BEYOND OBJECTS, BEYOND SUBJECTS: GIORGIO AGAMBEN ON ANIMALITY, PARTICULARITY AND THE END OF ONTO-THEOLOGY

Colby Dickinson

KU Leuven

ABSTRACT: The work of Giorgio Agamben could perhaps best be described as an original extension of the onto-theological critique that has dominated much of the last century's philosophical endeavors. For him, this fundamental critical perspective extends itself toward the deconstruction of traditional significations, including the boundaries said to exist between the human and the animal as well as between the human and the divine. By repeatedly unveiling these arbitrary divisions as being a result of the state of 'original sin' in which we dwell, Agamben aims to advance philosophical discourse 'beyond representation' and toward a 'pure' encounter with the myriad of faces always ever present before us. In this sense, he works toward redefining 'revelation' as being little more than an exposure of our animality, something which indeed lies now unveiled at the real root of our being. This animality is in fact locateable beyond the separation of being into form and content, a division which is rather indebted to the onto-theological representations that have governed the discourse of being.

By focusing instead on the manner in which paradigms could be said to operate over and against the (sovereign) rule of representations, he articulates a movement from particularity to particularity that resists the temptation to universalize our language on being. In this sense, then, the analogical logic of the paradigm, expressed always through the absolutely singular, exposes the beings which we all are before another, rather than violently condense any given ('whatever') being into a formal representation. By thus determining the contours of the paradigmatic expression, this essay intends to unite several 'loose' strands of Agamben's thought in order to demonstrate the consequence of this line of inquiry: that the end of representation, often criticized as a form of political nihilism, is the only way in which to develop a justifiable ethics, one beyond the traditional binary divisions of subject and object, or of universal and particular. In the end, as Agamben illustrates repeatedly, there is only the 'thingness' that each thing is, and which must be safeguarded in its precarity, thus paving the way (through a messianic intervention) for an ethical discourse to appear.

It is a final gesture toward the messianic, then, toward a religiously-inflected terminology which hovers over his entire oeuvre, that will ultimately guide Agamben's 'political' project back toward its canonical moment most clearly identifiable within the Christian heritage. As

his reading of Benjamin's relationship to Saint Paul indicates, there is much to be discerned for him in the transition from Judaic law (with its representational logic) to Christian 'forms of life' (with its paradigmatic focus). Rather than be content with a simple re-affirmation of Christian claims, however, Agamben deftly maneuvers his own position toward one of exposing the logic of Christianity as that which reveals a deep investment in a pantheistic worldview, one which theology can no longer afford to ignore.

KEYWORDS: Agamben; Butler; ontotheology; animality; pantheism

INTRODUCTION

For Walter Benjamin, it was the act of remembrance, in contrast to the search for scientific-historical fact, that guaranteed history could never be entirely 'atheological'.[1] There would always be some viewpoint external to history that would impart meaning to it. In this sense, the representations ('semblances') which seem to solidify any sense of 'cultural intelligibility' are given their meaning by viewpoints which must appear in some fashion to be theological, whether they are identified with a particular religious tradition or not.[2] They are also, as Benjamin made clear toward the very end of his life, *undone* by those 'weak messianic forces' moving through history that run counter to all theological-ideological readings of history, all myths of progress.[3] His co-opting of a religious ('messianic') terminology which seems to split or divide the theological from within can be established as a reading of history that attempts to grant power to those oppressed groups or persons who are otherwise muted *within* history, *by* any official historical record, that is, occluded by the strong narratives of progress and victory which dominate most historical accounts. Remembrance, by this count, will always thus appear to have two faces, that of the victor and that of the loser. This is more than a subtle reminder of the inherent contentiousness of any historiographical act.[4] Indeed, acts of remembrance are often nationalistic, racist, colonialist or patriarchical. They are possibly also, however, stories of liberation, surviv-

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1. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA, Belknap, 1999, p. 471. Something of his lifelong 'theological' viewpoint can also be seen in something like his relation to scripture, for example, as witnessed in Brian Britt, *Walter Benjamin and the Bible*, New York, Continuum, 1996. Benjamin's bringing of the theological into relation with the historical is also discussed at length in Stéphane Mosès, *The Angel of History: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem*, trans. Barbara Harshar, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009. See also, Susan A. Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1991 and Eric Jacobson, *Metaphysics of the Profane: The Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2003.

2. Benjamin's juxtaposition of historical 'semblances' or representations against his version of dialectical materialism, which focused rather on the singularities of history brought forward in 'messianic time' is testified to throughout *The Arcades Project*, see especially, his notes sketched toward the end of his life, gathered under the title 'Materials for the Exposé of 1935', no. 25, p. 918.

