as *Homo Sacer* 2.5, as the French publisher of the volume has chosen to label it, leaves in my mind an as of yet unfilled opening for an expected 2.4, an uncertainty that has yet to find confirmation.

10. KG, 1.

11. KG, 139.

12. KG, 208.

13. For more on this, see the conclusion in Dickinson, *Agamben and Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011).

14. KG, 53; see also 41.

15. KG, 129, 126–27; see also 82–84.

16. Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

17. KG, 137.

18. See SE.

19. KG, 90, 98–100.

20. KG, 111–13.

21. KG, 259.

22. On the difference between secularization, that which Agamben seeks to do away with, and profanation, or the task of the coming politics that he champions, see PR.

23. KG, 242.

24. KG, 221. See also Agamben's remarkable essay on nudity in *Nudities*.

25. KG, 276; deemphasized from the original.

26. KG, 166. See also TR.

27. KG, 33.

28. KG, 188.

29. KG, 19.

30. KG, 11.

31. Giorgio Agamben, 'The Idea of Language', in P.

32. SL, 33.

33. SL, 43.

34. SL, 59.

35. SL, 46, 52.

36. SL, 66.

37. SL, 56.

38. See Dickinson, *Agamben and Theology*, for more on this topic.

39. OD, 37.

40. OD, 39–40.

41. OD, 43 and 87–88.

42. OD, 79.

43. OD, 101.

44. OD, 68.

45. OD, 59–62.

46. See, for example, his chapter on 'Angelology and Bureaucracy' in KG.

47. OD, 110–11.

48. OD, 118.

49. OD, 132.

50. OD, 134.

51. OD, 133.

52. See the essay 'Absolute Immanence' in P, as well as the appendix in CC.

53. OD, 138.
54. OD, 150–51.
55. OD, 153–54.
56. See his essay on regression titled ‘Philosophical Archaeology’ in SA, as well as the essays contained in P.
57. HP, 10.
58. Alain Badiou, *Logiques des Mondes: L’Être et l’événement 2* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 584.
59. HP, 26.
60. HP, 29–32.
61. HP, 43.
62. HP, 45–47.
63. HP, 61.
64. HP, 100.
65. HP, 84.
66. HP, 86–87.
67. HP, 93.
68. HP, 94–96.
69. HP, 109–11.
70. HP, 115.
71. HP, 116–18.
72. HP, 136.
73. See Ernesto Laclau, ‘Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy?’ and William Rasch, ‘From Sovereign Ban to Banning Sovereignty’, both found in Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli, eds., *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty & Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 22 and 107, respectively. Catherine Mills also draws attention to the viability of Agamben’s end to politics in the conclusion to her *The Philosophy of Agamben* (Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2008).
74. See, among other places, Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2009).
75. CK, 4.
76. CK, 12.
77. CK, 18.
78. CK, 19.
79. See the conclusion to Zartaloudis, *Giorgio Agamben*.
80. CK, 27.
81. CK, 35.
82. CK, 35.
83. CK, 40–41.

THIRTEEN

Paul and the Jewish Alternative

Adam Kotsko

After the broad overview of Giorgio Agamben's use of theology in my 'The Theology of Neoliberalism' and Colby's '*Cur Deus Homo Sacer?*' this chapter may seem like an Agamben-style vertiginous leap from high-level generalities to the smallest philological quibbles. Here I narrow my focus to a single note on Saint Paul in *The Sacrament of Language*, taking what might seem to be a bombastic claim about Paul at its word and using it as a framework for rethinking both Agamben and Paul. Just as Colby has tried to show that Agamben's project, despite initial appearances, has a great deal to offer to gender studies, here I conclude by claiming that Agamben, notwithstanding his greater attention to Christian texts, may allow us to see Judaism as the most authentic response to the Pauline impulse, as a living example of a new relationship to the law that is not based on curse and exception.¹

Among the recent philosophical interpreters of Paul, Agamben has distinguished himself in at least two ways. The first is the erudition and depth of his reading Paul, above all in his book *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. The second is the degree to which his work on Paul is integrated into his larger project. While Alain Badiou presents his reading of Paul as a more or less detachable 'example' of his notion of faithfulness to a truth-event,² Agamben has claimed Paul's letters as fundamental for a style of thought that is central to Agamben's philosophical approach: namely, messianism. Accordingly, Agamben has also had recourse to Pauline arguments in his more programmatic works, including the *Homo Sacer* series. Paul comes up at key moments in *State of Exception*, for example, and the argument of *The Kingdom and the Glory*

hangs crucially on a close reading of Paul's concept of *oikonomia* and how it is taken up by later patristic writers.

In this chapter, I would like to address Agamben's use of Paul in another work in the *Homo Sacer* series, namely *The Sacrament of Language*. This work includes what seems to me to be a substantial new engagement with Paul and with the New Testament more broadly. This engagement is primarily situated in the aleph-note to section 16, where Agamben attempts to demonstrate that the Greco-Roman concept of law is intimately tied up with the concept of the curse that he characterizes as a kind of 'fall-out' of the oath. The passage is as follows:

It is in the perspective of this technical consubstantiality of law and curse (present even in Judaism—cf. Deuteronomy 21:23—but very familiar to a Jew who lived in a Hellenistic context) that one must understand the Pauline passages in which a 'curse of the law' (*katara tou nomou*—Galatians 3:10–13) is spoken of. Those who want to be saved through works (the execution of precepts)—this is Paul's argument—'are under a curse [*hupo katara eisin*]; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey [*emmenei*, the same word that one finds in the law of Caronda] all the things written in the book of the law.'" Subjecting himself to the judgment and curse of the law, Christ 'redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.'" The Pauline argument—and, therefore, the very meaning of redemption—can be understood only if it is situated in the context of the mutual belonging, in a juridical and not only religious sense, of law and curse.³

At first glance, this seems to be typical Agambenian bombast—only Agamben has noticed this crucial aspect of Paul's argument (despite the fact that Paul is one of the most commented-upon writers in the history of humanity), and without this profound insight, one is doomed to chronic misunderstanding. Yet given the depth of Agamben's previous work on Paul, I am inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt and to treat this as, at least potentially, a productive commentary on Paul. On the other hand, given the important role of Paul for Agamben's thought, it is likely that his use of Paul here can, in turn, shed light on Agamben's overall project.

Accordingly, in this chapter I will investigate Agamben's passage on Paul from *The Sacrament of Language* first in terms of what it says about Agamben—namely, where it fits within his project in this book as well as in the *Homo Sacer* series as a whole—and second in terms of what it says about Paul. In this latter connection, I argue that Agamben's insight here is at least potentially revolutionary in the answer it provides to one of the most important and sharply contested questions of Pauline interpretation: what Paul means by 'the law'. If Agamben's interpretation is taken seriously, it means that Paul must be understood as simultaneously and equally a religious and a political thinker. Failing to hold together those

two aspects of his thought means missing the true radicality of Paul's messianic preaching.

I

So first, what does this passage say about Agamben? To understand this, I'd first like to situate *The Sacrament of Language* within the *Homo Sacer* project as a whole. The goal of this body of political theory is to present 'the West', broadly considered, as most fundamentally a machine that attempts to claim all of life.⁴ While this machine regulates itself in various ways, its most fundamental trajectory tends towards the confrontation between sovereign power and bare life, in the words of the subtitle of the first volume of the series. The sovereign is one who is empowered to use limitless violence to enforce the claim of the machine on life, while bare life is the life that the machine has given up to destruction. Volume 3 of the series, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, analyses the most extreme manifestation of bare life: the 'Muselmann' of the concentration camp, the prisoners who had 'touched bottom'.

Interestingly, volume 3's detailed analysis of bare life was published before volume 2, which goes into greater detail on the structure of sovereignty. Both are to be followed by a fourth volume, on 'forms of life', which will presumably lay out Agamben's 'alternative' to the Western machine. This fourth volume, however, has only recently begun to appear—and meanwhile, volume 2 continues to get bigger. After *State of Exception*, Agamben wrote two subsequent works that were designated as 'part-volumes': *The Kingdom and the Glory*, which is volume 2, part 2, and *The Sacrament of Language*, volume 2, part 3. As far as I can tell, these two subsequent parts were not necessarily anticipated in the initial structure, and the place of *The Kingdom and the Glory* in Agamben's overall project is particularly problematic in my mind.⁵ Yet if we take Agamben at his word and view these three books as somehow constituting a broad analysis of sovereignty, we can see that Agamben does not believe that the Western 'machine' is limited to the political realm in any narrow sense: it encompasses the economy, the 'society of the spectacle', and the religious sphere.

Most radically, the Western machine encompasses language itself, and *The Sacrament of Language* is concerned not only with understanding language on the model of the logic of sovereignty but with demonstrating how the Western stance towards language actually grounds all other aspects of the Western machine. Agamben's way into this problem is through the phenomenon of the oath, which may seem strange—or at least unexpected, given that he hasn't paid a great deal of attention to the oath in the other *Homo Sacer* writings.

The oath turns out to be promising for two reasons, however. First, it is inherently a borderline phenomenon, incorporating the political and the religious in a way that, at least in Agamben's view, has misled and baffled modern scholars. Given that Agamben's methodology in the *Homo Sacer* project is so focused on finding 'zones of indistinction'—most notably the correlative status of the sovereign and the *homo sacer* as existing in a 'zone of indistinction' both within and outside the law—the attraction here is clear.

