

The Idea of Awakening: Giorgio Agamben and the Nāgārjuna References

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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the distinction and the basic dilemma of constituting power and constituted power. The predicament encountered in keeping these two concepts theoretically distinct repeats the problem embedded in the paradox of sovereignty which Agamben has placed at the centre of his political inquiry. Around this problem, we can explain the relation between Agamben and Carl Schmitt and, following the Negri's thesis, the shift from the politics to the ontology. The movement from politics to ontology opens a pathway for reconsidering the relation between actuality and potentiality, the central feature of Agamben's philosophy. Once at this point, this paper proposes a not obvious link between Agamben and Buddhism.

Keywords: constituting power, constituted power, sovereignty, actuality, potentiality, Buddhism.

RESUMEN

En este ensayo se discute la distinción y dilema básico entre el poder constituyente y el poder constituido. En estos dos conceptos teóricamente distintos encontramos la paradoja de la soberanía que Agamben ha colocado en el centro de su investigación política. Teniendo en cuenta este problema, podemos explicar la relación entre Agamben y Carl Schmitt y, siguiendo la tesis de Negri, el cambio de la política a la ontología. El movimiento de la política a la ontología nos permite replantear la relación entre acto y potencia, que es la cuestión central de la filosofía de Agamben. Desde este punto de vista, este trabajo propone una relación no obvia entre Agamben y el budismo.

Palabras clave: poder constituyente, poder constituido, soberanía, acto, potencia, budismo.

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My definition of politics: the fulfillment of an unimproved humanity.¹
 - Walter Benjamin

POLITICAL ONTOLOGY

Among the principle difficulties confronted by the theory of state power is the need to account for the transformation of power from a period of revolutionary action to a period of stable governance; to explain, in effect, why the same people who held the barricades yesterday will tomorrow fill the ranks of the police. To grasp precisely what distinguishes these two powers is exceedingly difficult especially when one tries to isolate the exact moment when the transition occurs—what Benjamin spoke of as the transformation of law-creating violence into law-preserving violence. But despite the difficulty, every modern theory of state formation has been bound to account for this transition because it is in terms of this separation that the formal existence of the state is established. Failure to adequately differentiate between these two powers is, in effect, to leave indistinguishable insurrection and government, anomie and law, for only at such time when the decisive separation of constituting power from constituted power is perceived to be unambiguous is revolution brought to a close. From this perspective then, and without distortion, we may look back at modern political theorists, from Hobbes to Locke to Rousseau, and understand them not only as theorists of government, or as theorists of insurrection, but as instruments providing the means of distinguishing between the two. From the vantage of state power what is imperative is not how one arrives at the distinction, but that it is made possible.

The third chapter of Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* begins with an account of precisely this difficulty. "Both theory and positive legislation have always encountered difficulties in formulating and maintaining this distinction in all its weight,"² and in those instances when a distinction between constituting power and constituted power has been put forward the formulation has often done more to mystify this separation than to explain it. The predicament encountered in keeping these two concepts theoretically distinct repeats the problem embedded in the paradox of sovereignty which Agamben has placed at the center of his political inquiry. The impossibility of determining whether the sovereign is within the juridical order or whether he stands beyond it, of deciding whether the power that constitutes the political

1 W. Benjamin, "World and Time," *Selected Writing: 1913-1926*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, et. al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 226.

2 G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 39.

order is the same as that which maintains it, mirrors the problem of isolating the source of power's constitution. "In western public law," Agamben explains elsewhere, "the source of power, in the last instance, is impossible to ascribe and moves always in a circle between constitutive and constituted power. In the end it is impossible to ascribe final responsibility because power has a deeply vicarious structure. Power exists always as a dialectic between these two poles. Apparently, constituted power is grounded in constitutive power but then, when you try to grasp it, you will see that there is an unceasing circularity."³

Awareness of this theoretical bind has contributed to efforts simply to circumvent the problem by, for instance, attempting to think the autonomy of constituting power, as in the case of political anarchy, and by contesting the necessity, or even the possibility, of its full conversion into constituted power. But despite these efforts the basic dilemma remains because, as Agamben explains, the essential dilemma "is not so much how to conceive a constituting power that does not exhaust itself in a constituted power (which is not easy, but still theoretically resolvable), as how clearly to differentiate constituting from constituted power."⁴ Antonio Negri's analysis of this problem, which attempts to salvage constituting power from being totally absorbed by constituted power, runs aground, Agamben claims, on precisely this question, on how the power that constitutes the state differs from the power of sovereignty that defends it, especially because both lay claim to conspicuously pure forms of autonomy. "[T]he fact that constituting power neither derives from the constituted order nor limits itself to instituting it—being, rather, free praxis—still says nothing as to constituting power's alterity with respect to sovereign power."⁵ On Agamben's reading, Negri fails to adequately differentiate constituting power from sovereign power and yet, he observes, it is precisely in encountering this impasse that Negri's analysis points beyond it to a far older problem.

At this juncture the chapter takes a decidedly ontological turn and in doing so sets the stage for the problem I wish to examine. Although Agamben distances himself from the argument Negri makes in *Il potere costituente*,⁶ he goes on to say that "The strength of Negri's book," lies not in maintaining the separation of powers, but "in the final perspective it opens insofar as it shows how constituting power, when conceived in all its radicality, ceases

3 G. Agamben, "The Power and the Glory," Lecture presented at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, January 11, 2007.

4 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 41.

5 Ibidem, p. 43.

6 Translated into English as Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, trans. Maurizio Boscagli (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

to be a strictly political concept and necessarily presents itself as a category of ontology.”⁷ What had been a political question is transformed into an ontological question and the “problem is therefore moved from political philosophy to first philosophy.”⁸ This suggests that the difficulty of adequately distinguishing between constituting power and sovereignty arises as a function of a deeper ontological configuration: “[O]nly an entirely new conjunction of possibility and reality, contingency and necessity will make it possible to cut the knot that binds sovereignty to constituting power. And only if it is possible to think the relation between potentiality and actuality differently—and even to think beyond this relation—will it be possible to think a constituting power wholly released from the sovereign ban.”⁹

The movement from politics to ontology opens a pathway for reconsidering the relation between actuality and potentiality. The problem this raises, and which Agamben’s writings broadly engage, is how to think the ontological presuppositions embedded in every political order; how, in other words, to bring to light the correspondence between political philosophy and first philosophy. “The relation between constituting power and constituted power is just as complicated,” Agamben contends, “as the relation Aristotle establishes between potentiality and act, *dynamis* and *energeia*, and, in the last analysis, the relation between constituting and constituted power (perhaps like every authentic understanding of the problem of sovereignty) depends on how one thinks the existence and autonomy of potentiality.”¹⁰ To understand Agamben’s political vision, which is singularly directed at freeing politics from the grip of sovereignty, we must come to terms with his conviction that an onto-political link binds our most profound political questions to the manner in which we apprehend potentiality. For “until a new and coherent ontology of potentiality has replaced the ontology founded on the primacy of actuality and its relation to potentiality a political theory freed from the aporias of sovereignty remains unthinkable.”¹¹

But what does it mean to “replace” an ontology? What would this entail? And how would we know when it had been accomplished? It is one thing to redefine ontology in philosophical terms, to speak, for instance, of an ontology of becoming rather than an ontology of being, or to reframe ontology in terms of potentiality rather than actuality. But it is quite another thing to reconstitute ontology on the level of our most basic conceptual instincts, our tendency, for instance, to divide the world into distinct and separable beings,

7 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, pp. 43-44.

8 *Ibidem*, p. 44.

9 *Ibidem*.

10 *Ibidem*.

11 *Ibidem*.

or to formulate judgments in terms of degrees of perfection. It is easy enough to state such things, but to adopt them as cognitive habits is quite another. And yet, this seems to be what is prefigured in Agamben's provocation, if only because the reason our ontological commitments have political effects, as he suggests they do, is because the categories they manifest are taken for granted not only intellectually, but on the level of our most basic social practices. Thinking beyond our cognitive inheritance—those fully assimilated categories of the western philosophical tradition—demands not only a transformation of theoretical explanation, but the reframing of perception, a change in our habits of everyday awareness. Agamben's provocation is, quite simply, an invitation to inhabit the world in a different way.

His writings, I believe, gesture in this direction but bringing about such a transformation is no small task. Indeed, if such a transformation is possible at all it is reasonable to suppose that we might be assisted in it by philosophical sources that are different from those that anchor the European tradition. The erudition of Agamben's scholarship has, of course, been widely acknowledged but the sources he draws upon are rooted almost entirely in the western tradition. There are, however, a few exceptions and for a long time I have been struck by them. Of particular interest to me are those instances where Agamben references Buddhist sources, not only because any reference to eastern ideas in his writing is bound to be anomalous, but because I suspect that there is more to these references than meets the eye. In fact, in what follows I would like to coax us out onto a limb and suggest that Buddhist thought, and more specifically the principle teachings of the Mādhyamika school, and of the Mahāyāna tradition more generally, offer us a vehicle for both understanding and extending Agamben's work. Between Agamben's onto-political philosophy and the long history of mindfulness practices within Buddhism I believe we can glimpse important affinities. Consulting these sources will, of course, pose difficulties as well as some risks. They do not fit our European frame of reference and will often, in terms of terminology and lineage, fit awkwardly into our familiar philosophical discourse, but it seems to me possible that an entirely new avenue for thought can open up here, in this convergence; something foreign to our declared theoretical convictions that might offer an opportunity to rethink them and ultimately to act differently in relation to them.