3. Cf. Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History' in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, (eds.), *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 4 vols., trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., Cambridge, MA, Belknap, 2003.

4. Cf. the development of this notion in relation to Benjamin's conception of history in Matthias Fritsch, *The Promise of Memory: History and Politics in Marx, Benjamin, and Derrida*, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 2005.

al, testimony and truth, functioning often as, to borrow the theologian Johann Baptist Metz's phrase, 'dangerous memories' to those persons remaining in power.[5] Insofar as all acts of remembrance are stories begging to be believed, they are certainly ideological, some more just in their fidelity to truth, others less so. Moreover, some are more violent to the precarious construction of identities today, some less so; for identities, no less than stories, are built upon these acts of remembrance passed along through time.[6]

It is in such a light that I would consider taking up Judith Butler's recent engagement with Benjamin's work, and, more specifically, with the much discussed term 'messianic'. Like Benjamin before her, Butler has striven to defend the excluded and marginalized figures of history whose very presence serves as a sort of messianic force undoing our normative cultural (and often legal) representations.[7] Though her use of the term 'messianic' has been somewhat limited, there lingers in it a profound connection to what has been stated above concerning Benjamin's use of it.[8] Illustrated by the context of her work on gender and its 'undoing', there is a specific way in which she attempts to undermine the 'practices of repetition that constitute identity' which has a strong resonance with Benjamin's approach to history.[9] As she has cleverly depicted it, in terms of human identity, there is no copy of an original ontological form that simply waits to be (re)produced in the present, but only copies of copies, carefully crafted representations of the (gendered) human being which change over time inasmuch as they are disseminated among particular social groupings. Early on in her work, and as she explained in the context of creating 'gender trouble': 'The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects'.[10] Her conclusion, that our identities are performed rather than 'natural', thus draws its strength from these acts of repetition which are easily deconstructed. This leads her to conclude that: 'Ontology is, thus, not a foundation, but a normative injunction that operates insidiously by installing itself into political discourse as its necessary ground'.[11]

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5. Cf. Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley, New York, Crossroad, 2007. This idea is developed further in relation to Metz's theology in Bruce T. Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory*, Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2000.

6. This is nothing less than the reality of the contentious (political) realm of representations which can be said to shape our sense of self (subjecthood). Cf. an account of self-narration, and as will be subsequently implicit in what follows, Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2005.

7. From the outset, Butler's work has been aimed at 'undoing' the normative (gendered, racial) divisions within our world. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 10th anniversary ed., London, Routledge, 1999; *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, London, Routledge, 1993; *Undoing Gender*, London, Routledge, 2004.

8. Cf. her stated interest in the 'messianic' which she puts forth in the 'Afterward' to Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville, (eds.), *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2006. She has subsequently developed this thematic more explicitly in her lecture on religion given at Utrecht University in January 2010.

9. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 188.

10. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 185.

11. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 189.

Ontology, in Butler's eyes, would seemingly be little more than a word utilized historically to mask the ruses of any attempt to 'ground' a given social normativity through a particular ('theological' in Benjamin's words) reading of history. The critique she utilizes, then, can be seen in this light as one aligned against the western ontotheological project and opening, as Annika Thiem highlights, toward the ethical.[12] And this is ultimately what unites her work, in a certain sense, with Benjamin's conceptualizations of history and theology, a proximity which she herself has recently acknowledged by making reference to Benjamin's use of 'messianic time' in order to formulate a 'revolutionary' critique of state (representational) violence.[13]

In essence, the division of gender unveiled by Butler as creating an arbitrary binary representation is an ephemeral ontotheological line which says nothing about an alleged ontological essence of being-male or being-female (if there even were such states of being, which she of course claims there are not), but rather is constituted as a theological (hegemonic) bid for power on behalf of those who most strictly establish and guard the boundaries.[14] Her deconstructive act, then, because it deals with an ontotheological platform, and much like Derrida's work before her, has something of a messianic structure to it; that is, it exposes the fault lines of any normative ontotheological claims from within, and is, in like manner, a challenge to the sovereign powers that be.[15]

Butler has subsequently brought this unmasking of binary representations to the threshold of formulating an ethics, though pulling up short of a fuller critique of the onto-theology which pervades so much of western representational logics.[16] In what follows, however, I wish to demonstrate how the work of Giorgio Agamben actually takes up this fuller onto-theological critique yet in-line with Butler's observations, and despite any differences between them, pursues this line of thought further in order to deconstruct the parallel dichotomous logics at work in the arbitrary divisions estab-

12. Annika Thiem, *Unbecoming Subjects: Judith Butler, Moral Philosophy, and Critical Responsibility*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2008, p. 9f.