Second, the oath is a cultural phenomenon that, according to Agamben's initial point of reference, the scholar Paolo Prodi, is losing its hold or breaking down. The very fact that the oath seems like a strange thing to analyse is evidence in favour of the declining importance of oaths in contemporary culture. I for one have never verbally sworn an oath to my knowledge, and I don't pay a great deal of attention to the distinction between documents that require my signature to affirm the truth of what I've written 'under penalty of perjury' and those that don't. In terms of public events, perhaps the greatest evidence of the decline in the importance of the oath was the series of events leading up to Bill Clinton's impeachment. On the one hand, the closest thing we have to the ruler of the entire Western world lied under oath—and the general public didn't particularly care. On the other hand, it's not as though the Republicans were acting as stalwart defenders of the integrity of the oath. They were effectively abusing the court system in what amounted to a fishing expedition, and their attempt to impeach Clinton over a perjury charge was clearly opportunistic. For both sides, perjury was not something to be taken seriously in itself, albeit for different reasons in each case.

Yet just as Agamben's answer to the increasing pervasiveness of the state of exception isn't to return to 'normal' liberal democracy, so here his solution isn't to return to the good old days when oaths were taken seriously. A great deal of his analysis is given over to demonstrating that even in ancient Greece and Rome the oath was always already breaking down—certain Greek cities were famous for perjury, and Odysseus was well known for his ability to craft misleading oaths that technically meant the opposite of what he seemed to be affirming or promising. As Agamben repeatedly emphasizes, if the purpose of oaths is to compel people to be truthful, they are amazingly ineffective, and simply prohibiting lying would surely have done a better job.

If oaths don't guarantee truthfulness, then, what do they do? A hint is found in a seemingly strange aspect of many of the ancient sources, which seem to view the purpose of the oath as combating perjury. Yet as Agamben points out, this can't make sense—there's no such thing as perjury unless an oath is already involved. Further complicating this is the fact that laws requiring both parties in a trial to swear an oath virtually guarantee that one of them will be committing perjury. The regime of the oath seems then not to prevent but to encourage perjury, and this

becomes all the more troubling when one recalls that oaths are typically accompanied by curses that will be visited upon those who break them. If the oath is the ground of the social pact in the West and therefore of the law, this explains what Agamben calls, in the quote on Paul above, the 'technical consubstantiality of law and curse'⁶—and of course, the ultimate legal curse for Agamben is *sacer esto*, that which releases a citizen into the nonstatus of the *homo sacer*.

The oath is not simply parallel to the operation of the machinery of sovereignty but provides its ground: it is most fundamentally the oath, through its invocation of a curse, that exposes that which falls outside it to destruction. On the positive side, the oath represents, as Agamben says in his discussion of Claude Levi-Strauss in §28, the living human being's decision to take responsibility for language. That is to say, the efficacy of language is more than a question of objective truth and falsehood, it is a profoundly ethical matter. The oath is a promise that one's words will be effective, and it entails a promise to make them effective. There is a reason that swearing an oath is the ultimate example of a performative speech act. The 'fact' that swearing the oath performatively creates more than just the sworn obligation—more fundamentally, it points back to the primordial bond between the living human being and language. It creates the living human being as the responsible speaking subject, and it creates language in the sense of making it socially effective and binding.

From this primordial moment of 'anthropogenesis' represented by the oath, Agamben believes that he can trace all major human institutions, beginning with religion and law. As a theory of politics and religion, I find it very satisfying and believe that it gets around many of the problems created by modern attempts to give religion its own autonomous 'essence'. Yet here one must emphasize the characteristically negative 'payoff' of this theoretical achievement: it means that all of Western society is structured by the logic of the curse. All of Western society follows the model found in the human claim to make language correspond to reality—and to subject what escapes this claim to destruction.

The apparent breakdown in the efficacy of the oath in contemporary society does not mean that the Western machine is running out of steam—by contrast, this machine becomes more powerful and dangerous as it breaks down. Here again a parallel with Agamben's better-known analysis of sovereignty is fruitful. The fact that contemporary constitutional orders are breaking down does not mean that state power is retreating and leaving people free to govern themselves and their communities. Rather, it means that the coercive power of the executive is growing ever more unrestrained, absorbing more and more legislative functions until authority and power, law and force are no longer distinguishable. As Agamben says in *State of Exception*, the dialectic between executive and legislative, between the force of law and the authority of law, has functioned in more or less stable ways at different times in history: 'But

when they tend to coincide in a single person, when the state of exception, in which they are bound and blurred together, becomes the rule, then the juridico-political system transforms itself into a killing machine.⁷ To put it in terms of American political debate, the narrowing and limitation of laws and regulations does not restore us all to the status of sovereign free individuals, as Tea Partiers might currently fantasize, but rather reduce us all, at least potentially, to the status of bare life.

Similarly, a breakdown in the efficacy of the oath doesn't lead us to a situation in which people can simply be concerned with the truth without all the baggage of oaths. Rather, it leads to a situation where all speech is cursed, where all speech is essentially blasphemy, taken in vain. As Agamben says in his closing section:

Prodi opened his history of the 'sacrament of power' with the observation that we are today the first generations to live our collective life without the bond of the oath and that this change cannot but entail a transformation in the forms of political association. If this diagnosis hits at all upon the truth, that means that humanity finds itself today before a disjunction or, at least, a loosening of the bond that, by means of the oath, united the living being to its language. On the one hand, there is the living being, more and more reduced to a purely biological reality and to bare life. On the other hand, there is the speaking being, artificially divided from the former, through a multiplicity of technico-mediatic apparatuses, in an experience of the word that grows ever more vain, for which it is impossible to be responsible and in which anything like a political experience becomes more and more precarious. When the ethical—and not simply cognitive—connection that unites words, things, and human actions is broken, this in fact promotes a spectacular and unprecedented proliferation of vain words on the one hand and, on the other, of legislative apparatuses that seek obstinately to legislate on every aspect of that life on which they seem no longer to have any hold. The age of the eclipse of the oath is also the age of blasphemy, in which the name of God breaks away from its living connection with language and can only be uttered 'in vain.'⁸

For Agamben, this situation of the breakdown of the oath, just like the situation of the breakdown of the 'normal' legal order of liberal democracy, is not an aberration but rather expresses the truth of the system as a whole—the Western machine may have been better regulated and produced better results in past eras, but it was always heading in this direction. When we lose the benefits of the Western machine, that doesn't mean that it's failed or fallen by the wayside but that its claim becomes much more intense and destructive. For Agamben, there is no room for nostalgia here: even at its best moments, the Western machine was heading towards Auschwitz.

For Agamben, the answer to this breakdown in the functioning of the oath is not, therefore, to get back to a point where we take the oath

seriously and take responsibility for our language again any more than the answer to the pervasiveness of the state of exception is for Congress to reclaim its constitutional prerogatives and rein in the executive. If the state of exception has always been integral to the Western machine, going back to a supposedly 'good' instantiation of that machine means preserving the 'bad' element that has in fact always been its motive force. To evoke Walter Benjamin, the answer is not to undo the state of exception and return everything to normal but to create a 'real state of exception'.⁹ Again, to start with the more familiar analysis of sovereignty, the answer is not to make force the servant of the law but to cut the relationship between law and force altogether—to render the law radically inoperative. As Agamben says in *State of Exception*, evoking Benjamin's interpretation of Franz Kafka:

One day humanity will play with law just as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good. . . . This liberation is the task of study, or of play. And this studious play is the passage that allows us to arrive at that justice that one of Benjamin's posthumous fragments defines as a state of the world in which the world appears as a good that absolutely cannot be appropriated or made juridical.¹⁰

That is to say, the only answer to the suspension of the law in the state of exception is to suspend the law even more radically, in a movement he identifies as messianic.

Similarly, in the case of the oath, the solution is to debase language even more thoroughly. As Agamben says in the concluding section of *The Sacrament of Language*: 'It is perhaps time to call into question the prestige that language has enjoyed and continues to enjoy in our culture, as a tool of incomparable potency, efficacy, and beauty. And yet, considered in itself, it is no more beautiful than bird song, it is no more efficacious than the signals insects exchange, no more powerful than the roar with which the lion asserts his dominion.'¹¹ What is truly distinctive about human language is its ethical force, that is, the very thing that renders it so potentially vain and destructive.

What does it mean to call into question the ethical force of speech as articulated in the oath? In the final pages of *The Sacrament of Language*, Agamben breaks from his normal pattern of evoking the messianic and instead points towards philosophy, which he claims is a type of speech that 'resolutely puts in question the primacy of names, when Heraclitus opposes *logos* to *epea*, discourse to the uncertain and contradictory words that constitute it, or when Plato, in the *Cratylus*, renounces the idea of an exact correspondence between the name and the thing named and, at the same time, draws together onomastics and legislation, an experience of *logos* and politics'.¹² Philosophy thus represents another use for speech beyond that articulated by the oath—indeed, 'philosophy is, in this sense,

constitutively a critique of the oath: that is, it puts in question the sacramental bond that links the human being to language, without for that reason simply speaking haphazardly, falling into the vanity of speech'.¹³

If philosophy rather than the messianic is the answer here, then where does Agamben's invocation of Paul fit into the argument? Is it simply an arbitrary display of erudition? One is often tempted to believe that his sometimes seemingly random footnotes are little more than release valves for self-indulgence, but I believe that his note on Paul actually points towards an important insight into Agamben's methodology.