However, before discussing either Buddhism or Agamben's alternative ontology it is necessary to rehearse our own.

BEING-AT-AN-END

In his commentary on substance in Book Theta of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle draws an ontological distinction that has become entirely familiar

to us, namely, that, with respect to the order of being, actuality (*entelecheia* or *energeia*) precedes potentiality (*dynamis*) and conditions it (1049b4-5). All things that come into being proceed toward an end and “actuality [*energeia*] is [that] end, and it is for the sake of this that the potentiality is acquired.” (1050a9-10)¹² Thus, in the same way form is given priority over matter, actuality is given priority over potentiality, both with respect to action (*energeia*) and with respect to its completion (*entelecheia*). Since the word *entelecheia*, which was coined by Aristotle, is formed from the root *telos*, and more directly from the common adjective *enteles*, meaning complete or perfect, it is not difficult to see that the priority given to actuality is, in fact, an ontological priority given to being over becoming, to ends over means. But here we must be careful. Aristotle’s understanding of being-at-an-end is subtle and we should not attribute to it a Platonic sense. In fact, it is precisely in this regard that we see the necessity which compelled Aristotle to fashion new terminology. The morphology of *entelecheia* incorporates not only *enteles*, but the verb *echein*, which refers to the act of enduring, of continuing in a given state. Moreover, indications survive that suggest Aristotle initially used the word *endelecheia*, (with delta in place of the more familiar tau) from an already established noun meaning continuity or persistency, to refer to being and only later adopted the new term *entelecheia*.¹³ In either case, what is crucial is the manner in which being-at-an-end implies an activity, a kind of equilibrium, rather than a static final state. Actuality, then, is for Aristotle a type of ongoing maintenance, the preservation of a state of completion or perfection through effort directed toward that perfection as an end. “The word ‘actuality’ [*energeia*],” he writes, “which we connect with fulfillment [*entelecheia*], has, strictly speaking, been extended from movements to other things; for actuality in the strict sense is identified with movement.”

12 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations in translation are from *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

13 The ambiguity of Aristotle’s use of these two terms seems to have found its way into literary satires over many centuries. Consider Lucian of Samosata’s (125-200 CE) short narrative “Trial in the Court of Vowels” in which a whimsical trial is underway concerning the usurpation of some consonants by others: “Tau’s, on the other hand, is naturally violent; its manifestations are not confined to me. In proof that he has not spared other letters, but assaulted Delta, Theta, Zeta and almost the whole alphabet, I wish his various victims to be put in the box. Now, Vowels of the jury, mark the evidence of Delta: ‘He robbed me of endelecheia, which he claimed, quite illegally, as entelecheia.’” The pun also appears in Rabelais’ *Pantagruel* where, approaching the shore of the island of Mataeotechny, Panurge cries out to the islanders that they are anxious to meet their famous and exceptionally old Queen whose name, Entelecheia, was given to her by her godfather, Aristotle himself. When Panurge calls out her name the islanders have difficulty hearing him and yell back “What do you say? Do you call it Entelecheia or Endecheia?” For a study of the two terms, see E. Garin, “‘Endelecheia’ e ‘Entelecheia’ nelle discussioni umanistiche,” *Atene e Roma*, ser. 3, 5 (1937), pp. 177- 187.

(1047a31-2) Thus, insofar as every entity has an end proper to it, so too it has a proper kind of activity which naturally disposes it to that end, and when this end is reached the activity does not cease for the simple fact that being-at-an-end is a type of activity in itself, a type of work.

As we have begun to see, beneath the distinction between actuality and potentiality there is another, more subtle difference upon which the first depends: the distinction between *energeia* and *entelecheia*. Although *energeia*, being-at-work, and *entelecheia*, being-at-an-end, are semantically distinct, Aristotle intends for the meanings to converge. We see this, for instance, even in the Latin derivative “actuality” which, though it essentially collapses the two meanings, preserves the sense of “acting” that distinguishes the double nature Aristotle ascribes to it. For the duration of its existence that which is brought into being, that which is actualized, never ceases to be maintained, or guided, toward a proper end, and in this sense Aristotle’s ontology may be understood as a type of governance. This is true in all cases. In the well known example of a stone at rest, the stone’s inactivity is merely apparent. According to the Aristotelian model, the stone maintains the state it is in through continuous effort to reposition itself at the center of the earth. Both the work of striving and the end toward which the striving tends form a solitary concept.

The nexus between work and fulfillment, between *energeia* and *entelecheia*, together with the ontological priority given to actuality over potentiality, shape the entire framework of Aristotelian thought and with it the overwhelming tendency of philosophy in the west. By means of this relation we come to see that all that exists does so according to a specific capacity for action such that this action has the character of an end. “For the action is the end and the actuality is the action.” And this is so completely the case that “even the word ‘actuality’ [*entelecheia*] is derived from ‘action’ [*energeia*], and points to the fulfillment.” (1050a 21-23) The completeness, or fulfillment, which characterizes *entelecheia* is shown by its derivation to be inseparable from the enduring activity (*energeia*) necessary to preserve the state of completion. The two terms implicate each other insofar as fulfillment has its being only through activity, through a specific kind of permanent being-at-work, and so when we speak of actuality what we refer to is precisely this correlation between activity and fulfillment, the point at which being-at-work coincides with being-at-an-end.

IM-POTENTIALITY

Despite the fact that Aristotle’s ontology rests on the active notion of being-at-work this activity is nonetheless constrained by the idea of being-at-an-end.

The significance of this teleological constraint for the development of western thought cannot be overestimated and no place is the subordination of means to ends more evident than in the prioritization of actuality over potentiality. The hierarchy pervades the whole of Aristotelian ontology and will become, in the form of *potentia* and *actus*, the basis for the Scholastic system. As we have seen, Aristotle's ontology is not only dynamic, it is also tendentious. The world is not simply a collection of objects but is an assemblage of tendencies and the ends toward which these tendencies strive are not external to objects but comprise what is essential to them. The essence of a thing, we might say, is the specific manner in which it is internally governed, its potentiality with regard to its existence. We see the benefit of this formulation in the ability to account for change without sacrificing the conceptual integrity of objects even as they undergo growth and decay. The acorn is conceptually the same as the oak because, although in appearance they are dissimilar, they are governed by the same *telos*. Decisive in this regard is the role of *dynamis*.

In keeping with the standard reading, potentiality stands opposed to actuality in a mutually exclusive relation. Insofar as *dynamis* (potentiality) indicates a capacity to bring forth what is not yet actual, potentiality is something that disappears in becoming actual, something that exhausts itself in bringing actuality into existence.¹⁴ But if this is truly the case, in what sense is it valid to say that potentiality *itself* exists? After all, it seems apparent that a thing which is potential is a thing that does not yet exist, yet, since some things possess potentials that other things do not, potentiality as such should also exist. In a formulation that must remain ambiguous, we are forced to conclude that if potentiality exists it does so, by definition, not as *actual* existence but as a mode of existence that is irreducible to actuality. Clarifying this peculiar mode of being is the unique difficulty that faces Aristotle in Book Theta and it is in response to these pages, first in a short essay entitled "On Potentiality" and then in *Homo Sacer*, that Agamben's engagement with potentiality begins.¹⁵

Agamben's reading of Aristotle's conception of potentiality is characteristically idiosyncratic, but will form the nucleus of his thought regarding politics and, for our purposes, opens a bridge between his political reflections and certain Buddhist principles. Whereas a long tradition of Aristotelian scholarship maintains that potentiality is strictly subordinated to actuality, Agamben disagrees, pointing to key passages from Book Theta in which "it is never clear, to the reader freed from the prejudices of tradition,

14 In the same way, conventionally speaking, constituting power exhausts itself in becomes constituted power.

15 Giorgio Agamben, "On Potentiality," *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

whether Book Theta of the *Metaphysics* in fact gives primacy to actuality or to potentiality.”¹⁶ The unresolved ambiguity Agamben identifies in Aristotle’s text allows him to assert that Aristotle himself offers a pathway to conceiving of pure potentiality—not the exhaustion of potentiality in its actualization, as most interpreters would maintain, but the preservation of potentiality beyond, and even within, actualization.

For the Megarins, who followed the Eleatics and especially Parmenides in denying the existence of change, potentiality exists only in action and therefore has no independent existence of its own. Aristotle’s well known reply to the Megarins is nuanced but, as Agamben notes, throughout the text he “takes great care to affirm the autonomous existence of potentiality.”¹⁷ Agamben seizes on this theoretical movement and follows Aristotle’s argument closely. Drawing our attention to several key passages, Agamben argues that when Aristotle says “Every potentiality (*dynamis*) is impotentiality (*adunamia*) of the same and with respect to the same” (1046a 32) he is, in fact, attributing to potentiality a dual nature which has gone unrecognized. Rather than emphasize the passing away of potentiality as it becomes actual, Agamben sees in Aristotle’s writings a formulation that reveals potentiality’s capacity to persist in its own privation. In other words, “if potentiality is to have its own consistency and not always disappear immediately into actuality, it is necessary that potentiality be able to not pass over into actuality, that potentiality constitutively be the potentiality not to (do or be), or, as Aristotle says, that potentiality be also im-potentiality (*adynamia*).”¹⁸ Potentiality is not consumed in becoming actual precisely because potentiality does not truly become something different. “The potentiality that exists,” Agamben continues, “is precisely the potentiality that cannot pass over into actuality,” and it is this potentiality that “maintains itself in relation to actuality in the form of its suspension.”¹⁹ Actuality, on this account, turns out to be simply a form of potentiality that is, so to speak, capable of *not* not being. Consequently, what the tradition has concealed and what Agamben seeks to disclose is this mode of potentiality as im-potentiality, a potentiality of means without ends, a potentiality unconstrained by teleology that “conserves itself and saves itself in actuality.”²⁰ Thus, to “set im-potentiality aside, so as to become actual, is not to destroy it but, on the contrary, to fulfill it.”²¹ This is

16 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 47.