13. Cf. her taking up of Benjamin's Theses on history, his use of 'messianic time' and the messianic potential for the disruption of state power, in Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, London, Verso, 2009, pp. 134-5. See also her related essay on Benjamin's notion of violence entitled 'Critique, Coercion, and Sacred Life in Benjamin's 'Critique of Violence'' in Hent de Vries and Lawrence Sullivan, (eds.), *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2006, pp. 201-219.

14. She later extends this arbitrary signification of gender to include the divisions of race which could be said to 'found' the intelligibility of society in some sense. See Judith Butler, 'Changing the Subject' in Sara Salih, (ed.), *The Judith Butler Reader*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2004, pp. 333-34.

15. The concept of a 'messianic without messianism' runs as a theme throughout Derrida's later work. In essence, Derrida sought to develop an open-ended conceptualization of time that cannot be foreclosed upon in history, thus distancing him from any concrete, historical messianism within any particular religious tradition. Cf. his *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 74f. See also the elaboration of the concept in John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1997.

16. Though Butler has engaged more recently with some theological motifs, including Joseph Ratzinger's (Pope Benedict XVI's) views on homosexuality, she advocates within the same pages that religion is only one of many fields attempting to deal with the multiple historical tensions that constitute the subject under state rule. Butler, *Frames of War*, pp. 117-121 and 149f.

lished between the human-animal and the human-divine.[17] I will therefore argue that Agamben's taking-up of this thematic follows quickly on the heels of Heidegger's onto-theological critique, though it perhaps also points toward, in a more Kantian register, the only possible grounds for the existence of theology—though perhaps a particular brand of Benjaminian theology at that.[18] In this manner, I hope to show how Agamben begins to form a position of immanent materialism that is perhaps perceivable as a sort of pantheistic animality, an openness to the 'thing-ness' of all created things and the only way left toward approaching the divine once the messianic forces working within history have dismantled the 'myth of division' which any subsequent myth of progress founds itself upon.

ON HUMAN-ANIMAL REPRESENTATIONS

The work of the contemporary Italian theorist Giorgio Agamben could perhaps best be described as an outright extension of the onto-theological critique that has dominated much of the last century's philosophical endeavors. For him, this fundamental critical perspective extends itself toward the deconstruction of traditional (normative) significations, including the boundaries said to exist between the human and the animal as well as between the human and the divine. By repeatedly unveiling these arbitrary divisions as themselves being a result of the state of 'original sin' in which we dwell (the state of *signification* itself), Agamben aims to advance philosophical discourse 'beyond representation' and toward a 'pure' encounter with the myriad of faces always ever present before us, in their sheer nudity as it were.[19] In this sense, he works toward redefining 'revela-

17. On their differences, one could note, for example, how they differ on notions of sovereignty pre-existing the state of exception. See Elena Loizidou, *Judith Butler: Ethics, Law, Politics*, London, Routledge, 2007, p. 98f. Butler, for her part, has also sought to critique Agamben's all-pervading conceptualizations of sovereignty and 'bare life' in her discussion with Gayatri Spivak in *Who Sings the Nation-State?*, Oxford, Seagull, 2007. Their positions in general, however, do converge on multiple interlocking points, and so, interestingly, Eric L. Santner seeks to combine Agamben's fundamental insights on 'bare life' in relation to gender found in Butler's work in his *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2006.

18. Agamben's critique of ontotheology seems to take its cue most directly from Heidegger whose work seems to have charted a specific course for Agamben. On Heidegger's use of the term 'ontotheology', see Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Vol. IV: Nihilism*, David Farell Krell, (ed.), trans. Frank A. Capuzzi, 4 vols., San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco, 1982, p. 209f. as well as Iain Thomson, *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005. It should also be noted, however, that Agamben has consistently, though opaquely, insisted that the work of Benjamin played the role of 'remedy' to the 'poison' in Heidegger's writings, and thus, that the two must be read in conjunction throughout his own work. See Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 310f.

19. Cf. the numerous places where Agamben takes up his critique of signification, often in explicit reference to what he sees as Derrida's commitment to it. See, for example, Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 156f; *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron, London, Verso, 1993, p. 9; *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005, 102f. In essence, his critique attempts to demonstrate that the act of signification itself violently enters one into a world of representations that in fact mutes the singularity that each person is. In

tion' as being nothing more than an exposure of language itself as it attempts to limit and contain our animality, something which indeed now lies unveiled at the real root of our being. What Agamben seems to be after, then, is a presentation of the post(because pre-)human.[20] This 'animality' within us is in fact locateable beyond the separation of being into form and content, a division which is rather indebted to the onto-theological representations that have governed all discourse on our (human) being.