In order to get at this point, I first ask, where has Agamben prepared the way for this privileging of philosophy as a discourse critical of the oath? Many of Agamben's philosophical references are in fact seemingly quite supportive of the ideology of the oath—for instance, Cicero and Philo. He does evoke Plato as consistently critical of the oath, but one of his key examples of what a use of language not governed by the oath might look like is actually Jesus's prohibition of the oath in the Sermon on the Mount:

Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.' But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one. (Matt. 5:33–37)¹⁴

What is translated as 'yes yes, no no' is *nai nai, ou ou*, and Agamben argues: 'The expression gains its full meaning if we remember that the Greek formula for the oath was *nai dia* (or negatively *ou ma dia*). By extracting the particle *nai* from the formula and removing the sacred name that followed, Jesus opposed one part of the oath to the whole. What is at stake, then, is a gesture symmetrically opposed to that of blasphemy, which instead extracts the name of God from the context of the oath.'¹⁵ This formula thus corresponds to Agamben's description of philosophy as a discourse that 'puts in question the sacramental bond that links the human being to language'—in this case, by evoking the formulation of the oath in order to subvert it—'without for that reason simply speaking haphazardly, falling into the vanity of speech' because after all, one's yes does mean yes, and one's no means no.¹⁶

Another example can be found in a brief reference to Paul outside the footnote I have singled out for analysis. In §24, Agamben discusses Michel Foucault's notion of 'veridiction', which he believes corresponds to the originary experience of language that logically precedes the splitting up of the experience of the oath into various human institutions. A veridiction differs from either an assertorial or promissory oath in that it 'has as

the sole criterion of its performative efficacy its relationship to the subject who pronounces it'.¹⁷ It needs no external support—for instance, the various sacred objects that are invoked in oaths both ancient and modern, as when one swears on the Bible—and has no referent external to the subject. Having established this, Agamben evokes Paul here, specifically Romans 10:9–10: “‘The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess [*homologēsēis*, a Greek term for the oath] with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe [*pisteusēis*] in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.’¹⁸

The messianic proclamation is thus a kind of proto-oath, where the only ‘objective’ support is the mouth one uses to speak and the only standard is one’s own heart. Here this may seem to position Paul as supportive of the ideology of the oath. Yet just as Agamben’s ultimate hope in returning to this moment of ‘anthropogenesis’ is to find some way to change the relationship between the living human being and language so also does the messianic faith as Agamben explains it represent a different use for language—one in which the oath is actively rejected and subverted, for instance, or, as in the longer footnote on Paul, one in which the curse of the law is rendered inoperative. Indeed, Agamben contrasts this originary experience of language with the church’s later institutionalization of the proclamation of faith as an assertorial oath. Thus Agamben appears to be positioning Paul’s evocation of the oath here as a subversive move parallel to that of the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount.

Overall, then, some of the key examples of people who are doing what Agamben asks of philosophy are precisely messianic teachers. I would thus suggest that Agamben’s reference to philosophy where he would normally evoke messianism does not represent a rejection or a move beyond the latter. Rather, it reflects the fact that for Agamben philosophy at its most authentic has a messianic vocation. This vocation must obviously be distinguished from an ideological or propagandistic one, but it must just as crucially be distinguished from an apocalyptic one that demands the destruction of this world and its replacement by a new heaven and a new earth. The point is not to somehow destroy the Western machine nor to let it run its course, increasing the contradictions until it exhausts itself. The point, rather, is to stop the machine by making that small change that makes all the difference. In the messianic imagery of Benjamin and Kafka, for instance, the law isn’t destroyed or forgotten—it is the object of study and play. Similarly, Agamben is not advocating that human beings simply give up speaking altogether or speak totally at random—he wants a new stance towards language other than that which claims reality for language in the oath.

As Benjamin says of the messianic age, ‘Everything will be as it is now, just a little different.’¹⁹ That little difference is enough to turn this

world from a body of death, caught up in the destructive machinery of sovereignty, into a 'means without end', an object of study or of play.

II

Having shown what Agamben's invocation of Paul tells us about Agamben, I now turn to the second half of my presenting question. If Agamben's use of Paul in *The Sacrament of Language* demonstrates that Agamben remains a messianic thinker, does it say anything useful or interesting about Paul? Specifically, does it give us any particular insight into the contentious question of what Paul means by 'the law'? In order to assess this, I'll observe that Agamben claims that he is providing a new insight into Paul, and indeed a decisive one. As he says, 'The Pauline argument—and, therefore, the very meaning of redemption—can be understood only if it is situated in the context of the mutual belonging, in a juridical and not only religious sense, of law and curse.'²⁰ The first question to ask, then, is whether Pauline interpreters in general have understood Paul in these terms.

I think the answer to this can be found in an element of the first sentence of the footnote that is surprising to those familiar with traditional interpretations of Paul: 'It is in the perspective of this technical consubstantiality of law and curse (present *even* in Judaism—cf. Deuteronomy 21:23—but very familiar to a Jew who lived in a Hellenistic context) that one must understand the Pauline passages in which a "curse of the law" (*katara tou nomou*—Galatians 3:10–13) is spoken of.' *Even* in Judaism? The majority of the Christian tradition, and modern scholars in its wake, has understood the link between the curse and the law as a uniquely and specifically Jewish phenomenon. For instance, Martin Luther's amazingly influential interpretation of Paul presents the Jewish law as intended solely to trip us up, to convict us of sin and show us the impossibility of saving ourselves apart from God's grace—and this in turn shows that the focus specifically on the Jewish law as the object of Paul's critique functions as a way to keep Paul's argumentation within a specifically 'religious' sphere.

The anti-Judaism and even outright anti-Semitism that such readings of Paul have engendered throughout Christian history, culminating in the Nazi Holocaust, have led many biblical interpreters to reopen the seemingly settled question of Paul's relationship to the Jewish law. The result has been to emphasize Paul's reverence for the Torah and the very Jewish nature of the early Christian movement. Yet few have gone so far as to question whether Paul's arguments focus primarily on Jewish law. For instance, a recent reinterpretation of Romans by Stanley Stowers includes as a methodological principle the claim that the Greek *nomos* always and only refers to the Jewish law in the Pauline corpus.²¹ Another

work on Romans by Mark Nanos claims that the authorities to which one must submit according to the infamous passage in Romans 13 are actually the local synagogue authorities.²²

This research agenda of reembedding Paul within Judaism has been undeniably productive, yet there remains an irreducible obstacle to presenting a pro-Jewish Paul according to the terms laid out in this strand of scholarship: Paul's argument in Galatians. In scholarly circles, a focus on Galatians has led to a negative assessment of Paul's mission in Daniel Boyarin's *A Radical Jew*, which claims that Pauline universalism as represented in Galatians leads inexorably to an erasure of any specifically Jewish difference and is hence ultimately anti-Jewish.²³ Boyarin's focus is, perhaps ironically, precisely the passage from Galatians that is normally treasured by advocates of a more liberal reading of Paul: 'There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (3:28). In this context, it is fortuitous that Agamben's reference to Paul in the note to §16 is focused on Galatians.

It may be helpful to pause briefly and review the contents of Paul's letter to the Galatians. It begins with a typical greeting but is unique among Paul's letters in not then including a 'thanksgiving' passage thanking God for how wonderful the community he's writing to is—and that's because Paul is extremely angry at what he's heard about his followers in Galatia. After a remarkably short time, in Paul's eyes, the Galatian community has abandoned the Gospel and sought out another, false one. Before telling us what the problem is, however, he gives a long account of his life story, starting with his zeal for Judaism as a young man, passing through the dramatic revelation in which Christ gave him the calling to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles, continuing through his approval by the mainstream of the Christian movement in Jerusalem, and culminating in a decisive encounter with the Apostle Peter himself, in which he accuses Peter of betraying the Gospel. What is Peter's crime? He distances himself from table fellowship with Gentile believers out of deference to the 'circumcision faction', who believe Gentiles must become circumcised to be part of the Christian community. Paul insists, by contrast, that since Jews are not justified by adherence to the law, neither should Gentiles have to be.

At this point, Paul turns again to his diatribe against the Galatians, saying that they should have known better because 'it was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified' (3:1). What this public exhibition entailed is unclear, but it does show that Paul believes that Christ's crucifixion is in direct opposition to what the Galatians have chosen to do, namely to submit to the demands of their own local 'circumcision faction' and become circumcised. To combat this desire for circumcision, Paul develops an elaborate series of analogies from the Hebrew Bible to draw a contrast between law and grace, curse and bless-

ing, slavery and freedom—and it is specifically Christ’s crucifixion that provides access to grace, blessing, and freedom by undoing the law with its curse and slavish obedience. To quote the broader context for Agamben’s quoted passage:

For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.’ Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’ But the law does not rest on faith; on the contrary, ‘Whoever does the works of the law will live by them.’ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (3:10–14)

Given Paul’s focus on the Jewish law throughout this letter, the tendency of most interpreters has been to believe that Christ died to set us free specifically from the Jewish law. Yet this fails to make sense to me on several levels. First, at what point were Gentiles ever subject to the Jewish law? Theoretically it might be possible that Paul was preaching to a group of aspiring Jewish converts. Even if this were the case, however, given that they are considering getting circumcised after accepting Paul’s message, it does not seem as though they had subjected themselves to the full demands of the law before he arrived—after all, one can only be circumcised once.