17 Ibidem, p. 45.

18 Ibidem.

19 Ibidem.

20 Agamben, “On Potentiality,” p. 184.

21 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 46.

why, just as with constituting power and constituted power, at the limit, “pure potentiality and pure actuality are indistinguishable.”²²

PERFECTIO

It comes as no surprise that, consistent with its etymology and the earliest uses of the term, perfection (*perfectio*) was the Latin equivalent of *telos*. We learn from Władysław Tatarkiewicz, for instance, in a series of articles first published by the Polish Academy of Sciences in 1979, that *perfectio* derives from *perficio*, which means simply to complete or to bring to an end. “Perfectio(n) thus literally means a finishing; and perfect(us) means finished (just as, in grammar, *perfectum* refers to ‘perfect tense’).”²³ The meaning of perfection, which has remained relatively stable, was first defined in Book Delta (1021b12) where Aristotle distinguishes between three aspects of *telos*—that which is complete in all its parts, that which cannot be excelled in its kind, and that which has attained its proper purpose or end. Although Aquinas will collapse the first two meanings, leading to the dualistic characterization of perfection that we find in Scholasticism between that which is perfect in itself (*perfectio prima*) and that which has perfectly accomplished its purpose (*perfectio secunda*),²⁴ it is the notion that perfection is the expression of that which is brought to a proper end—*perfectum est cui nihil deest*—that concerns us here because any reconsideration of the relation between actuality and potentiality demands a reassessment of perfection insofar as *perfectio* and *telos* are bound by a common lineage. Moreover, it is within the Latin context or, more specifically, in the context of Platonized Christianity, that an alliance is made between perfection and transcendence.

Perfection entered the Christian era accompanied by a question which is not found in classical antiquity, namely, is perfection attainable in this life? The problem was significant and would split theological scholarship. As early as the 5th century, two distinct views on perfection had arisen within the Church. As Tatarkiewicz explains, one view argued “that [perfection] may be attained by man on earth by his own powers; and the other, that it may come to

22 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 47.

23 Władysław Tatarkiewicz, “Perfection: The Term and the Concept,” *Dialectics and Humanism*, 4, no. 4 (Autumn 1979), p. 5.

24 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Benziger Brothers edition, 1947), I q.73a. “The perfection of a thing is twofold, the first perfection and the second perfection. The ‘first’ perfection is that according to which a thing is substantially perfect, and this perfection is the form of the whole; which form results from the whole having its parts complete. But the ‘second’ perfection is the end, which is either an operation, as the end of the harpist is to play the harp; or something that is attained by an operation, as the end of the builder is the house that he makes by building.”

pass only by special divine grace.”²⁵ The first view, championed by Pelagius, claimed that humanity would not have been inspired by God to seek perfection if it was made incapable of doing so. But this position was condemned by the Council of Carthage in 418 C.E., while the second view, developed most completely by Augustine, prevailed and by the beginning of the 5th century had become authoritative. In his *De perfectione iustitiae hominis*, Augustine flatly precludes the possibility of complete earthly perfection, stating that “It is after this life, indeed, that the reward of perfection is bestowed, but only upon those by whom in their present life has been acquired the merit of such a recompense.”²⁶ The position Augustine sets down is echoed throughout the tradition and so, for instance, we read in the *Moralia* of Saint Gregory that perfection will be realized only after the fulfillment of history: “only then will the world be beautiful and perfect” (*tunc pulchra erit universitas et perfecta*).²⁷ And in the writings of Saint Jerome: “*perfectio vera in coelestibus*”²⁸—true perfection is to be found only in heaven. In each case, perfection is not simply a matter of deferral, but of assistance. And so, in contrast to the position of the Pelagians who, in addition to rejecting the notion of original sin, believed that humanity had the capacity to achieve sinless perfection in this life, Augustine maintains that divine grace—a superadded gift of unmerited generosity given by God and mediated through the church and its sacraments—is also necessary.

The nature of completion in Christian theology, then, is supplementary. Not only is one barred from achieving perfection in this life, but perfection itself requires, in addition to good deeds and acts of devotion, divine intervention and the superadded gift of grace (*charis*). Indeed, for Aquinas, the soul is a potentiality (*potential obedientialis*) and grace itself is the act or the perfection that humanity lacks. Under the sway of Church theologians, the capacity to achieve ends proper to one’s essence, which Aristotle understood to be entirely internal to one’s nature, was delivered over to God. And because divine intercession was seen to be necessary for attaining the end which is proper to human life, humanity was effectively alienated from the fulfillment of its own potential. The proper goal of human life, which the Church had so meticulously defined, was made attainable only through an actuality that humanity itself did not possess. The entire ecclesiastical theology of grace rests on this point. Grace, without which human perfection cannot be reached, is strictly supplemental to human nature. The catechism of the Church is clear

25 Tatarkiewicz, “Perfection: The Term and the Concept,” p. 119.

26 Augustine of Hippo, *De perfectione iustitiae hominis*, viii, p. 17. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887).

27 Saint Gregory, *Moralia* 1, xxv, p. 15 (*Patrologia Latina*), cited in Tatarkiewicz, 119.

28 Saint Jerome, cited in Tatarkiewicz, p. 119.

on this point, “Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call to become children of God, adoptive sons, partakers of the divine nature and of eternal life.”²⁹ Not only is human perfection not attainable within the constraints of earthly existence, but this perfection, this *telos*, is indissolubly linked to a potentiality that is essentially not our own. According to the Christian ecclesiastical tradition, what is essential to humanity is that it lacks the means to its own ends.³⁰

The translation of *telos* into *perfectio* corresponds, then, to the alienation of humanity from its own potentiality—the transference of potentiality to a transcendent source. Few transformations within the lexical history of western ontology have been as significant because with the potentiality of human life given over to an anticipation of, and a dependency on, divine intercession, being-at-work (*energeia*) becomes a kind of labor. The understanding of life in antiquity as a capacity to be-at-work in pursuit of the actualization of a natural end becomes in Christianity a manner of being-at-work in pursuit of an extrinsic means to an end—the anticipation of divine assistance in the form of a supplementary potential manifested through grace. As long as this world view is maintained, as long as the end which we are compelled by divine law to reach is accompanied by a conspicuous lack of the means to achieve it, humanity exists in a state of exception relative to its own potentiality. “Called to beatitude but wounded by sin,” the Vatican’s catechism reads, “man stands in need of salvation from God.”³¹ And this salvation is made possible according to two principles: law and grace. “Divine help comes to him in Christ,” the catechism continues, “through the law that guides him and the grace that sustains him.”³² The principal ontological consequence of this condition—a condition of being called by law to a proper end for which means are granted only as a supplemental favor—is the emergence of salvation as an ontological paradigm. Ontology becomes soteriology. It is for this reason that Agamben’s analysis of potentiality, according to which he conceives of an

29 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), para. 1996.

30 Thomas Aquinas’ writings are entirely grounded in the distinction between potentiality and act. Put simply, for Aquinas, potentiality indicates an absence of perfection, whereas act equates to perfection. Thus something that exists in a state of potentiality, like humanity with respect to its own perfection, is in an imperfect state, and is therefore capable of receiving what it lacks only if what is missing can be provided by something that already possesses that perfection. This applies to the perfection of the soul as well as to more mundane things. Cold water, for instance, has the potential to become hot but will not become hot unless it encounters something which actually possesses heat. According to the Thomistic system, which is entirely founded on this ontological distinction, God alone is pure act (*actus purus*) with no admixture of potentiality.

31 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para. 1949. This passage appears in section three under the subheading, “God’s Salvation: Law and Grace.”

32 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para. 1949.

ontology stripped of every kind of *telos*, is drawn to both Walter Benjamin's reformulation of messianic time and to the ancient link that joins being and sacredness.