In his work on the human-animal divide entitled *The Open*, his most extensive treatment of the subject thus far, Agamben goes to great lengths in order to illustrate how the construction of the human subject rests upon a platform of division and separation, one which has no substance in and of itself other than its ability to signify.[21] Indeed, the space that is said to offer such a signification is decidedly empty, having no content *per se*, only bearing its position as a pure functionality of separating and dividing.[22] This is the place for Agamben to locate the origin of language, as well as of our 'original sin'. This site of language, being also the site of our sin, is produced through our (self)distancing from our animality, which also in effect produces the unique character that distinguishes humanity from its animality. This is the originary ground of the ontotheological par excellence.[23] That is, the human subject, in order to appear as such, must constantly state its distinction from the other animals, even if such distinctions become more and more difficult, or even impossible, to make. The human being must remove him/herself from the animal world in order to be human, *the* original act of transcendence if ever there was one.

Utilizing his characteristic genealogical approach, and thus ranging in his sources from Aristotle and Heidegger to the founder of taxonomy Carolus Linnaeus and the biologist Jakob von Uexküll, Agamben continuously circulates around his target of the historical fabrication of the human subject, performing an analysis which renders humans as being truly 'without content' in terms of any alleged ontological essence. They are precisely 'without content' in the sense that there is nothing inherent to their nature which can render them unique (or, sovereign) among the animal kingdom. Indeed, their borders are 'mobile', seemingly permeable, and thus in great need of defense, as often

contrast to this, Agamben seeks on multiple occasions to contribute toward an 'exposure' of being before the face of another, something he describes as our more proper state of 'nudity'. See Giorgio Agamben, *Nudités*, trad. Martin Rueff, Paris, Rivages, 2009.

20. Cf. Giorgio Agamben, 'The Idea of Language' in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 39f.

21. Agamben most directly addresses the animal/human boundary in his work *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004, which also, at times, deliberately directs the questioning of this arbitrary separation to the human/divine border as well. See also his remarks in Giorgio Agamben, *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p. 93.

22. His remarks on the 'state of exception' elsewhere should be read in this context. Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005.

23. Cf. the notion of our 'original sin' being a state of separation from our animality is explored in Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 95f; *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 80.

the weakest arguments are in need of the most powerful, emphatic and yet absolutely empty justifications, their *force* as it were.

The ceaseless need to rearticulate the boundaries between human and animal, a boundary which cannot really be said to exist as such, is thereby exposed as the 'anthropological machinery' which institutes what we call 'humanity'. It is a boundary dependent upon humankind's ability to construct its own image within a more originary zone of indifference, what he will elsewhere call a 'zone of indistinguishability' or a site of 'pure potentiality'.[24] It is here that the anthropological machine engages in a ceaseless 'articulation between human and animal, man and non-man, speaking being and living being'.[25] Humankind thus becomes sovereign within ('over') the animal kingdom because it alone can draw a distinction of some sort between human and animal, despite the fact that no substantial or quantifiable distinction can really be established as such. This, indeed, is what his genealogical analysis seeks to uncover: the 'division of life' itself, forged in the cracks of the 'human being', without justification or even the potential for being clearly delineated as identifiable. It was this very lack of identifiability, in fact, which led taxonomists such as Linnaeus to attempt a categorization of humans as the animal which has the unique capacity to recognize itself as human, and so, therefore by this logic, *must be* human.[26] Consequently, each statement that attempts to articulate our being proceeds from this fractured sense of self that lies deep within, a state that has historically yet been defined as *sin*. The uniqueness of Agamben's claim here is that this is not simply an ontological proposition (hence, both biological and philosophical), but a theological one as well (hence, 'sinful'), and thus it is truly onto-theological. Ontotheology is therefore defined as a reaction to the originary 'zone of indistinction', that is, to the 'caesura' at the heart of our being in which we constantly dwell and which we wish to transcend by positing ourselves as (sovereign) subjects. Ontotheology is given its reign, then, over the ambiguity of our condition as animals so that the human being might be born.

What becomes evident for Agamben in all of this is that a deeper ontological rift is 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 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]

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24. Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 47f; *State of* Exception, p. 31; *The Open*, pp. 37-8; *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort, New York, Zone, 2007, p. 79.