Even more importantly, and more directly relevant to Agamben’s interpretation here, the salient feature of the ‘law’ from which the Galatians have been set free is precisely the curse—and as Agamben demonstrates throughout *The Sacrament of Language*, Greco-Roman law subjected citizens to a curse as well. Indeed, Agamben’s wording implies that Greco-Roman law featured this curse to an even greater degree—for Agamben is able to say that the curse is consubstantial to the law ‘even’ in Judaism and that in any case this consubstantiality would’ve been familiar to a Hellenistic Jew like Paul. That is to say that even if he hadn’t noticed this curse in Judaism, Paul surely would’ve known of it from the surrounding Greco-Roman law. The same thing goes for the other salient features of the law from which the Galatians have been set free: Jewish law is far from the only legal system that demands obedience or condemns those who fail to live up to those demands. Nor is it the only legal system that seems to turn its subjects into slaves to arbitrary requirements or observances. Paul says as much in 4:8–11:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be

enslaved to them again? You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years. I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted.

Again, it is unlikely that Paul is referring to some preconversion state where the Galatians observed some aspects of the Torah without getting circumcised—he does still regard the Jewish law as a revelation of God, and so those who study and follow it do know God. Paul has to be referring to their previous lives as ‘pagans’. The problem with their new-found desire to subject themselves to Jewish law is that they’re simply trading in one law for another. Thus the whole point of the argument is to show that everything they’ve escaped from through Christ is every bit as present in the Jewish law as well. In other words, he’s trying to show that whatever is special about the Jewish law can’t be found in its legal requirements, which are ‘just as bad’ as the pagan forms of law they’ve escaped.

The problem isn’t that they want to submit themselves to Judaism specifically but that they want to be subject to some law, any law after Christ has already set them free. What’s more, Christ has set them free precisely by releasing them from the curse that is consubstantial with Greco-Roman law by suffering that characteristic Roman punishment, crucifixion. There is some debate about whether it is appropriate to draw an analogy between the victim of crucifixion and the figure of the *homo sacer* specifically, but I think there is a strong parallel.²⁴ It is first of all a punishment that is reserved for runaway slaves and rebels against Roman rule, that is, against classes of people who have put themselves beyond the pale, and it certainly is an appropriate emblem for the unlimited violence to which the sovereign power subjects bare life, being one of the most ingeniously horrific punishments ever devised.

In the context of the Roman Empire, then, the victim on the cross—of which there were tens of thousands during the early centuries of Roman rule—embodies the law’s power to exclude, destroy, and curse life to the utmost extent. By taking on this curse of Roman law, Christ has set Gentiles free, not from a Jewish law they were never under any obligation to obey but from the Roman law to which they were previously subject. Paul does find a reference in the Torah that seems somewhat parallel to crucifixion, ‘cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’, which has led some interpreters to believe that Paul thinks crucifixion is a specifically Jewish practice, but those living under foreign occupation rarely have the luxury of being so extravagantly ignorant of the distinctive torture practices of the occupiers. Instead of reading this reference as indicating that Christ’s Roman punishment somehow represents the culmination of Jewish law, I believe we need to read it as a forceful rhetorical move, a strong reminder of the ‘public exhibition’ of Christ’s crucifixion that reportedly proved so decisive in the Galatians’ acceptance of Paul’s Gospel.

In short, I believe that we have to view Paul's use of the term 'law' as referring to an overarching category of legal systems that includes both the Greco-Roman and Jewish legal traditions. Only in this way can we make sense of the notion that Christ came to set both Jews and Gentiles free from the curse of the law—that is, from the curse specific to their own legal traditions. In this context, we can also make sense of Paul's pervasive use of the first-person plural in describing the relationship to law from which Christ sets 'us' free. Paul has presented himself as a faithful Jew, and we have no indication that the Galatian community is made up of anything but 'pagans' subject to Roman law. The only way 'we' can be set free from the law is if 'the law' is a general category capable of including both legal traditions. A sample passage might be helpful here:

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (3:23–28)

In this context, the last verse here can be seen to indicate another purpose of the law: to divide us, along national, class, and even biological lines. By submitting to the demands of the 'circumcision faction', Peter was reinstating this legal division that, in Paul's view, Christ had undone. Thus, alongside the pairings of law and grace, curse and blessing, slavery and freedom, we should place division and unity. Like slavish obedience, division can be understood, in the terms of Agamben's analysis, as a direct consequence of the curse of the law, which ultimately serves to draw a line between the inside and the outside of the law.

Yet I don't think we can view Paul as saying simply that Jewish law is 'just as bad' as Roman law. In terms of the category of division, this would be hard to maintain in light of Paul's examples: those whom Jewish law excludes are not invited to dinner, while those whom Roman law excludes are crucified. If Paul is extremely negative about Jewish law in Galatians, he is also extremely positive, as he does not draw evidence of God's promises from any source apart from the Torah. Jewish law is like Roman law insofar as it subjects its followers to a curse, but it is unlike Roman law insofar as it points towards God's promises. The purpose of Christ's death is not to destroy the Jewish law but to allow access to its promises apart from its curse. Paul knows that those promises are what makes the Jewish law so attractive to the Galatians—and his point is that they already have the promises without the curse. Similarly, Paul and

Peter continue to have access to those same promises without the obligation of strict obedience, as both are able to dine with Gentiles in violation of dietary laws, and so on, as the situation demands.

In light of Agamben's analysis, we can thus say that Paul is proposing that Christ's death somehow brings about a 'real state of exception' in which the link between law and force is broken, with force here represented above all by the curse of the law. What this allows us to do is to live according to the intention of the law, which is to promote beneficial behaviour—or, using Paul's quotation from the Torah, to induce us to 'love your neighbor as yourself'—in complete indifference to the commandments and prohibitions of the law. He exhorts the Galatians to practice 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control'—and then adds, 'there is no law against such things' (3:22–23). The point is not to violate or overturn the law for its own sake but rather to enter into a sphere of indifference to the law, with no reference to legal reward or, especially, legal punishment.

* * *

I'd like to conclude by asking whether Paul's analysis of the law applies to the Judaism we know today. Does the Torah still operate according to the logic of the curse, such that it would still be subject to Paul's critique in Galatians? I contend that it does not. In Paul's time, the Jewish law was enforceable, centred on Temple sacrifice in Jerusalem and supported by taxation of Jews throughout the Roman Empire. The death penalty could still be carried out and sometimes was, via the characteristic method of stoning.

The destruction of the Temple and the rise of rabbinic Judaism changed that completely.²⁵ Authority in Judaism shifted from a model centred on sacrifice to a model centred on study—or play, as evidenced by the creative and bizarre interpretations often found in the rabbinic literature. Meanwhile, passages mandating the death penalty, which represent the most concrete example of the curse of the law, were largely rendered 'inoperative', to evoke Agamben's terms. The result is a noncoercive law that is able to govern all aspects of life. By contrast, in Christianity, the tendency was for the church to understand its mission in uniquely 'religious' terms, abandoning much of the believer's life to the very law that Paul believed Christ had died to set us free from. While we might be subject to grace rather than law in the religious realm, in the everyday realm, we remain subject to the curse of the law.

Overall, then, it seems as though Judaism rather than Christianity would be more likely to meet with Paul's approval today, insofar as Judaism can be viewed as instituting a new noncoercive stance towards the law that represents a 'real state of exception'. I would suggest that this is why the Jewish tradition is such a continual point of reference for

Agamben's own work as well—even in texts that are not explicitly 'messianic', Judaism already represents the longest-running experiment in a messianic form of law in which the authority of law is disconnected from force.

If Agamben's reading of Paul is correct, that would indicate that at a crucial moment in the history of the Western machine, when the bond between law and force was short-circuited in the person of the emperor and the apparatus of law had become, at least for subject populations, a killing machine, Paul made it his mission in life to bring together groups of Gentiles who would attempt to embody such a messianic stance towards Roman law. In the long run, the mission failed, producing a church institution that embraced the violence of the Western machine while congratulating itself for being set free from the Jewish law.

If we are living in a similar moment of crisis, then it is unsurprising that so many are now turning to Paul. Yet given the actual result of the Pauline mission, we must ask ourselves how things could have gone so terribly wrong. In light of my reflections here, I contend that a significant part of the problem is that Paul did not have a concrete model of what it would look like to separate the promise of law from its curse. With no model for how to regulate this new community, many early Christian leaders fell back on the authority of the bishop and the demand for obedience as the only way to introduce order, making the movement dangerously open to an alliance with the authoritarianism of empire. Now, I would argue, we do have a model in rabbinic Judaism, and Agamben's reading of Paul is one that can help us to recognize it as such. The problem of the modern West, then, may be summarized as that of finding a way to adopt a messianic stance towards its own legal and cultural traditions similar to that found in Judaism, how to divorce its own law from coercive force and make it into an object of study or of play.