HIEROPHANY

Mircea Eliade's *Das Heilige und das Profane* opens with an homage to Rudolf Otto whose *Das Heilige*, published in 1917, serves as the backdrop for Eliade's own work. The particular virtue of Otto's study is its focus on the modalities of religious experience rather than simply on religious doctrine. These experiences, which he characterized as numinous, are shown to be manifested as "wholly other" (*ganz andere*), as something fundamentally different, in the presence of which humanity "senses profound nothingness."³³ For Eliade as well, sacredness names a type of separation and to designate that which carries the sacred beyond the familiar world, he employs the term *hierophany*. Regardless of the religious tradition, "in each case we are confronted by the same mysterious act—the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural 'profane' world. . . . The sacred tree, the sacred stone are not adored as stone or tree; they are worshipped precisely because they are *hierophanies*, because they show something that is no longer stone or tree but the *sacred*, the *ganz andere*."³⁴

In Eliade's formulation, sacredness names a technique for stabilizing reality, for constituting reality insulated from the contingency and transience of normal life. Sacredness, he writes, is "saturated with *being*," and for this reason, "the *sacred* is equivalent to *power*, and, in the last analysis, to *reality*."³⁵ The correlation between sacredness and ontology is a hallmark of Eliade's writing and thus it is somewhat surprising that Agamben does not reference him. The manner in which Eliade articulates the relation between sacredness and ontology parallels Agamben's own investigation of the bond that joins sovereign power to the paradigm of western ontology and, as is well known, Agamben's analysis of this bond, disclosed principally in the pages of *Homo Sacer*, is intimately connected to the peculiar logic of sacredness. "[R]eligious need," Eliade writes, "expresses an unquenchable ontological thirst. Religious man thirsts for *being*. His terror of the chaos that surrounds his inhabited world corresponds to his terror of nothingness.

33 Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 10.

34 *Ibidem*, pp. 11-12.

35 *Ibidem*, p. 12.

... for the religious man, this profane space represents absolute nonbeing.”³⁶ But for Agamben it is precisely this profane space, a space that threatens exposure to nothingness and to the unfixed ontology of pure potentiality, that he commits us to living within—the precarious threshold between dogmatism and nihilism—and the procedure Agamben prescribes for entering this space is profanation, which is, in effect, hierophany in reverse. “We must neutralize this relation to the sacred,” Agamben insists, “and that is what profanation first makes possible.”³⁷

According to Agamben’s analysis, objects designated by the term sacred have this in common: they all, in some way, belong to the gods and so are “removed from the free use and commerce of men.”³⁸ Consequently, any attempt to make use of such objects, that is, to violate their special unavailability, is to commit a sacrilege. If to make sacred is the act of removing an object from the human world and delivering it over to the sphere of divine law (making it *ganz andere*), the reverse act of returning something that was once sacred to “the free use of men” is to profane. Following the work of Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, Agamben holds that sacrifice is in all cases the social practice that regulates the passage of an object from the profane order to the sacred, and religion is the cultural practice that governs and determines the sacrificial act. Echoing Eliade’s formulation, Agamben states that, “Religion can be defined as that which removes things, places, animals, or people from common use and transfers them to a separate sphere.”³⁹ And thus, not only is there no religion without the idea of separation, but every other form of separation, including the separations and exclusions of the political order, “contains and preserves within itself a genuinely religious core.”⁴⁰

At the end of *Language and Death*, in speaking of the ungroundedness of man, having “no foundation except in his own action,”⁴¹ Agamben associates religious sacrifice, and specifically its exclusionary function, with the founding of communities, and here too he follows closely in the tradition of Eliade. “At the center of the sacrifice,” he writes, “is simply a determinate action that, as such, is separated and marked by exclusion; in this way it

36 Ibidem, p. 64.

37 G. Agamben, “Der Papst ist ein weltlicher Priester,” interview with Abu Bakr Rieger, *Literaturen*, (June 2005), 22. Cited in Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 361.

38 Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), p. 73.

39 Ibidem, p. 74.

40 Ibidem.

41 G. Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen Pinkus and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 105.

becomes *sacer* and is invested with a series of prohibitions.”⁴² That which is forbidden, however, is not merely excluded from society, “rather it is now only accessible for certain people and according to determinate rules.”⁴³ According to this logic, Agamben concludes, the sacred “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.”⁴⁴ Sacrifice is therefore a technique of division which functions to separate the sacred from the profane, to exclude one from the other, and in so doing gives rise not only to the myth of political authority, but to the violence that accompanies it—especially when we recognize that the sacred as much a juridical concept as it is a religious one. The figure of the *homo sacer*, which anchors Agamben’s most complete treatment of sacredness, is, of course, a juridical term drawn directly from ancient Roman jurisprudence.

For Eliade as well, sacredness founds community but it does so within the more expansive context of founding the world, which it accomplishes by way of what we might call ontological orientation. “The sacred reveals absolute reality,” Eliade writes, “and at the same time makes orientation possible; hence it founds the world in the sense that it fixes the limits and establishes the order of the world.”⁴⁵ The desire of “religious man” to live in the sacred, Eliade tells us, is equivalent to his desire to “take up his abode in objective reality,”⁴⁶ to avoid the disorienting relativity that accompanies purely subjective experience, and to live in an orderly world with well defined limits. “If the world is to be lived in, it must be founded—and no world can come to birth in the chaos of the homogeneity and relativity of profane space.”⁴⁷ Thus, the act of profaning this world, which Agamben enjoins us to do, entails not only the un-founding of a particular form of community, but the emergence of a profound ontological disorientation, the vertigo we know as nihilism.

There is a paradox, Eliade tells us, that is present in every hierophany, even the most rudimentary, in which the objects of the sacred world, even though they are marked as wholly other, *ganz andere*, are in truth the very same objects of the profane world. Between the sacred and profane orders there is no essential difference, only a difference in efficacy. “By manifesting the sacred,” Eliade explains, “any object becomes *something else*, yet it continues to remain *itself*, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic

42 Ibidem.

43 Ibidem.

44 Ibidem.

45 Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p. 30.

46 Ibidem, p. 28.

47 Ibidem, p. 22.

milieu. A sacred stone remains a stone, nothing distinguishes it from all other stones. But for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality.”⁴⁸ Being at once ordinary and extraordinary, being at once profane and sacred, this is the particular ontology manufactured by sacrifice.

Though religious man “thirsts for *being*” it is a thirst born of ontological fear, the “terror of the chaos that surrounds his inhabited world [which] corresponds to his terror of nothingness. . . . for the religious man, this profane space represents absolute nonbeing.”⁴⁹ Herein we grasp the logic of sacredness that Agamben will reconfigure, asking us to live into this nothingness and to find in nihilism not a road to despondency, but a path to happiness—the origin of which can be located in Benjamin’s short “Theologico-Political Fragment” where the notion of happiness is linked not to permanence, nor to perfection, but to transience. “The rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence,” Benjamin writes, “transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality . . . is happiness.”⁵⁰ Full awareness that things will pass away, which we commonly equate with suffering and loss, with disorientation and with nihilism, is precisely where Agamben, following Benjamin, locates happiness. And this impermanence is not only associated with the profane, but with an entirely re-envisioned understanding of messianism, because, as Benjamin insists, “Nature is messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away.”⁵¹

TIME’S NARROW GATE

Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” concludes with the following passage:

We know that the Jews were prohibited from inquiring into the future: the Torah and the prayers instructed them in remembrance. This disenchanting the future, which holds sway over all those who turn to soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future because a homogeneous, empty time. For every second was a small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter.⁵²

48 Ibidem, p. 12.

49 Ibidem, p. 64.

50 W. Benjamin, “Theologico-Political Fragment,” *Selected Writing: 1935-1938*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, et. al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 306.

51 Ibidem.

52 W. Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” *Selected Writing: 1938-1940*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, et. al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 397.

Within certain segments of Judaism we find a prohibition against forecasting the arrival of the messiah (*mashiach*), and it is in this respect that Benjamin speaks of Jews being forbidden to look into the future. But, of course, what Benjamin has in mind is not this narrow prohibition but rather a certain manner of conceptualizing time, which, as the preceding pages of Benjamin's text make clear, is shared equally by those who look into the past. For between the historicist and the soothsayer, who differ only in the direction of their attention, there is a shared experience of time. The historian who sees in the past nothing but events justifying the present shares with those who see in the figure of the messiah the culmination of world history a conception of time governed by continuity. In both cases, we encounter a homogeneous narrative premised on an experience of time from which nothing escapes, a continuous history that, recalling the words of Michel Foucault, promises to allow the subject to "once again be able to appropriate, to bring back under his sway, all those things that are kept at a distance by difference, and find in them what might be called his abode."⁵³ If historicism is a discourse which inexorably recuperates memory to itself or if, as Foucault tells us, we are assured that "time will disperse nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted unity,"⁵⁴ then any genuine critique of historicism must confront the regime of temporality under which such a discourse becomes possible, and for Benjamin this critique is inseparable from, and is in fact premised upon, a critique of messianism.

As we have seen with respect to Christian theology, perfection resides in a world yet to come, and if it is not possible for humans to achieve perfection on their own, then intercession becomes necessary. Framed in this manner, intercession and transcendence form a single idea of thought epitomized in the paradigmatic form of a savior. The figure of the messiah appears throughout the literature of all three Abrahamic traditions, but for Agamben it is the Jewish messianic tradition, channeled through Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin, as well as the Christian writings of Saint Paul, that are most influential. Despite their philosophical differences, Scholem and Benjamin, alongside an entire generation of young Jewish intellectuals, were united by a rejection of traditional religious observances, including belief in conventional messianism. Benjamin was adamant in his view that history as a sphere of action is incapable of fulfillment and that "the Kingdom of God is not the *telos* of the historical dynamic."⁵⁵ For Benjamin, messianism has nothing to do with time as a period of waiting and thereby shares with

53 M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 12.

54 *Ibidem*.