25. Agamben, *The Open*, pp. 37-8.

26. Cf. Agamben, *The Open*, p. 26.

27. Agamben, *The Open*, p. 21.

An entirely immanent reading of history is opened up through this reflection, one that likewise directly impinges upon what we have come to understand as being the domain of the 'theological'. Hence, his reading of Benjamin's 'weak messianic force' is essential to unmasking the rather arbitrary strength of signification.[28] Only a messianic dislodging of the boundaries between human and animal, as between human and divine, could point toward something like the arbitrariness of division itself. Much like Foucault's famous ending to *The Order of Things* where he declares that man is a recent invention, the invention of *homo sapiens* is, for Agamben, 'neither a clearly defined species nor a substance; it is, rather, a machine or device for producing the recognition of the human', something which the messianic forces moving through history are capable of disrupting.[29] This is so because, as Agamben will elsewhere state, the messianic is an entrance into that 'zone of indifference' where the human-animal and human-divine divisions are created, an entrance that also reveals the true nature of such a zone, as the contentless, unpronounceable potentiality that exists within all created things.[30] It is the blank slate upon which so much of our significations are carved, that is, where the anthropological machinery continues to produce our self-identity.[31] It is pre-historic inasmuch as it is pre-linguistic—a radical manner of 'moving beyond' (as 'before') the ontotheological indeed.

For this reason, he is able to take up the 'messianic vocation' elsewhere as a counter movement to these productions and a chance to return to our animality. Co-opting a religious terminology, though in some contrast to Derrida's adaptation of the same concept, Agamben utilizes a discourse of the messianic as a suspension of all sovereign decisions regarding the construction of representations in general. Essentially, the messianic forces moving through history, much as they were for Benjamin, are those 'weak' forces established as counter to the sovereign narratives of a 'purer' ideological script. If stripped to their barest form, it is possible to view these messianic forces, as Agamben does, as even capable of stripping down our sovereign notions of transcendence and 'humanity'. The messianic is, by this count, 'a movement of immanence, or, if one prefers, a zone of absolute indiscernability between this world and the future world'.[32] It is a chance for a redemption which can be said to precede creation.[33] The messianic issues in a 'generic potentiality', a 'being-without-content' as such which more accurately presents created things by not trying to identify or represent them.[34] The messianic vocation is therefore also the 'revocation of every vocation'

28. Cf. Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, p. 102f.

29. Agamben, *The Open*, p. 26. Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York, Vintage, 1970, pp. 386-7.

30. Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 26f.

31. Agamben himself deploys the image of the 'blank slate' as a metaphor for our 'pure potentiality' in a short tale on the philosopher Damascius in *Idea of Prose*, pp. 31-4. For an elaboration upon this theme, see also Anthony Downey, 'Zones of Indistinction: Giorgio Agamben's 'Bare Life' and the Politics of Aesthetics' *Third Text*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2009, pp. 109-25.

32. Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, p. 25.

33. Such is what Agamben has recently claimed in his essay 'Création et salut' in *Nudités*, pp. 9-22.

34. Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, p. 26.

and a dwelling in the indiscernability of our situatedness which is ultimately all we have.[35] It is also, however, the only viable ethical option which is present to humanity, if humanity is willing to embrace this 'coming political task' which risks the very definition of humanity. As he puts 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]

Though critics such as Dominick LaCapra have been concerned about the nature of his making this a political task for future generations, the messianic act of dividing (signified) divisions themselves, something which Agamben discerns at work in the writings of both Saint Paul and Benjamin, is an entrance into the zone of indistinction that yet must not be foreclosed upon with the ease of perpetuating violent representations; rather, it must be kept open and allowed to expose itself for what it is beyond the political sphere entirely.[37] Instead of being an opening to a truly political nightmare, as LaCapra envisions, it is, in this fashion, rather an end to the political as we know it, something which has certainly earned him (and perhaps rightly) the label of being a 'political nihilist' at times.[38] Despite this seemingly harsh criticism, for Agamben it is only at the point of dissolving politics that the only true ethical task may be carried out, as a ceasing entirely of our indebtedness to the 'anthropological machine'. If there is an ontology at work here, it is to be found in this movement of openness, a certain regression beyond representation and politics, a poverty of being that (in Heideggerian terms) shares with the animal's poverty of world.[39] It is a willingness to enter into a poverty of being that the messianic

35. Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, p. 23, de-emphasized from the original. This messianic vigor, then, seems to condense what he has stated elsewhere as a Deleuzian-Spinozistic reduction of philosophical investigation to a plane of 'absolute immanence'. As he considers it, '*The ria* 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'. Giorgio Agamben, 'Absolute Immanence' in *Potentialities*, p. 239.

36. Agamben, *The Open*, p. 92. See also, Andrew Benjamin, 'Particularity and Exceptions: On Jews and Animals', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 107, no. 1, 2008, pp. 71-87.

37. Cf. Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, p. 138f. LaCapra's critique, in this regard, seems to misperceive Agamben's stated intentions of 'going beyond' the political, which precludes any foray into dangerous, utopian political movements. Just how this form of living without politics is achievable, however, remains to be seen. See Dominick LaCapra, *History and Its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2009, p. 162f.