NOTES

1. This chapter is based on a presentation titled 'Agamben, Paul, and the Oath' that I presented on 25 April 2011 under the auspices of the Paul of Tarsus Reading Group at Northwestern University. I'd like to thank Virgil Brower for inviting me to speak to the group.

2. See Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). Slavoj Žižek has argued that the situation is more complicated than Badiou admits in 'The Politics of Truth; or, Alain Badiou as a Reader of St. Paul', in *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Verso, 1999), 127–70.

3. SL, 38.

4. Cf. my chapter 'Agamben's Messianic Nihilism' in this volume.

5. Cf. my reflections on the more complete shape of the *Homo Sacer* project in my chapter 'What Is to Be Done?' in this volume.

6. SL, 38.

7. SE, 86.

8. SL, 70–71.
9. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257.
10. SE, 64.
11. SL, 71.
12. SL, 72.
13. SL, 72.
14. All scripture is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).
15. SL, 42.
16. SL, 72.
17. SL, 57.
18. SL, 57.
19. Quoted in CC, 53.
20. SL, 38.
21. Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).
22. Mark Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996).
23. Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
24. Cf. John Milbank's essay 'Christ the Exception', *New Blackfriars* 82 (2001): 541–56.
25. A fascinating account of the origins of rabbinic Judaism that informs my views here can be found in Daniel Boyarin, *Borderlines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). Boyarin's view of rabbinic Judaism is less optimistic than mine, as he emphasizes the authoritarianism of the rabbinic school as such, which stands at the root of the free play of interpretation.

FOURTEEN

What Is to Be Done? The Endgame of the *Homo Sacer* Series

Adam Kotsko

Translation can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it gives me the opportunity to study Giorgio Agamben's works very closely before most English-speaking readers have access to them. On the other hand, though, it can be very isolating not to have anyone to discuss the new texts with. This is particularly problematic given that studying Agamben, more than anything else I have worked on, has pulled me into a wide array of dialogues—not only with Colby but with colleagues at various conferences and seminars, as well as with the members of Northwestern University's Paul of Tarsus Interdisciplinary Reading Group. This chapter is the third (along with 'Paul and the Jewish Alternative' and 'The Theology of Neoliberalism') to originate in the context of that reading group, and it represents my attempt to bridge the gap between the isolating privilege of the translator's advanced access and my desire to continue the dialogue. Instead of summarizing the final volume of the *Homo Sacer* series, *The Use of Bodies*, here I try to show that *The Time That Remains*, a text to which Anglophone readers have long had access, may lead us to reread the *Homo Sacer* series in ways that will have anticipated the retrospective effects of *The Use of Bodies*. In a complex temporality that echoes Agamben's account of messianic time in *The Time That Remains*, the series does not end so much as exhorts us to read it again, but differently.¹

After nearly two decades and many unexpected detours, Agamben is bringing the *Homo Sacer* series to an end. The final volume, titled *The Use*

of *Bodies*, appeared in Italian late in 2014 and will be published in translation by Stanford University Press. In my capacity as translator of the volume, one of my primary goals in this chapter is to provide a kind of indirect ‘preview’ of that work.

First, some words about the format. It is a long book, approximately the same length as *The Kingdom and the Glory*. It is divided into three long sections, titled ‘The Use of Bodies’, ‘An Archeology of Ontology’, and ‘Form-of-Life’. Each is relatively autonomous and roughly the length of *The Sacrament of Language*. Along with these three primary divisions, there is a prologue on Guy Debord, two interludes (on Michel Foucault and Martin Heidegger, respectively), and an epilogue.

While there are recurring themes that bring together the three major segments and the supplementary material, I think it’s fair to say that *The Use of Bodies* isn’t a unified argument in the same sense that the other books in the series are. Furthermore, Agamben warns us in a brief ‘notice’ not to expect anything like a conclusion or a ‘constructive’ counterpart to the preceding ‘critical’ argument. Rather, he argues that ‘in a philosophical investigation, not only can the *pars destruentis* not be separated from the *pars construens*, but the latter coincides completely with the former’ and promises only that *The Use of Bodies* will develop ‘certain concepts—use, exigency, mode, form-of-life, inoperativity—that have from the very beginning oriented an investigation that, like every work of poetry and of thought, cannot be concluded, but only abandoned (and perhaps continued by others).’²

My ‘preview’ of *The Use of Bodies*, then, will be a ‘preview’ of the spirit of the text and not the letter. It will not be a summary of the contents of the book, which would necessarily be superficial and misleading, nor will it be a unified argument. Instead of delivering to you the occult knowledge to which I have privileged access as Agamben’s translator, I will indicate to you how my reading of *The Use of Bodies* has caused me to read the previous books—that is, the body of texts to which we Anglophones have shared, common access—differently in retrospect.

At the time I wrote the conference paper that was to become the present chapter, I had read and reviewed all of the *Homo Sacer* books—including *The Use of Bodies*—multiple times, in multiple orders over the course of three months. And my experience is that the effect of *The Use of Bodies* on my reading of the previous texts is not qualitatively different from the effect of any given *Homo Sacer* volume on the texts that came before or after it. Aside from its own distinctive content and argument, each new volume introduces a new series of relays across and within previous volumes, calling fresh attention to concepts and arguments that may have seemed unimportant in previous readings.³

I will take the example of *State of Exception*, given that it is one of the most popular and seemingly self-contained volumes in the series. Only on returning to *State of Exception* with the argument of *The Kingdom and*

the *Glory* in mind did I recognize the significance of Agamben's repeated references to the importance of economic justifications for emergency powers—and his attention in both *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception* to the strange fact that the father of the household seems to be the originary locus of sovereign authority in Roman society. Only the analyses of liturgy in *The Kingdom and the Glory* and *Opus Dei* allowed me to account for the place of the final two chapters of *State of Exception* in the argument, chapters that I had frankly forgotten about after previous readings, preferring to see the climax of the text in the following passage that I have already quoted several times in the present book:

One day humanity will play with law just as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good. . . . This liberation is the task of study, or of play. And this studious play is the passage that allows us to arrive at that justice that one of Benjamin's posthumous fragments defines as a state of the world in which the world appears as a good that absolutely cannot be appropriated or made juridical.⁴

At the same time, in light of *The Highest Poverty* and *The Use of Bodies*, my focus on that passage—which I view as a kind of key to Agamben's project, hence my perhaps excessive citation of it—was vindicated, as it appeared in retrospect to prefigure the importance of the concept of 'use' in those later volumes.

The very structure of the series encourages this kind of retrospective rereading, insofar as the order of publication of the volumes has often deviated from the architectonic order of the volumes and part-volumes. For example, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, which is designated as the third volume of the series, was published five years before *State of Exception*, which is designated as the first segment of the second volume. *The Highest Poverty*, which is the first segment of the fourth volume, appeared a year before *Opus Dei*, the final segment of the second volume—despite the fact that Agamben refers explicitly to *Opus Dei*'s investigation of liturgy as necessary for understanding *The Highest Poverty*'s study of monasticism. Hence *The Highest Poverty* comes both before and after *Opus Dei*, and *Remnants of Auschwitz* comes either long before both or between them.

If we read *Remnants of Auschwitz* in the order of publication, it appears to be little more than an expansion of the final sections of *Homo Sacer*, presenting the Muselmann as the ultimate example of bare life—and the last major appearance of the figure of bare life itself, which notably fades from view in the subsequently published volumes of the series (including *The Use of Bodies*). Read between *Opus Dei* and *The Highest Poverty*, however, it becomes clearer that *Remnants* is attempting to chart a path between the attempt to reinscribe the camps into 'normal' law (as represented by the Nuremberg and Eichmann trials) and the empty ritual of 'tak-

ing moral responsibility' for one's actions while avoiding legal repercussions. Once we know from *The Highest Poverty's* investigation of monasticism that an order that escapes law and liturgy really is possible, it becomes easier to see that his investigation of the impossible testimony on behalf of the Muselmann is aiming at a similar space before or beyond law (which is founded in the very state of exception that produced the Muselmann as bare life) and liturgy (which separates the subject from his or her actions in a way that evacuates ethical responsibility).

In other words, if we read *Remnants of Auschwitz* in its 'architectonic' placement, it appears to be more central and less dismissible than some readers—including, at times, myself—would like it to be. One can't help but understand Agamben as claiming that the Muselmann gives us privileged access to an ontological domain that is somehow 'redemptive' (for lack of a better word), a claim that can seem disturbing or even obscene, particularly when paired with his strange meditation on sadomasochism. By contrast, if we read *Remnants* in the order of publication, it can seem that Agamben is implicitly backing away from that claim insofar as he puts forwards God's glory (rather than the sadomasochistic punishment of the damned) as a privileged site for the investigation of inoperativity.⁵

In light of *The Use of Bodies*, the centrality of *Remnants* implied by its 'architectonic' placement is forcefully reaffirmed. The eponymous first segment of the book makes a similarly uncomfortable claim, putting forth Aristotle's theory of slavery as the privileged locus for the development of the theory of 'use'—indeed, it is revealed that the phrase 'the use of bodies' is drawn from Aristotle's discussion of slavery in the *Politics*. Much more explicitly than in *Remnants*, the abjected figure of the slave is put forwards as giving us access to 'anthropogenesis', a term first introduced in *The Sacrament of Language* to designate the becoming human of the human animal in its confrontation with language. The sexual use of the slave's body by the master is a particular focus here, giving rise to a more detailed investigation of sadomasochism that carries over into Agamben's 'interlude' on Michel Foucault.