55 Benjamin, "Theologico-Political Fragment," p. 305.

Agamben's critique of classical ontology the same non-anticipatory structure. Messianism does not foretell a historical rupture or break, nor does it imply a final redemption or rescue. On the contrary, messianism represents the very means whereby we may shed our teleological image of time and make visible the potentiality that lies coiled in each moment. What messianism places before us, Benjamin elegantly declares, is simply "the notion of a present which is not a transition."⁵⁶

The "small gateway" through which the messiah might step at any moment must be understood in these terms, as "a conception of the present as now-time (*Jetztzeit*) shot through with splinters of messianic time."⁵⁷ In *The Time That Remains*, following a set of reflections on the concept of *parousia* in relation to Saint Paul's Christian messianism, Agamben notes that, far from indicating a "second coming," *parousia* describes the dual nature of messianic time, a time that does not lie far off in the future, but which parallels chronological time moment for moment. "In Greek *parousia* simply means presence (*parousia* literally signifies to be next to); in this way, being is beside itself in the present."⁵⁸ The messiah, he continues, "has already arrived, the messianic event has already happened, but its presence contains within itself another time, which stretches its *parousia*, not in order to defer it, but, on the contrary, to make it graspable. For this reason, each instant may be, to use Benjamin's words, the 'small door through which the Messiah enters.'⁵⁹ *Uniting Paul and Benjamin*, *parousia* does not signal a complement that is added to life in order to complete it. Instead, in the absence of teleological constraint, the messiah becomes an agent of antinomianism implying not only the arrest of teleology's logic of deferral, but the profanation of every sacred order, not the fulfillment of the law, but its potential deactivation.

ANTINOMY

In the fourth chapter of *Homo Sacer*, entitled "Form of Law," Agamben speaks of the messiah as the mode in which the great monotheistic religions confronted the problem of the law. In Judaism, in Christianity, in Shiite Islam, messianism "constitutes not simply one category of religious experience among others but rather the limit concept of religious experience in general, the point in which religious experience passes beyond itself and calls itself into

56 W. Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," p. 397.

57 Ibidem.

58 Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 71.

59 Ibidem.

question insofar as it is law.”⁶⁰ But why would the law’s complete realization draw into question the legal framework of religion? The most direct answer to this question emerges from within radical forms of messianism and concerns a tension between the anticipated fulfillment of the law that the messiah promises and what life becomes once the law is fulfilled. At such a time it is entirely uncertain as to whether life and law can be distinguished and for this reason we find in Sabbatai Zevi, for instance, the doctrine that the fulfillment of the Torah by the arrival of the messiah is also its absolute transgression. We encounter the same sentiment in well known passages from Scholem. “There is an anarchic element in the very nature of Messianic utopianism,” he writes, “the dissolution of old ties which lose their meaning in the new context of Messianic freedom. The total novelty for which utopianism hopes enters thus into a momentous tension with the world of bonds and laws which is the world of *Halakhah* [law].”⁶¹ The problem, Scholem explains, is that if the *halakhah* remains inviolate in the present this is only provisional and cannot last forever, for when the messiah arrives the relation between law and life will presumably change. As long as messianism appeared only “as an abstract hope, as an element totally deferred to the future which had no living significance for the life of the Jew in the present, the opposition between the essentially conservative rabbinic and the never completely defined Messianic authority . . . could remain without real tension.”⁶² But whenever there was “an actual eruption of such hope, that is to say, in every hour in which the Messianic idea entered the mind as a power with direct influence, the tension which exists between these two forms of religious authority immediately became noticeable.”⁶³

The tension of which Scholem speaks emerges when the law’s authority is shown to be provisional not due to the incursion of an external force, but according to the constraints of its own logic. Any law which prepares the way for its own fulfillment has an antinomianism core and Scholem identifies this as a fundamental characteristic of Judaic law. Within the history of modern philosophy, of course, it is within the writings of Immanuel Kant that we find the first sustained treatment of antinomianism where the problem appears in the form of the antinomies of the first *Critique*. With respect to the operation of pure reason, the antinomy names an incongruity engendered by pure reason itself wherein it arrives at two equally valid but contradictory conclusions giving rise to a theoretical impasse. Not surprisingly, Kant

60 G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 56.

61 Geshom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 19.

62 *Ibidem*, pp. 21-22.

63 *Ibidem*, p. 22.

borrowed the term from jurisprudence, where antinomy (in Greek, *antinomos*, “against the law,”) refers directly to a legal situation and indicates a contradiction that must be left standing between two laws, each of which claims to be valid on the grounds of unimpeachable authority. Thus, the antinomy marks the coincidence of two authorities the legitimacy of which, at least apparently, is equally grounded—a condition which corresponds not only to the tension within messianic law outlined by Scholem, but to the tension between constituting power and sovereign power as well. What is at issue in all such cases, and which constitutes the “tension” Scholem speaks of, is the historical appearance of conditions that make possible an awareness of the inconsistency of authority, an inconsistency which normally remains hidden either simply through illusion or through the work of philosophical reconciliation. We need only recall, within the sphere of political authority, the establishment of two jurisdictions (divine law and human law), or within the sphere of epistemology the establishment of two worlds (noumenal and phenomenal) to sense not only the scope of this tension, but the extent to which the west has sought to avoid confronting it. The antinomianism we find in Scholem points instead to an engagement with this confrontation, a world in which antinomies are resolved neither by splitting authority, nor by splitting the world, but by deactivating the very notion of consistency itself, or to use Agamben’s terminology, rendering it inoperative.

Life ordered by law and the life to come for which religious law purportedly prepares us are incompatible, and so again and again religious authorities have silenced messianic movements, labeling them heretical. But any true messianism must render the law inoperative or, as Scholem puts it, true messianism “has no real need for those ‘fences’ and restrictions with which the *Halakhah* was surrounded,”⁶⁴ which not only corresponds to what Benjamin refers to in the eighth thesis as “a real state of exception,” but gives voice to an openly antinomian interpretation of messianic time. “One of the paradoxes of the state of exception,” Agamben writes, “lies in the fact that in the state of exception, it is impossible to distinguish transgression of the law from execution of the law, such that what violates a rule and what conforms to it coincide without any remainder. [...] This is precisely the situation that, in the Jewish tradition (and, actually, in every genuine messianic tradition), comes to pass when the Messiah arrives.”⁶⁵ The risk associated with ushering in this paradoxical period of legal undecidability, of juridical disorientation, is real but only if seen from the perspective of the law. Seen from an alternate standpoint, a standpoint Benjamin’s writings attempt to establish, the danger

64 Ibidem, p. 20.

65 G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 57.

reveals itself to be not only apparent, but misplaced. As Scholem once warned, “From the point of view of the *Halakhah*, to be sure, Judaism appears as a well-ordered house, and it is a profound truth that a well-ordered house is a dangerous thing.”⁶⁶

THE DAY AFTER THE LAST

In his “Theologico-Political Fragment” Benjamin establishes the proximity between messianism and impermanence. “For nature is Messianic,” he writes precisely “by reason of its eternal and total passing away.”⁶⁷ The passing away of the world as a means of its salvation is a striking reversal of the trope of completion that commonly shapes the messianic order. Rather than things wrapped up, we find a world undone, unhinged from any foundation or final judgment. And what is more, in impermanence Benjamin identifies neither sorrow nor mourning, but happiness. “The rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence,” he writes, “is happiness.”⁶⁸ To accept that, in the end, there is no fulfillment, no final justice, is precisely why Benjamin asked us to conceive of an image of history that is not governed by the fantasy of progress. If we reconcile ourselves to an image of historical time that has shed any pretense to a goal, then we must also come to terms with the future that such an image of time would demand. The difficulty of abandoning this concept of time is equaled by the difficulty of bearing the feeling of emptiness that so often follows. But in a powerful gesture, which Agamben extends, Benjamin explain that the sorrow of having lost a fixed ground is not a result of groundlessness, but of our having assumed that there was a ground to begin with. The sorrow that accompanies loss, the remorse or regret that follows things left unaccomplished, each require, at their most basic level, a notion of the found or a notion of accomplishment. Without these points of reference the trauma of being lost, and even the possibility of becoming disoriented, vanishes. For in reference to what baseline would we measure the extent to which we have gone astray?

In the appendix of *The Coming Community*, in a chapter entitled “The Irreparable,” Agamben takes up this point stating that, “Redemption is not an event in which what was profane becomes sacred and what was lost is found again. Redemption is, on the contrary, the irreparable loss of the lost.”⁶⁹ To be irreparable is to be beyond the idea of repair—neither fixed nor broken—or

66 Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, p. 21.

67 Benjamin, “Theologico-Political Fragment,” p. 306.

68 Ibidem.

69 G. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 102.

to quote Agamben, “things just as they are, in this or that mode, consigned without remedy to their way of being.”⁷⁰ Spoken of in this way, redemption becomes the elimination of the mistaken ontological assumption that there *is* something to complete, the removal of the very possibility of being abandoned or of being lost, not because lost souls are found, but because they were never lost to begin with. An irreparable life is irreparable precisely because it has shed the fantasy of its own perfectibility not because it has reconciled itself to what it lacks, but because it has gently passed beyond the logic of completion that conditions every concept of lack. Such a life is no longer captured in a posture of anticipation awaiting a culminating event, the end of time that promises to redeem and make perfect what is incomplete. Life instead is left precariously open.