38. Cf. 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, Stanford University Press, 2007, pp. 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*, Stocksfield, Acumen, 2008.

39. Cf. Agamben, *The Open*, p. 49f. See also, the idea of 'regression' explored by Agamben in his essay 'Philosophical Archaeology', in *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, trans. Luca D'Isanto with Kevin Attell,

points toward, what has elsewhere been suggested as resembling a certain 'Franciscan' ontology in his work.[40]

IMMANENCE, OR MATERIALISM AS A PANTHEISTIC ANIMALITY

In contrast to the traditional transcendent claims of ontotheological speculation, Agamben's work seems poised to present what Antonio Negri has referred to as a 're-newal of the theological-political in the Spinozian way', what could otherwise perhaps be labeled as a 'theology of immanence' potentially latent within his writings. This is something which seemingly does point in many ways to a potential 're-enchantment' of our post-religious world.[41] Agamben's understanding of immanence is therefore, and as might be anticipated from what has already been stated above, wrapped within his conception of a zone of indifference, indistinction and exception, a zone seemingly forever marked by the repeated attempts to transcend its ambiguity and to posit an ontotheological grounding through its various act of signification. The divisions of gender, of race, of human and animal, as well as of human and divine are all scored within this zone, and, as he makes clear, it is a zone of suspension which should, as the present ethical task before us, be itself constantly suspended until it remains as only the pure potentiality that it most truly is, and without any identification to distort it.[42] It is a realm then 'beyond representation', a presentation of the particularity that all things irreducibly are. As Agamben's later work on paradigms demonstrates, the way to reconcile the caesura or scission or fracture at the heart of the human being (our 'sinful' state) is to do away with the dichotomous logics that this (representational) schema has brought us. Instead therefore of relying upon the false duality of the uni-

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New York, Zone, 2009, p. 81f. LaCapra criticizes Agamben's linkage of the animal with the 'Muselmann' of the concentration camps, which seems to him to collapse the diversity of animality onto a blanket scheme of 'bare life'. He therefore charges Agamben with lacking the nuance necessary to deal with animality in its various species. Though there would seem to be truth to this statement, it should also be noted that Agamben's primary target here is really the machinery which produces the monolithic division between human and animal which Agamben is quick to criticize himself. Whether or not Agamben fails to take up the 'diversity' of animality itself remains, then, in some sense as an almost separate issue. For a similar critique of Agamben's alleged 'anthropocentric' claims, see also Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2008, p. 79f.

40. As Lorenzo 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''. Lorenzo Chiesa, 'Giorgio Agamben's Franciscan Ontology' in Lorenzo Chiesa and Alberto Toscano, (eds.), *The Italian Difference: Between Nihilism and Biopolitics*, Melbourne, re.press, 2009, p. 162. Alain Badiou has also referred to Agamben's work as being 'Franciscan' in its ontology in his *Logiques des Mondes: L'Être et l'événement, 2*, Paris, Seuil, 2006, p. 584.

41. Antonio Negri, 'Sovereignty: That Divine Ministry of the Affairs of Earthly Life', *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, trans. Gabriele Fadini with Robert Valgenti, vol. 9, no.1, 2008, p. 100. LaCapra, for one, has termed Agamben's 'utopian' project one that attempts to 're-enchantment' our world. LaCapra, *History and Its Limits*, 167.

42. Cf. how all of these themes are brought together and interwoven throughout the short text *Means Without Ends*.

versal/particular (or of form/content, or lawfulness/exemplarity), we should learn to respect the absolute singularities that present themselves before us.[43]

By focusing instead on the manner in which paradigms could be said to operate over and against the (sovereign) rule of representations, he articulates a movement from particularity to particularity that resists the temptation to universalize our language on being, indeed to be pre-linguistic as it were.[44] In this sense, the analogical logic of the paradigm, expressed always through an absolute singularity, exposes the beings (what Agamben calls 'forms of life') which we all are before another, rather than violently condense any given (or 'whatever') being into a pre-scripted representation.[45] By thus determining the contours of the paradigmatic expression as the end of representation, and which is thus often criticized as a form of political nihilism, Agamben seeks to discern the only way in which to develop a justifiable ethics, one beyond the traditional binary division of subject and object. In the end, as Agamben illustrates repeatedly, there is only the 'thingness' that each thing is, and which must be safeguarded in its precarity through a messianic revocation of all representative identifications.