Here we see one of Agamben's signature moves—the rejection of an abstract moralism that would simply denounce a phenomenon and then look away. Corollary with this stance is a refusal to unambiguously designate a 'good guy' and 'bad guy' at any point in his system. For instance, he is generally favourable towards sadomasochism because of how it finds a new use for both the trappings of power relations and for sexuality itself. At the same time, he recognizes the limits of the paradigm's subversive power when it is transferred back into the political field. In a note on masochism in *Opus Dei*, Agamben claims that simply exposing the obscene underside of power is not the answer and may in fact further reinforce the powers of domination.⁶ Moreover, as I've already noted, at a crucial moment in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben explicitly turns away from the sadomasochistic encounter between the demons and the

damned in hell, preferring to unmask the imposture of sovereignty through a close analysis of the very gesture of glorification itself.

In the central segment of *The Use of Bodies*, 'An Archeology of Ontology', Agamben performs another reversal, this time with regard to Trinitarian theology. In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, it functioned as the transmitter of the logic of economy to secular modernity, giving rise to contemporary neoliberal governmentality. By contrast, in 'An Archeology of Ontology', Trinitarian theology performs crucial ontological mutations that help Agamben to get at what he calls a 'modal ontology' that privileges ways of being over actuality. This same segment creates a kind of relay between *The Sacrament of Language* and *Opus Dei* as well by tying the project of ontology to anthropogenesis, that is, to the encounter between human life and language. With this in mind, we see that *Opus Dei's* 'two ontologies' (of is and ought, of being and having-to-be) can be mapped onto the difference between assertorial and performative oaths.

Rather than belabour the new connections that struck me upon reading *The Use of Bodies*, however, I would like to turn now to a volume that retrospectively seems to contain essentially all the important themes of the *Homo Sacer* series—namely *The Time That Remains*, which is not part of the series and which appeared after the original *Homo Sacer* and *Remnants of Auschwitz* but before *State of Exception* and all the subsequent volumes. I returned to *The Time That Remains* after rapidly completing the other volumes, and I was struck by the way it seemed to prefigure nearly all the *Homo Sacer* volumes that followed it. If we return to the somewhat surprising list of key concepts from Agamben's 'notice' to *The Use of Bodies*—use, exigency, mode, form of life, and inoperativity—the only one that is not explicitly developed in *The Time That Remains* is 'form of life', and even that may be a misleading characterization of the situation, insofar as all five concepts are so closely tied together as to imply one another.

Thus while we wait in joyful hope for the publication of the English translation of *The Use of Bodies*, *The Time That Remains* may well serve as an adequate substitute—not because it contains or prefigures all the explicit content of the much longer *The Use of Bodies*, but because it performs the same kind of operation on the *Homo Sacer* series, pointing out connections and consequences that might otherwise have remained unnoticed.

Nonetheless, *The Time That Remains* is not immune to the retrospective changes that the later volumes carry out. There is a sense in which one could call Agamben a deeply 'Pauline' thinker, and yet that does not mean that Paul emerges as an untarnished hero by the end of the *Homo Sacer* series. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to tease out the precise links between the Pauline epistles and the economic logic that grows out of them, but it seems clear that Agamben lays ultimate responsibility for the 'economic' character of Christianity at Paul's feet, and perhaps less

ambiguously, he presents Paul as the primary source for Christian ideas about the hierarchical order of angelic glorification. The one aspect of Pauline thought that appears to be unambiguously positive, the logic of the *hos me*, the 'as not', plays a crucial role in both *The Highest Poverty* and *The Use of Bodies*—yet the later volumes cast a shadow even here. In retrospect, the analysis of *klesis* or 'calling' in *The Time That Remains* seems to foreshadow the analysis of liturgy in *Opus Dei*, indicating that something like the 'as not' can function negatively to reinforce power relations rather than relativize them.

The Use of Bodies also sheds interesting light on other major points of reference throughout the series. Walter Benjamin reappears here—as always, in an unambiguously positive light—while the name of Carl Schmitt is blessedly absent from the entire text. Aristotle and Martin Heidegger play major roles, both positive and negative, highlighting the ambivalence that has always marked Agamben's use of their work. Both thinkers—and of course the two are necessarily connected since Agamben's reception of Aristotle is so deeply marked by Heidegger's idiosyncratic Aristotelianism—at times seem to embody what is worst and most destructive in the Western tradition. This negative valence is clearest when Heidegger is presented as an unwitting representative of the ontology of command in *Opus Dei*,⁷ or when Aristotle's theory of potentiality, which previous seemed to be firmly on the 'good' side of Agamben's ledger, quite unexpectedly appears in *Homo Sacer* as the paradigm for the logic of sovereignty.⁸ Nevertheless, both somehow point beyond it—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that each of them somehow gives us access to something before or below the 'Western machine', to the ever-present, ever-receding moment of anthropogenesis.

Perhaps more surprising is Agamben's extensive use of Plato towards the end of *The Use of Bodies*. His references to Plato himself have always been relatively sparing, even in texts where he draws extensively on Neoplatonism. Yet in retrospect, they are seemingly always positive. Already in the chapter in *Homo Sacer* on Pindar's evocation of *nomos basil-eus*, Plato seems to offer us a decoupling of law and force that bears a certain resemblance to Agamben's reading of the Benjaminian 'real state of exception'. This chapter can initially seem out of place, as Agamben leaps from the most abstract general presentation of the logic of sovereignty (and its parallels in linguistics and ontology) to the most detailed questions of Greek philology. Yet the first hint that there may be an escape from this cruel logic comes in the form of a misquotation from Pindar by Plato, one that scholars have tended to regard as a copyist's error but that Agamben insists was purposeful.⁹ Building on this point, Agamben traces the development of Plato's theory of natural law, concluding that Plato 'means to affirm not law's sovereignty over nature but, on the contrary, its "natural," which is to say nonviolent, character'.¹⁰ By contrast, the Sophists, here anticipating the mainstream of the Western

tradition, tended to unite law and sovereignty in a way that required a conception of law as a violent imposition. Agamben underlines this point in the passage that immediately follows, when he demonstrates that Thomas Hobbes, the ultimate theorist of sovereignty and the inspiration for Schmitt, basically shares the Sophist's view on this matter.¹¹

More dramatically, in *The Sacrament of Language*, Plato figures in Agamben's conclusion as the ultimate exemplar of philosophy as a critique of the logic of the oath, which here stands in for the entire Western machine. As with the misquotation of Pindar, Agamben's point is somewhat obscured by his close attention to philological detail, as in the long note at the end of §12. Against the legal scholar Plescia, Agamben disputes the claim that there was ever an era when the oath effectively bound Greeks to fulfil their word, after which they fell into a faithless decadence. Here Agamben argues that Plescia is misinterpreting Plato's ironic invocation in the laws of the good old days when everyone feared the gods and fulfilled their oaths. Plato's wry observation that in a litigious city 'well-nigh half the citizens are perjurers' given that both opponents are required to swear an oath to the rightness of their cause shows that Plato recognized the insidious nature of the oath.¹² In other words, Plato already realized that the ineffectiveness of the oath and the resulting proliferation of the curse were not an unfortunate deviation from the logic of the oath but necessary consequences—and hence Plato joins Agamben in calling for an alternative to the oath as the foundation for the social bond.

I have argued in the chapter 'Paul and the Jewish Alternative' in this volume that Agamben's concept of philosophy in this passage is homologous to what he elsewhere calls the messianic. If philosophy takes pride of place here, it may be because the stakes of *The Use of Bodies* are more purely ontological than political-theological. This is particularly true of the central section on the 'Archeology of Ontology', which consists of the same kind of fine distinctions that characterize much of *Opus Dei*. Whatever the intrinsic interest of these passages, they help us to see how consistently the entire series has been oriented towards questions of ontology, even and especially when its concerns have seemed to be most urgently political and contemporary.

There is much more that I could say about *The Use of Bodies*, but I have now covered the primary ways that it helped me to read Agamben's previous work anew. What remains is the seemingly ironic question of my chapter's title: What is to be done? Clearly we can't expect any kind of 'political program' from Agamben. Many have critiqued him for a one-sided emphasis on theory over practice,¹³ but one of the things I find most helpful about his work is the way he calls that very distinction into question. In Agamben's account, an abstruse scholastic debate can have an astonishing impact on economic and governmental forms centuries

later, while the way priests and monks (and sadomasochists) live out their day-to-day lives can have profound effects on the level of ontology.

It can't be a matter of getting away from abstract concepts and into lived experience, because for Agamben, our life and our politics play out precisely at the point of intersection between life and abstraction, between the human animal and language. Theory and practice, study and play, both have equal rights here because both converge at the horizon of anthropogenesis—and thus both give us the opportunity to make that small change that will allow us to become human again but differently this time. If Agamben is calling us to do anything, it is to dare to attempt that small change that will make all things new.

NOTES

1. Originally presented at the American Comparative Literature Association Annual Conference, Seminar: 'Agamben, Capital, and the *Homo Sacer* Series: Economy, Poverty, People, Work', at New York University, March 2014.