This insight, crafted in a beautiful though enigmatic fashion, appears in a famous passage from Kafka which both Benjamin and Agamben cite. In a fragment entitled, “The Coming of the Messiah,” Kafka writes, “The Messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary; he will come only on the day after his arrival; he will come, not on the last day, but on the very last day.”⁷¹ Just as redemption occurs once we finally realize that there is nothing to redeem, so too the messiah will come only after the idea of the messiah, embedded so deeply within our conception of law, is no longer necessary. Only after the category holds no more value for us and when the messianic frame of life has been dissolved and rendered inoperative will the messiah appear. That the messiah will come “not on the last day but on the day after the last,” means simply that the messiah’s arrival is contingent upon our no longer thinking in terms of “last days” or “fulfillment.” So instead, the messiah will arrive at precisely the moment we have given up the idea of the last day which is not only why the messiah is not messianic, but is also the reason the messianic kingdom is no other than the very world in which we live, here and now, at this moment.

THE WORLD TO COME

At the beginning of one of the many short chapters that make up *The Coming Community*, in a chapter simply entitled “Halos,” Agamben engages the question of community by recounting a well known parable depicting the condition of the world following the coming of the messiah. Retelling Benjamin’s version of the story, he writes:

⁷⁰ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 90.

⁷¹ F. Kafka, “The Coming of the Messiah,” *Parables and Paradoxes* (New York: Schocken Books, 1958), p. 81.

The Hassidim tells a tale about the world to come that says that everything there will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too it will sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, those too we will wear there. Everything will be as it is now, just a little different.⁷²

The story depicts a future entirely collapsed into the present, conflated in such a way that the idea of finality vanishes. How, after all, can one look forward to a moment one already occupies? This is presumably what Agamben had in mind when, in an interview from 2001, he remarked that, “the sole possibility of truly gasping the present is to conceive of it as the end.” This, he continues, “was Benjamin’s idea and his messianism is above all to be understood after this fashion.”⁷³ Or, as he writes in *Profanations*, “the end of days that is every day.”⁷⁴

72 Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 53. The genealogy of the parable is quite complicated. Agamben notes that Ernst Bloch, who transcribed the story in *Spuren* (in an article from 1969 entitled “The Invisible Hand”), heard it from Benjamin who in turn heard it from Scholem. Scholem confirms this in a footnote included in the collected correspondence between himself and Benjamin which Scholem edited. He notes that Benjamin had already published a version of the story in 1932 in a text entitled “In the Sun.” Scholem writes: “In Ernst Bloch’s *Spuren*, the same sentence ascribed by W[alter] B[enjamin] to a ‘great rabbi’ (GS 2:423) is quoted from a ‘truly kabbalistic rabbi.’ But in 1932 W[alter] B[enjamin] had already borrowed the sentence verbatim in the version originating from me, in his text ‘in der Sonne’ (GS 4:419): ‘Everything will be as it is here—only slightly different.’” And in a letter to Benjamin, dated June 9, 1934, Scholem wrote: “Who is actually the source of all those stories? Does Ernst Bloch have them from you or you from him? The great rabbi with the profound dictum on the messianic kingdom who appears in Bloch is none other than I myself [...] It was one of my first ideas about the Kabbalah.” See *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932-1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). Despite this claim, however, the source of the parable goes back much further and it seems highly unlikely that Scholem would not have been aware of its original source. The narrative first appears in the *Mishnah Torah* of Maimonides: “Let no one consider that in the days of the Messiah [Hazrat Mahdi (pbuh)] anything of the customary way of the world will be defunct, or that there will be anything new in Creation, rather the world will remain as it is.” (*Mishnah Torah, Laws of Kings 12:1*); and “Nothing will change in the Messianic age, however, except that Jews will regain their independence. Rich and poor, strong and weak, will still exist. However it will be very easy for people to make a living, and with very little effort they will be able to accomplish very much. [...] Do not think that the ways of the world or the laws of nature will change, this is not true. The world will continue as it is.” (*Mishnah Torah, Sanhedrin 10:1*).

73 G. Agamben, “Das unheilige Leben: Ein Gespräch mit dem italienischen Philosophen Giorgio Agamben,” interview with Hannah Leitgeb and Cornelia Vismann, *Literaturen* 2, no. 1 (January 2001): 18. Cited in Leland de la Durantaye, “*Homo profanus*: Giorgio Agamben’s Profane Philosophy” *boundary* 2 35, no. 3 (2008), p. 47.

74 Agamben, *Profanations*, p. 30.

In each case, messianism is reconceived as a manner of attention paid to the present. The messiah has already come, we are already saved but we do not yet realize this. And so we cling to anticipation and to the promise of completeness rather than pay attention to the world as it is, here and now. “The world of the happy and that of the unhappy,” Agamben tells us, “the world of the good and that of the evil contain the same states of things; with respect to their being-thus they are perfectly identical. The just person does not reside in another world. The one who is saved and the one who is lost have the same arms and legs. The glorious body cannot but be the mortal body itself. What changes are not the things but their limits.”⁷⁵ What changes are not the things that comprise the world but the limits that stand between them, which is to say, the order that we impose on the world as a consequence of a misguided ontology rooted politically in the logic of sacredness. To profane these limits, to render them inoperative, is not to cause distinctions to vanish, or to suddenly make everyone identical, but rather, to paraphrase Saint Paul, it is to allow distinctions to remain but in a way that they cease to divide.⁷⁶

“To strive after such passing,” Benjamin concludes, speaking of our need to embrace impermanence, “even for those stages of man that are nature, is the task of world politics, whose method must be called nihilism.”⁷⁷ The link between politics and nihilism which Benjamin establishes in these lines is crucial, but we must pay special attention to the fact that nihilism is understood here not as the goal of politics, but as its “method,” as a kind of

75 Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 92.

76 In an interview which prefigures Agamben’s work in *The Time that Remains*, he explains the importance of Saint Paul: “Right now I’m working on Paul’s letters. Paul formulates the problem: ‘What is messianic life? What are we going to do now that we live in the messianic time? What are we going to do with regard to the State?’ What’s interesting to me is the double movement we find in Paul that has always been problematic. Paul says: ‘Remain in the social condition, be it juridical or cultural, in which you find yourself. You’re a slave? Remain a slave. You’re a doctor? Remain a doctor. You’re a wife, a husband? Remain in the vocation for which you have been called.’ But at the same time, he says: ‘You’re a slave? Don’t worry, but make use of it, take advantage of it.’ This means that it’s not a matter of changing your juridical status, or changing your life, but of making use of it. He then specifies what he means through this very beautiful image: ‘as if not,’ or ‘as not.’ That is: ‘You’re crying? As if you weren’t crying. You’re rejoicing? As if you weren’t rejoicing. Are you married? As non-married. Have you bought something? As not bought, etc.’ There is this theme of the ‘as not.’ It’s not even ‘as if,’ it is ‘as not.’ Literally, it’s: ‘Crying, as not crying; married, as not married; slave, as not slave.’ It’s very interesting, because we could say that what he calls ‘usages’ are conducts of life which, on the one hand, do not directly confront power—remain in your juridical condition, your social role—but nevertheless completely transform them in the form of an ‘as not.’ The notion of use, of usage, in this sense, interests me a great deal.” Giorgio Agamben, “I am sure that you are more pessimistic than I am [...]: An Interview with Giorgio Agamben,” *Rethinking Marxism* 16, no. 2 (April 2004), p. 118. This interview first appeared in the French journal *Vacarme* 11 (December 1999) under the title “Une biopolitique mineure.”

77 W. Benjamin, “Theologico-Political Fragment,” p. 306.

practice through which we might wean ourselves from the habit of grasping after perceived permanence. For Benjamin, it is decidedly not the task of politics to shelter us from transience, nor is the task of politics to provide foundations for a world that has none, rather politics sets before us the task of accepting radical groundlessness and of abandoning our reflex to project our hopes and happiness onto a transcendent world. Unflinching attention to this world is happiness, nothing more and nothing less. No grace. No messiah. No *telos*. No actuality. No perfection. What stands in the way of our happiness, then, is not the fact that what holds value for us is impermanent, or that the world is not fixed and consistent, but rather our persistent efforts to create such a world and to act as if this leads to our salvation.

The basic problem, then, is not how to conceive of life in the absence of beliefs that furnish an objective ground for thought, but how to endure this absence in a way that does not exhaust itself in a search for new foundations. It is simply not enough to answer the historical demands of our age by abandoning foundationalism, we must also come to terms with the practical consequences of this realization, that we learn how to live in a world in without them. The philosophical challenge Nietzsche faced, and which we still face today, is how to endure the collapse of those beliefs that anchor our presumed objectivity without succumbing to the extremes of either nihilism or dogmatism. Even if we fully accept the fact that the world is groundless this gives us no obvious means of answering the practical question as to how we ought to live in a world without foundations. The problem we confront here, as we have seen, reveals a political task. The ontological questions spills over into the political question, and is why Agamben insists that the political task of our time begins with the embrace of a renovated ontology. What, for instance, is a political life that takes seriously the groundlessness of experience? How does this realization inform our forms of sociality and the social ontologies that we cling to as if they were not socially constituted at all? How would confronting, openly and honestly, the fact of impermanence and emptiness translate into new possibilities for living differently in this very same world? We must not only lay down a path for thinking which is sensitive to the reality left behind after our cherished myths of stable truths have been displaced, but must also adopt ways of both acting and perceiving such that we are capable of living without them. In the final instance, *politics is a type of awareness*, not of the minor and mundane adjustments that comprise juridical existence, but of the largely hidden attitudes that sustain that existence and determine the scope of what is valid within it.