It is an almost Levinasian sounding proposition that therefore appears to us, as an ethics of the face is established as the only ontological determination truly available to us, a presentation of the animality that we are.[46] If humanity allows itself to venture here, into the pure realm of things beyond representation, then it may be capable of embracing its true vocation beyond vocation, the culmination of the messianic forces working through and throughout history. It would provide, then, a purely immanent dwelling inasmuch as it would also seek to eradicate the traditionally theological—hence, to profane our world of its ontotheological claims, which he seeks to express in his conceptualization of the 'coming task' of profanation. There is no doubt that a profound rereading of humanity is at work here, from its smallest philosophical distinctions to its greatest religious aspirations.

Revelation, by this score, is reworked until it is little more than the attempt to articulate what cannot be articulated through language, which is, for Agamben, the inexpressible fact of language's existence.[47] We dwell in language as we dwell in our world and it was our ability to uniquely posit ourselves *in* and *through* language that set us apart from the 'animals'. Yet, how language is, *that it is*, is something we are barred from expressing *in* language. Accordingly, as he will join to our sense of being-in-the-world, 'How the world is—this is outside the world'.[48] It is, again, the external theological which grants it

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43. Cf. the central thesis in Giorgio Agamben, 'What is a Paradigm?' in *The Signature of All Things*, p. 20.

44. This 'pre-linguistic' stage is what, initially, gave rise to his use of the term 'infancy' as the state toward which our regression should be directed. See Agamben, *Infancy and History* as well as the essay on regression, 'Philosophical Archaeology', pp. 81-111. Cf. Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, p. 90f.

45. Cf. his characterization of 'whatever being' in *The Coming Community*, p. 1f., as well as his brief comments on 'forms of life' in *Means Without Ends*, p. 3f. It should also be noted that the much anticipated fourth volume of his *Homo Sacer* project will be devoted to developing the notion of a 'form of life' in greater detail.

46. Agamben, *Means Without Ends*, p. 91f. On Levinas' ethics, see Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburg, PA, Duquesne University Press, 1969.

47. Agamben, *Potentialities*, p. 39f.

48. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 106.

meaning, and which Agamben here seeks to bring to its conclusion—its profanation as it were. Transcendence, as the term which was historically used to attempt to describe this purely immanent fact of our existence, something which we could otherwise not express, can now be exposed as the pre-eminent concept that became the cornerstone for positing the various theories of sovereignty, both politically and theologically, and which are seemingly in decline today.[49] Both of these varied and analogous attempts to concretely embody transcendence failed to perceive its true nature as merely being an attempt to exit our immanent state of animality.

Hence, in the context of a series of condensed political aphorisms, Agamben is given over to state that the transcendent 'is not a supreme entity above all things; rather, *the pure transcendent is the taking-place of every thing*'.[50] That a realm of things could exist, that it could dwell at all in a space of potential indistinction, this is the principle of transcendence toward which theology, in its explorations and justifications for God's existence, and the Good which is likewise to be found there, has tried to point. As he renders it,

> God or the good or the place does not take place, but is the taking-place of the entities, their innermost exteriority. The being-worm of the worm, the being-stone of the stone, is divine. That the world is, that something can appear and have a face, that there is exteriority and non-latency as the determination and the limit of every thing: this is the good. Thus, precisely its being irreparably in the world is what transcends and exposes every worldly entity….the good is not somewhere else; it is simply the point at which they grasp the taking-place proper to them, at which they touch their own non-transcendent matter.[51]

Hence, inverting the crafted historical conceptions of theology, Agamben is able to declare that salvation, as he will define it, is a purely profane interest, 'the coming of the place to itself'.[52] Religion therefore becomes a 'content-less' project in light of this fundamental disclosure, without doctrine, without dogma, without need of oscillating between the transcendent and the immanent as between the universal and the particular.[53] What had been presumed to be transcendent is now rendered inoperative and a dynamic immanence is revealed to be already at work within the profane order.

> 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.[54]

49. Though Agamben has chosen to focus his remarks upon the decline of the oath in both religious and legal settings, the associated sense of transcendence that accompanies the oath seems to be included in this eclipse. See his *Le sacrament du langage: Archéologie du serment*, trad. Joël Gayraud, Paris, Vrin, 2009.

50. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, pp. 14-5, emphasis in the original.

51. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 15.

52. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 15. Cf. also Agamben, *Profanations*, p. 73f.

53. Cf. Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, pp. 136-7.

54. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 90.