2. Giorgio Agamben, *L'uso dei corpi: Homo sacer, IV, 2* (Vicenza, Italy: Neri Pozza, 2014), 9; my translation.

3. Another product of this period of intense study is my reconsideration of the relationship between the early segments on sovereignty and the later texts on economy and theology in 'The Theology of Neoliberalism' in this volume.

4. SE, 64.

5. Cf. my critique of this move on Agamben's part in 'Perhaps Psychoanalysis?' in this volume.

6. OD, 117–18.

7. OD, 61–62.

8. HS, 39–48.

9. HS, 33–34.

10. HS, 35.

11. HS, 35–36.

12. SL, 29, quoting Plato's *Laws*.

13. A claim I dispute previously in this volume in 'Genealogy and Political Theology.'

Conclusion: Finding a New Use for Theology

Colby Dickinson and Adam Kotsko

For a work on Giorgio Agamben to ‘conclude’ in any programmatic way would be to betray the inherently open-ended and exploratory nature of Agamben’s project. This is especially the case given that his lifelong project seems to have been from the start an effort to upend many of our standard representations of things, even of traditional methods of scholarship. The final volume of the *Homo Sacer* series, in fact, is more a collection of related studies than a sustained book-length argument. Hence there is something Agambenian about a book like the present one, which has sought to emphasize the diverse ways that Agamben can be read by staging a dialogue between two thinkers who have been grappling with his work, both in parallel and together, for over a decade.

Rather than attempt a final synthesis of our readings of Agamben or a constructive development of his thought, then, we choose here to conclude as Agamben himself almost always does: by pointing towards questions that remain to be explored, ‘coming tasks’ that are to be taken up by others. And just as he attempts to position himself at the outermost boundaries of the various apparatuses he seeks to render inoperative, so do we hope, as we have throughout this volume, to push up against the boundaries or limitations of Agamben’s own thought.

1. THE QUESTION OF ETHICS

One of the most effective rhetorical strategies Agamben deploys in *Homo Sacer* is the refusal of moralism. He never lets us simply condemn Nazism, for example, without being complicit in it, never lets us imagine that our ‘normal’ liberal order is something fully different from and better than the totalitarianism it rejects. For this reason, it is problematic for Agamben’s readers to deploy his concepts in a moralizing way, as when they critique the War on Terror for wrongly turning people into *homines sacres*. Such a move seems to miss the radicality of his attack. The problem is not just that some discrete political policy renders someone as a *homo sacer* but rather that rendering someone as a *homo sacer* is what our

established political orders ultimately always do. The 'normal' human dignity to which we wish to restore such persons is built on the presupposition of a permanent existence of *homines sacres*. It simply cannot exist without them. The broken promises of 'change' that linger behind many a politician's tenure in office would find their explanation here.

In the last analysis, of course, Agamben would surely agree that it is undesirable to render someone into a *homo sacer*, or else his critique of the structures that carry out that operation would lack their profound urgency. Further, beyond the horizon of easy moralism, he has gestured ever more insistently towards something like an ethics, even though individual ethical practice seems clearly inadequate to the radical change his critique seems to demand. Agamben wishes to somehow step outside the system of politics proper and only from this vantage point to rethink the operations of law, politics, ethics, religion, and philosophy.

Perhaps the resultant 'deadlock' that many sense as prominent within his work is why he often turns to attempts within the history of religious traditions to radically rethink the shape of our shared life. These traditions continuously point towards a world beyond the one we see before us, and yet it is also a world that they insist can and must be brought into reality (as when Christians pray for God's kingdom to come into our world). At the same time, such a vision for a world beyond this one is typically presented to us in a paradoxical fashion, as something that seems as if it cannot exist at all, but at the same time as something that we feel must come to exist for the betterment of humanity.

At the same time, Agamben clearly sees the limitations of those theological apparatuses that have blinded us to the face of the person before us, to their 'exposure' or 'nudity', as he terms it on occasion. Theology has seemingly so thoroughly failed at the task of responding to the other that Agamben now proposes some undisclosed form of theology—one lacking any of the historical content that many would identify it with—as a wholly immanent task that is at once philosophical and ethical. As Agamben claims throughout his works (particularly in his *Means without Ends*, *The Coming Community*, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, and *The Open*), rendering the anthropological machinery that generates our political, social, and religious representations inoperative allows us to strip away what has been foisted upon us and, thereby, perhaps to behold the naked 'whatever being' that stands before us in its precarious vulnerability and its absolute particularity.

It is this 'form of life' that Agamben has been after for so long, and that creeps up again towards the end of his *Homo Sacer* series in *The Highest Poverty*, one that is seemingly beyond the law and yet right before our eyes, every day, if we could only see reality as such. It is this strain of ethical thought that most directly correlates as well with his parallel efforts to turn to a realm of 'pure' gesture beyond words as an ethical imperative and as part of the presentation beyond all representations that

he has clamoured for on numerous occasions. And this desire to go beyond the form of this present world while recognizing the inevitability of returning to the world arguably makes him less 'antinomian' and more hermeneutical in orientation than he has generally let on. Here one could point to his remarks on the necessity of maintaining a tension between this world and a messianic one in *The Church and the Kingdom* or the necessarily missed encounter between the political and the theological that he outlines in *Pilate and Jesus*.

2. THE QUESTION OF THE 'WEST'

If the 'form of life' we are after is one that is posited before the division between law and life (or, as we might put it in more explicitly theological terms, 'grace'), then what does this mean for the division between Judaism and Christianity? Agamben seems to be suggesting that to recognize a difference between these traditions is itself an entrance into a realm of representations that the initial Christian proclamation, at least in its Pauline formula, tries to go beyond. The Pauline 'division of division itself', championed in *The Time That Remains* and arguably central to his entire philosophical project, pushes us beyond the historical tensions between these two religious traditions and towards a poverty of identity that puts an end to the 'strong' identities of both religions. This 'Franciscan' ontology, as some have put it, nicely illustrates his recurring fascination with accessing a space prior to the division of immanence and transcendence, one of 'absolute immanence' that we regress to in order to somehow become the fullest potentiality of the human being. This is a place that Agamben has located through his reading of Aristotle on a state of 'pure potentiality', a specific conceptualization that subsequently permeates his entire oeuvre.

Yet there is an identity that Agamben seems to be strangely insistent upon, and which crops up again and again in his selection of texts and authors: namely, that of the West. Despite some forays into the Jewish and even Islamic heritage in his earlier writings, the *Homo Sacer*-era texts are overwhelmingly Western in orientation. Even when Indian traditions quite unexpectedly come up in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, they are mediated through Western anthropology (via Marcel Mauss) and their inclusion is implicitly justified by reference to the scholarly construct of the Indo-European heritage that he relies on throughout his career. Even the Hebrew scriptures rarely come under discussion other than to clarify references to them in later Western texts.

In *Infancy and History*, moreover, he includes a programmatic statement under the heading 'Program for a Review', in which he puts forwards philology as a radical method that can get past the impasses of the decline of authority in modernity. There he talks about how philology

proceeds by first creating a textual tradition as a tradition. We must assume, therefore, that such traditions are linguistically based and arbitrarily (contingently) constructed.

Yet our question remains: Why continually re-create this tradition that runs from 'classical antiquity' to the 'Christian Middle Ages' to 'secular modernity'? Is this a strategic position on Agamben's part or a principled one? If this move is merely strategic, can it be strategically justified time and again? Or, perhaps more to the point, should it be?

While no one would dispute the necessity for internal critiques of Western thought, why should the West be the only possible site for alternatives? Why does he go to monasticism, for example, rather than drawing explicitly on rabbinic Judaism as a new form of law? Why is there no exploration of *Shari'a* as an alternate conception of law? Must all law necessarily be Western law, thus necessitating a seemingly antinomial solution?

Perhaps it is simply the case that the Western traditions with which he deals are his context, as they are for a good many of us working within certain continental traditions. It feels to us, however, that Agamben's work, much as with any philosophy that responds to the call to take alterity seriously, must push us beyond the West and towards its 'other'. Perhaps the 'coming' philosophy then will be a comparative exercise unlike anything we have yet seen, one willing to extend its reach far beyond Western texts and authors and towards those 'subaltern' texts and persons who remain, for many, entirely unknown and unengaged.

All of this is also to ask, can we learn to read Agamben's work differently, as a way of testifying to the possibility that the radical, alternative solutions we desperately need in the West are perhaps already present elsewhere in the world, in cultures and contexts that the West has been loathe to acknowledge, especially in an academic setting?

3. THE QUESTION OF POLITICAL THEOLOGY

According to Agamben's reading of the disciplines of both philosophy and theology, in the end, there is little difference between them, except to say that theology, historically speaking, got things very wrong early on and only now has an opportunity to embrace its 'mission' once again. When he speaks of Saint Paul's understanding of 'the messianic' and its ability to upend any of our representations through a 'division of division itself', again in *The Time That Remains*, he is signalling something we might call the 'theological' core of our essential philosophical insights. This is why we feel that Agamben's most philosophical work will always also have a theological counterpart to it, just as his writings on theology will always have major philosophical conclusions.

We agree as such that Agamben sees the two disciplines as necessarily connected or at least as mutually communicative. He recognizes a distinction between them, but they seem to be two ways of going about a fundamentally similar task. This is perhaps what leads him to see such a necessary connection as fostering his absolute rejection of modern attempts to establish 'religion' as a separate, self-contained realm—opening up a path for a new and different way of conceiving the relationship between theology and philosophy outside paradigms of either the religious or the secular.