It is at this juncture that I believe we can glimpse an unexpected affinity between Agamben's prescriptive political philosophy and the long history of mindfulness practices arising from the Buddhist tradition. The doctrine

of dependent co-origination (*paticca samuppāda*), and in particular some of the discourses on consciousness (*viññāṇa*) within the Pali canon, forms a cornerstone of Buddhist teaching which entails coming to an awareness of how divisions arise both in the objective world and the subjective mind, and how these false divisions are overcome neither by rearranging the divisions, nor by denying their existence, but by rendering them inoperative through techniques of mindfulness and meditation. Agamben's repeated claim that the world is not lacking anything, and his insistence on the present moment all point toward an as yet unarticulated philosophy of practice. What I say here must remain prefatory, but I think one can demonstrate the possibility of an alliance between tenants of Buddhism and Agamben's onto-political project.

STEPPING OFF A 100 FOOT POLE

It was not until approximately five hundred years after the Buddha's death that the teaching of emptiness (*sūnyāta*), which would become so central to the Buddhist tradition, first developed. The *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* and other texts that expound this doctrine began to appear at that time and those who began to adopt these newer teachings called themselves the Mahāyāna. By the first half of the second century CE these teachings on emptiness were put into precise philosophical form by Nāgārjuna, the principle founder of the Mādhyamika, or Middle Way, school and it is Nāgārjuna that Agamben will reference in his writings.

Though central to its philosophy, the Mādhyamika doctrine of emptiness is easily misunderstood. In particular, it is often misinterpreted as a profound nihilism. But Nāgārjuna's position is, in fact, decidedly non-nihilistic and aims to avoid precisely the condition in which nihilism arises, namely, the reification of emptiness and the dualism, between existence and emptiness, that this entails. In contrast, Nāgārjuna champions a middle path between the poles of foundationalism and nihilism, by demonstrating that emptiness and the phenomenal world are not two distinct things but are rather two characterizations of the same thing. For Mahāyāna Buddhism, including the Mādhyamika school, *sūnyāta* refers to the principle that all things come into being according to dependent co-origination (*paticca samuppāda*) and therefore do not possess an independent or essential nature. Thus, to say of something that it has dependently co-arisen is, in fact, to say that it is empty because dependence makes both ontological and epistemological separability impossible.

The great insight of the Buddhist tradition follows directly from this, namely, that our craving for essences and for ontological foundations—what Eliade called the “thirst for being”—is responsible for generating suffering

(*dukkha*) which in turn is the basic condition of our conventional life (*samsāra*). The translation of the Sanskrit term *dukkha* as “suffering” is somewhat unfortunate because it erroneously suggests physical pain. For Buddhism, physical pain is a mere fact of life which no amount of practice will eliminate, so the concept of suffering is better understood as “anxiety,” namely, the anxiety that comes from our efforts to control the conditions of our existence such that it appears permanent. Instead of embracing the transitory nature of the world, and of ourselves, we convince ourselves that what we are, what we have, and what we know are more certain, more permanent, than they are. Moreover, it is this act of clutching or clinging that produces anxiety/suffering not only because these things will inevitably be lost, but because the mental state we inhabit while trying to convince ourselves of their permanence is delusional and this delusion causes us to make false distinctions. Once we make these distinctions—often taking the form of dualisms—we then live our lives in reaction to them by desiring one and hating the other. The more we suffer the more we attempt to solve the problem of suffering by seeking permanence, not recognizing that this pursuit of permanence is what caused the problem to begin with. Indeed, all too often the categories we use to comprehend a problem, and thus use to frame the solution, only reinforce the problem itself. This, I believe, is not only an insight distinctive to Buddhism, but is at the heart of Agamben’s critique of western onto-politics as well. In both cases, the manner in which we frame the problem must be undone.

We can say, then, that Buddhism presents us not with a moral or normative world view bracketed by absolutes of right and wrong, but rather with a description of the world which, in explaining our condition and the problem of suffering it engenders, provides us with a new means of solving the problem. And the solution is, of course, not the pursuit of the good as opposed to the bad, but a reconstruction of our mode of awareness—in particular, our ontological awareness vis-à-vis an understanding of emptiness—such that the reified distinctions we cling to no longer propel our thoughts and actions. It is for this reason, for instance, that the early Chan monk Seng-ts’an instructs, “Gain and loss, right and wrong—let them go, once and for all,” because, he continues, “In the very end, at the ultimate, there’s no room for rules of measures.”⁷⁸

Though Chan (or Zen) Buddhism is a much later development, it shares close affinities with Nāgārjuna, and in both traditions what is required is a letting go of those cognitive moorings which we strive for and cling to

78 Seng-ts’an “Relying on Mind,” *The Roaring Stream: A New Zen Reader*, ed. Nelson Foster and Jack Shoemaker (Hopewell, NJ: The Ecco Press, 1996), pp. 13-14.

and which express themselves philosophically in the form of ontological assumptions. Reification is the root of craving and craving leads to suffering, thus it is only by truly understanding emptiness that our habit of thinking in terms of essences and foundations can be broken and with it the root of suffering. But there are risks, perhaps the most serious of which is falling into a state of nihilism. As Nāgārjuna explains, if one relinquishes the idea of phenomenal existence but then goes on to reify emptiness this merely shifts the problem from the craving for ontological permanence to a craving for emptiness. Only with the realization of the emptiness of emptiness can suffering be fully uprooted. However, not unlike Benjamin who claims nihilism to be a “method” for the coming politics, so too the encounter with nihilism is the gateway—the narrow gateway—through which awakening must pass.

Within the Zen tradition, passing beyond this encounter with nihilism, which afflicts the early stages of awakening, has been spoken of as “the Great Death,” first by Joshu, then by Dōgen, and finally by Hakuin in whose writings the term assumes a particular importance. One lets go, abandoning the safety of permanence without substitution. Under these conditions, which Hakuin likens to a free fall, our cognitive vertigo draws us back to foundational thoughts, the last of which is the reification of emptiness itself. But to pass beyond the Great Death and awaken is to do away with even this ontological construct. We find among the *koans* of the *Mumonkan*, for instance, a question which focuses this point: “Master Sekiso said, ‘You are at the top of the 100 foot high pole. How will you make a step further?’”⁷⁹ To step off a 100-foot pole is to step into death unless, of course, one truly understands that there is no place to fall, no ground or foundation upon which to land. Only under these conditions can one awaken to the groundlessness of being, the transience of existence, and an ontological awareness that has decisively done away with the anchors of actuality and finality, without descending into the trap nihilism. “At the bottom of great doubt,” Hakuin tells us, “lies great awakening. If you doubt fully you will awaken fully.”⁸⁰

MOUNTAINS ARE MOUNTAINS

While the link between Agamben and Buddhism is not obvious, Agamben does provide us with reasons to proceed in this direction. In the lines immediately following Benjamin’s parable about the world to come being no

79 Z. Shibayama, *The Gateless Barrier: Zen Commentary on the Mumonkan*, trans. Sumiko Kudo (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1974), p. 311.

80 Hakuin, *The Zen Master Hakuin: Selected Writings*, trans. Philip Yampolsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), p. 144.

different than the world as it is now, Agamben turns our attention, just for a moment, in an unexpected direction. The logicians of India, he writes, were the first to posit the axiom contained in Benjamin's narrative:

There is nothing new about the thesis that the Absolute is identical to this world. It was stated in its extreme form by Indian logicians with the axiom, "Between Nirvana and the world there is not the slightest difference." What is new, instead, is the tiny displacement that the story introduces in the messianic world. And yet it is precisely this tiny displacement, this "everything will be as it is now, just a little different," that is difficult to explain. This cannot refer simply to real circumstances, in the sense that the nose of the blessed one will become a little shorter, or that the cup on the table will be displaced exactly one-half centimeter, or that the dog outside will stop barking. The tiny displacement does not refer to the state of things, but to their sense and their limits.⁸¹

Though the reference is passed over quickly, and the reference is surprising given how deeply rooted Agamben is in the Judeo-Christian-Islam tradition, it is, in fact, not the only appearance of Buddhism, and more specifically Mādhyamika Buddhism, in Agamben's work. At the end of *The Coming Community*, in the chapter on the irreparable, he virtually repeats the statement: "This is why Indian logicians said that *sicceitas*, the being-thus of things, was nothing but their being deprived of any proper nature, their vacuity, and that between the world and Nirvana there is not the slightest difference"⁸²

What these passages appear to suggest, however momentary, is a conduit between Agamben's onto-political philosophy and a Buddhist worldview. There are many places one could begin building this connection but at the core of this affinity is, I believe, the in-distinction between the world before the messiah and the world after, between the world of *samsāra* and the world of *nirvāna*. And the reason I believe this notion is so fundamental is because it demands that we confront our dissatisfactions, indeed, our unhappiness, in a very different way. If the world to come is identical to the world we have then getting from one to the other is precisely not the problem. Rather, the problem is in the way we occupy this world, the way we comport ourselves toward it, our disposition, or more philosophically speaking they way our

81 G. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 53.

82 Ibidem, p. 102.

ontological commitments, which shape how we conceive of ourselves and the world, become political commitments.