The 'whatever' nature of things, the very thing-ness of all things, becomes seen as the created matter which is only redeemable through an encounter with the messianic disruption of representations formed within this 'zone of indiscernability' that is the location only of our pure potentiality for being which we need not actualize in any sense. Only a pure potentiality, then, could be said to safeguard a thing's thing-ness, refusing to attach a more or less violent representation (its 'actuality') of any sort to its existence, any onto-theological marker. In essence, we are led then to a theory of thingness which exalts the presentation ('exposure') of our animality before an other who is to be witnessed bereft of all representations, in our nudity.[55] If the divine could be said to exist over and beyond the ceaselessly articulated division between human and divine, then it would presumably only be demonstrable insofar as it is encounter-able in the face of the other. Perhaps, then, a purely immanent ontology is possible, but it is a realm wherein, if we are capable of dwelling in it, is inexpressible because without inherent (theological) meaning. It cannot be universalized or communicated as such; it can only be respected in its absolute singularity. It is, again, a site of pure potentiality that is as blank as the tablets upon which we would place our words.

A total ('pure') immanence subsequently arises within the profane order that cannot be surpassed by any notion of transcendence or its commonly associated sacrality. It dissolves the traditional (onto)theological and offers an unmediated opportunity to encounter the O/other before us. If we are to encounter the divine, then, it would only be through such an opening to this world beyond representations. And for this reason,

> 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. 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.[56]

There is only the profane order, just as there is only a movement from particularity to particularity, collapsing the dichotomies of western logic with the same basic premises. There is only the profane, or the immanent, and this is the only place where anything like the divine is encounterable. This is what will allow Agamben, in an otherwise rather enigmatic section of his work *The Coming Community*, to declare that: 'The world—insofar as it is absolutely, irreparably profane—is God'.[57] And this would appear to be the real revelation that Agamben has been working toward all along, a sort of pantheistic animality that is beyond the transcendence historically utilized to establish the 'human being' or the subject with which western thought is all-too-familiar. What he is seeking to develop then is really just a letting of the thingness of each thing be, a task that pushes toward establishing a 'theology of immanence' in his work. The moment we fully embrace this realm beyond all representation, the moment we

55. Cf. Agamben, *Nudités*, p. 95f.
56. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 90.
57. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 90.

dissolve transcendence and therefore immanence as well, is the moment we embrace a materialism beyond the animal-human or human-divine dichotomies, a materialism that can only as such be divine.

CONCLUSION

It is Agamben's final gesture toward the messianic, and likewise toward a religiously-inflected terminology which hovers over his entire oeuvre, that will ultimately guide his political project back toward its canonical moment, one most clearly identifiable within the Christian heritage. As his reading of Benjamin's relationship to Saint Paul indicates, there is much to be discerned in the transition from Judaic thought (with its representational logic) to Christianity (with its paradigmatic focus), as Agamben seems to read it.[58] Rather than be content with a simple re-affirmation of Christian claims, however, Agamben deftly maneuvers his own position toward one of exposing the logic of Christianity as that which reveals a deep investment in some form of a pantheistic worldview, one which theology can no longer afford to ignore.

Theology has been portrayed by Agamben throughout as an historical attempt to articulate a boundary between God and humanity, to produce an onto-theology that, under his gaze, seems now rather only to indicate the artificiality of the boundary itself, the fact that there really is no boundary ontologically existent as such. Though it has historically fallen to the various human disciplines of thought (biology, politics, theology, etc) to manufacture representations which appear to draw a more or less absolute distinction, according to Agamben, that time has come to an end. This is not, as he will repeatedly state elsewhere, an attempt to secularize our world, but rather an effort of profanation, a returning of things once deemed sacred to their more proper use among human-beings.[59] And though his project is certainly aimed toward dissolving the western onto-theological project, there is yet another veil to be removed, one that reveals the deeply Christian core within his work: the veil that tore from top to bottom exposing the presence thought to dwell in the holiest of holies—an originary act of profanation upon which Agamben's work is seemingly founded and that has come to define the Christian legacy.[60] And, in the end, perhaps without its onto-theological presuppositions, maybe theology could be, or even already is, closer to embracing certain forms of pantheistic materiality than even it would at times like to admit.[61]

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58. If Agamben's understanding of signification in light of Pauline theology is read in conjunction with his use of monastic life as an exemplary 'form of life', what we come across is a particularly 'Christianized' philosophy which Agamben seems to endorse, though being cautious to directly endorse such an understanding. See his *The Time That Remains* as well as his essay 'What Is a Paradigm?' in *The Signature of All Things*, p. 9f.

59. Cf. Agamben, *Profanations*, p. 77.

60. Cf. Mark 15:38.

61. Though the scope of the essay does not here permit a fuller examination of theology's possible interests in exploring a 'theology of immanence', suffice it to say that various feminist theologians, as only one example among many, have often championed this theme in their writings, including Mary Daly's early challenges in *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, Boston, Beacon, 1973, Grace

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