In many ways, this is why his notion of 'profanation' is so intriguing, though perhaps very baffling at the same time. There is a sense in which 'profaning' what appears to us as 'sacred' is a blasphemous act, but it is one that also seems so central to the Christian tradition, as something Jesus himself would have been familiar with (and it is interesting, therefore, to read his comments on Jesus in *The Sacrament of Language* as suggesting as much). Jesus's many acts of 'blasphemy' might in turn actually be reread as so many acts of profanation, specifically in Agamben's sense of the term. This is a point that theologians themselves have often been hesitant to take up and address directly because it often puts them at tremendous odds with ecclesial ('religious') structures of authority. And yet it is a central insight on Christian thought that must be reckoned with.

What seems unique in his work is that Agamben offers theology a genuine chance to glimpse its own inner workings in terms of its political movements, specifically as they have been deployed over time, and in this way, to rethink its own foundations as a self-reflexive exercise. In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, for example, he points out time and again how Christian talk of the Trinity is mired in a very this-worldly economy, complete with communal and even financial implications. He does the same thing in his comments in his book *Nudities* on the 'glorious body', the post-Resurrected body that is really another way of talking about our very earthly bodies.

For quite some time now many theologians have been trying to talk about how each and every theology really says a good deal about one's personal context (e.g., feminist, black, Latino/a theologies, etc.), the site from which a particular theology is performed. What Agamben seems to say to such efforts is that they are right to recognize the importance of looking at the ground from which one speaks but also that such talk does not go far enough insofar as the foundational claims of the Christian narrative must also be reexamined and spoken anew from within new contexts. The entire project of theology must be rethought from the ground up, and philosophy—or something like the 'philosophy of theology', perhaps—plays a central role in redefining the theological tasks before us today.

The major 'point of contact' between philosophy and theology in this regard—and to which theologians will have to become more attuned

than they currently are—is actually the notion of the messianic, which in some works (like *The Sacrament of Language*) can seem to be synonymous with the philosophical. Just so, Agamben can detect messianic patterns of thought in Aristotle, for example, and implicitly claim Saint Paul as part of the philosophical tradition. In this light, it will be intriguing to see what happens to the distinction between philosophy and theology in his work subsequent to *Opus Dei*, where he postulates two ontologies, one of being and one of command, which may correspond to (or serve as the object of) philosophy and theology, respectively. Additionally, in this context, and insofar as it should be addressed to theologians, one of the things we most appreciated about *Opus Dei* in fact was his movement back towards the ethical-philosophical by way of critique towards Kant's sense of 'duty'—something linked very much in many people's minds to an internal sense of 'commanding oneself'. There is much yet to be rethought within the Western, Christian tradition with regard to duty, obligation, and responsibility, just to name a few central concepts, and we believe that Agamben is here pointing a way towards such a reformulation of these things, and in very profound ways.

As another example of such 'points of contact', the way he talks about the Kantian categorical imperative resonates a great deal with psychoanalytic accounts of its relationship to the superego—with all the cruelty and sadism implied there. He acknowledges that connection by writing a long note on Jacques Lacan's 'Kant avec Sade', and while it is clear that he wants to take some distance from the psychoanalytic interpretation, it is less clear what his own position is. This is an area where Eric Santner's work, for example, might be seen as especially valuable for understanding Agamben, because Santner is continually supplementing Agamben's concepts with psychoanalytic ones—and in retrospect, Agamben's own account can sometimes seem incomplete. It is as though he needs that psychoanalytic supplement and yet does not want to deal with it.

In short, the consequence of such a transfer again has a highly relevant theological point: politics today functions as a thinly veiled religious spectacle, complete with its calls for glory to permeate its every gesture. One can notice how certain national political spaces and persons have a tendency to become 'sacred' over time. In a deeply ironic fashion, then, Agamben tries in a certain sense to preserve theology's ('original' or perhaps simply Pauline) ability to critique the political sphere and its dependence on the violent reductions made with regard to its given, normative representations. Though he is highly critical of theology's legacy, historically speaking, there is something as well in the Christian tradition specifically—from Paul's writings to Saint Francis of Assisi's attempt to embody a 'form of life' beyond the law—that is able to formulate a substantial critique of the political sphere's use of the 'sacred'. At the same time, such a rendering of things allows him also to dismiss any labelling of 'sacrality' as a political ploy for sovereign power. Such insights motivate

his quest towards an 'absolute profanation' of our world as the only way to be authentically 'religious', and in the end, we feel that such a profanation does share something fundamental with Jesus's own attempts to divest people of their false 'sacred' idols.

What is likewise noteworthy from the perspective of the theory of religion is that Agamben believes that this shift within our understanding of sacredness, from religion to politics, is only possible because the very notion of the sacred itself points to a time 'before' religion and politics were separated in the first place. One might think that a notion like 'the sacredness of human life' is more of a metaphor drawn from the religious sphere, which is meant to emphasize the extreme importance of human life, but if the religious and the political are always connected because they share the same root in human experience, then a metaphor can never be only a metaphor.

In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben's goal is to reveal how sovereign power is fundamentally empty, and the empty throne is a powerful image for that reality (or lack of reality). But he also does something interesting with this image. It seems to be merely a way of unmasking the illegitimacy of sovereign power, but he claims that there's something positive to be said as well. The void at the heart of sovereignty can also be a source of transformation and creativity, a source of the pure potentiality that does not cross over into actuality. This is because it corresponds to the fundamental inoperativity of humanity—the fact that we have no pre-given purpose or task in the world. Sovereign power masks this inoperativity by claiming to be the purpose of all human activity, and unmasking sovereign power grants us the possibility of creating new and different purposes or tasks for ourselves.

What we would note here as well is an aspect of Agamben's argument in *The Kingdom and the Glory* that is perhaps difficult to understand but entirely relevant to the point we are trying to make here. At first, he seems to be presenting the economic paradigm as a better alternative to the political-theological paradigm of sovereignty, especially insofar as he locates it in the Pauline epistles. Yet by the end of the book, he has dismissed the economic paradigm as ultimately 'hellish' and beyond redemption and turned back to the sovereign paradigm in his analysis of glory. Perhaps he could have said more about how he understands Paul's place in the development of economic thought.

Though Agamben does not do so, it would be theologically beneficial to put such a view of the 'void' at the heart of sovereignty in dialogue with something like Jürgen Moltmann's notion of 'perichorisis', in which the Trinity itself is said to have a void at its own heart. Agamben does take up Moltmann's notion of the Trinity very briefly in this book, but he does not deal directly with this connection, and as such, an opportunity is missed to explore 'alternate' notions of the divine, ones beyond his usual understanding of divine sovereignty. In this way, Agamben points be-

yond the simple connection of God-sovereignty, though he does not address those theologians who sought to do similar things for decades. In this sense, the reader might be disappointed with his engagement with Moltmann, for example, as it was limited to claims that Benjamin already did a better job of what Moltmann wants to do and to a quotation identifying the economic and immanent trinity (which actually stems originally from Karl Rahner). In general, Agamben does a great job of engaging with the theological tradition, but like most other philosophers, he can be dismissive (or even ignorant) of contemporary theologians.

4. FINDING A 'NEW USE' FOR THEOLOGY

The point we thus arrive at is starkly illustrated: the status of theology as a discourse in itself is always unclear in Agamben's work. In some ways, this apparent confusion is productive because it allows him to simply ignore tired clichés on the differences between theology and philosophy—and thereby come to see genealogical links that would otherwise be invisible if his discourse were governed by that opposition.

What remains of theology as a distinctive task, however? Is the 'messianic' moment of theology simply absorbed into the truly critical 'philosophy' Agamben cites at the end of *The Sacrament of Language*? Is Plato, in the end, a messianist and Paul simply a philosopher? If so, what is theology's distinctive task? Or is theology simply superseded by a truly critical philosophy, as he seems to enact in *The Sacrament of Language*? And what do we make of the status of political theology in particular in light of these questions?

Though Agamben does not himself articulate a theology per se, we might suggest that if he did venture into this territory, it would be one wherein God is silent, behind a wall of 'absolute immanence' that at once undoes centuries of theological speculation and yet might better preserve the nature of whatever 'mystery' such a divinity might actually be. Insofar as religion has tried historically to express the existence of language itself without actually being able to state this fact in words (this is its 'sacramental' core), it is now philosophy that is capable of illuminating the possibility of a true 'messianic nihilism', understood as an immanent and ethical task.

Though this task may seem like the end of theology, perhaps it is rather the case that it is simply the end of theology as we know it. The productive rise in a determinate 'political theology' (from the mid-twentieth century onwards) has given the world a bold provocateur intended to dismantle many political and theological ruses that had once functioned as tools of oppression. A new use for theology, however, is yet possible, one that will have significant consequences for the definitions we give to politics, religion, culture, economics, and philosophy. And it is

perhaps by thinking this particular new use for theology that we might begin to conceive of new uses for the other remnants of the ongoing disaster called the Western theologico-political machine. Agamben's work seems to call us forwards on a new path that we, as a civilization founded on a particular nexus of politics and theology, ever in search for their philosophical justifications, may have never before tread upon.

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