To understand the meaning of these passages is, I believe, to come close to what Agamben is trying to accomplish and for this reason I think that there is much to learn about Agamben by reading the Buddhist sources he references. While Agamben provides no specific citation for the quotations he uses, mentioning only “Indian logicians,” there can be little doubt that the doctrines he cites come directly from Nāgārjuna, and more specifically from his most important work, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Whereas in earlier forms of Buddhism, awakening was equated with a complete escape from samsāra (the everyday lived world of fixation, habit, and suffering), the teaching of emptiness in the Mahāyāna tradition, and especially within the stanzas that comprise *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, brought about a radical change by collapsing the distinction between samsāra and nirvāna. On this point Nāgārjuna is clear:

There is no distinction at all between the everyday world (samsāra) and freedom (nirvāna). There is no distinction at all between freedom and the everyday world.

The range of the everyday world is the range of freedom. Between them not even the most subtle difference can be found.⁸³

Moreover, this theme was adopted and extended in Chan and Zen literature, appearing, for instance, embedded within a well known aphorism that occurs in many variants but which is first attributed to Qingyuan in the *Compendium of the Five Lamps*:

Thirty years ago, before I practiced Chan, I saw that mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers. However, after having achieved intimate knowledge and having gotten a way in, I saw that mountains are not mountains and rivers are not rivers. But now that I have found rest, as before I see mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers.⁸⁴

The meaning of this passage, which directly parallels not only Nāgārjuna, but Agamben’s reading of Benjamin’s parable about the messiah, lies in the ultimate in-distinction between existence and emptiness discussed above. The conventional reality of phenomenal existence and of the ordinary world gives

83 J. Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, trans. Jay Garfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), XXV: pp. 19-20.

84 App Urs, eds. *Master Yunmen: From the Record of the Chan Master “Gate of the Clouds”* (New York: Kodansha America, 1994), pp. 111-112.

way in Buddhist practice to an awareness of the world as emptiness. But if one stops at this juncture, if one only sees beyond the delusion of substantial existence and adopts the awareness of interdependence, this is not enough. When mountains are no longer mountains, emptiness stands in relation to existence in the same way fact stands in relation to fiction, and under such conditions perception remains divided. Thus, as Qingyuan's parable makes clear, mountains must again become mountains, for it is only when there is no longer a distinction between emptiness and existence—when we realize that the world after the messiah will be the very same world as the world before the messiah, when we realize that samsāra is nirvāna—that awakening begins. “Since the darkness of ignorance is inseparable from nirvana,” Dōgen writes in the *Shōbōgenzō*, “deliberate acts, becoming aware of things, and so forth, are also inseparable from nirvana. We can speak in this way because what arises is also what ceases.”⁸⁵ If conventional reality is no different from ultimate reality, if existence is the very same thing as emptiness, then there is in fact nothing to accomplish. We have already achieved nirvāna, the messiah has already arrived, but we have not yet awoken to an awareness of it, which, of course, does not mean that there is nothing to do, or that everything is now easy. Far from it. But what, in fact, needs to be done does not involve the reclamation of a lost world, or the establishment of a new one, but rather the adoption of a new mode of perceiving and inhabiting the one we are now in. Nirvāna is not a place but a way of being, a manner of awareness characterized by the vulnerability of letting go of that which we never had.

PERFECT JOY

As far as I am aware, within his published writings Agamben mentions Buddhism only three times and, as I indicated above, in each case his specific reference is to the doctrines set forth by the founder of the Mādhyamika school, the second century monk Nāgārjuna. Two of these references, which we have just discussed, appear in *The Coming Community*, but the third and most provocative appears at the end of the *Idea of Prose* where an entire, but very short chapter, entitled “The Idea of Awakening,” is devoted almost entirely to Nāgārjuna himself—to which we will now turn our attention. But as will become clear in a moment, before discussing Nāgārjuna we must begin with Saint Francis.

There is a story told in chapter eight of the *Fioretti di San Francesco* which has its origin in a very simple and short version, which Kajetan Esser

⁸⁵ E. Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō*, trans. Hubert Nearman (Mount Shasta: Shasta Abbey Press, 2007), p. 307.

considers to have originated with Saint Francis himself. The tale recounts an exchange between Francis and his long time companion and confessor, Brother Leo, on the subject of perfect joy (*perfecta laetitia*).

One day blessed Francis, while at St. Mary's, called friar Leo and said: "Friar Leo, write this down." And Leo responded: "Behold I am ready." "Write down what perfect joy is," Francis said, "A messenger comes and says that all the masters of theology in Paris have entered the Order: write, this is not true joy. Likewise all the prelates beyond the Alps, archbishops and bishops; likewise the King of France and the King of England: write, this is not true joy. Or, that my friars went among the infidels and converted them all to the Faith; likewise that I have from God enough grace that I can heal the infirm and work many miracles: I say to you that in all these things there is not true joy. But what is true joy? I return from Perugia and in the dead of night I come here and it is winter time, muddy and so frigid that icicles have congealed at the edge of my tunic and they pierce my shins so they bleed. And covered with mud and in the cold and ice, I come to the gate, and after I knock for a long time and call, there comes a friar and he asks: 'Who is it?' I respond: 'Friar Francis.' And he says: 'Go away; it is not a decent hour for traveling; you shall not enter.' I appeal to him again and he responds to me insisting: 'Go away; you are a simpleton and an idiot; you do not measure up to us; we are so many and such men, that we are not in need of you!' And I stand again at the gate and I say: 'For the love of God take me in this night.' And he responds: 'I will not! Go away to the place of Crosiers [referring to the Hospital of Fontanelle, run by the Order of Crosiers] and ask there.' I say to you, if I endure all this patiently and without dismay therein lies perfect joy, true virtue and the salvation of the soul."⁸⁶

A lengthy quotation from this story appears at the conclusion of "The Idea of Awakening," the same three-page chapter in which Agamben discusses Nāgārjuna. The quoted passage, which is left un-translated from the original

86 G. Agamben, *The Idea of Prose*, trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), p. 133. The most famous edition of the writings of St. Francis in recent times is the critical Latin edition of Kajetan Esser, O. F. M., published for the first time in 1976 in collaboration with a team of researchers at the *Collegio San Bonaventura of Grottaferrata*. The translation of Francis's "*De Vera et Perfecta Laetitia*" used here, and modified, is from *The Writings of St. Francis of Assisi* (The Franciscan Archive, 1999). The version which appears in the *Fioretti di San Francesco* (The Flower of Saint Francis), which was published a century and a half after St. Francis' death, is significantly embellished.

Latin, is followed by a short parenthetical commentary which calls our attention to the failure of recognition that confronts Francis at the gate. Though he tries repeatedly to gain the recognition of the gatekeeper Francis is left in the end with nothing but the empty sign of his name. But in spite of this non-recognition, Agamben concludes, or perhaps because of it, “the insignificant name . . . is included in the edifice of joy.”⁸⁷ But in what sense does the total failure to be recognized, to be left cold outside the walls of one’s own monastery, constitute, for Saint Francis as well as for Agamben, the conditions for joy?

A partial answer to this question can be found in another one of the book’s brief chapters, this time a single page entitled “The Idea of Peace.” The chapter concerns liturgical reform in the Catholic Church which brought back to the mass the sign of peace. Though the Vatican initiated this change, the liturgy provided no indication of what precisely a sign of peace should be. How would one recognize it? Unsure of the proper gesture to use during services congregations fell back upon the familiar act of shaking hands. But in the end, Agamben writes, “the truth is that there is not, nor can there be, a sign of peace” because “[e]very struggle among men is in fact a struggle for recognition and the peace that follows such a struggle is only a convention instituting the signs and conditions of mutual, precarious recognition.”⁸⁸ In other words, the sort of peace for which a sign is appropriate, or even possible, is peace conceived as mutual recognition born of struggle—a detente, an armistice, a treaty, a contract. But this has nothing to do with true peace and is instead merely a provisional recognition formed within the bounds of an agreement, a mutual willingness to accept the current conditions of life—whether from fear or from benefit.

True peace, then, has nothing to do with the mutual recognition that is the condition for the cessation of struggle. It exists beyond recognition and for this there can be no sign. “Not the appeal to guaranteed signs or images,” Agamben writes, “but the fact that we cannot recognize ourselves in any sign or image: that is peace.” Or, if you prefer, he continues, “that is the joy more ancient than peace which a marvelous parable of St. Francis’ defines as sojourn—nocturnal, patient, homeless—in non-recognition.”⁸⁹ The peace of recognition (the handshake) is set here in contrast to the peace of non-recognition (Francis at the gate) which grounds nothing, provides no shelter, and which has nothing to do with agreement.

Looking again at the parable, we see that each example used by Francis to illustrate what is *not* true joy entails a kind of recognition because recognition

87 G. Agamben, *The Idea of Prose*, p. 133.

88 *Ibidem*, p. 81.

89 *Ibidem*, p. 82. Translation modified.

is the condition for every category, a kind of inclusion: theologians brought into the dogma of the order, kings and heathens brought into the community of the faithful, etc.⁹⁰ But instead of locating joy in inclusiveness, Francis teaches that joy appears precisely when one is left outside, when one is excluded, when one has no proper place of belonging. Positioned on the threshold of a comfort which has been denied, Francis teaches that here one finds joy.

To fully appreciate this teaching and, I believe, to grasp Agamben's philosophical enterprise, we must come to terms with the ambiguity of this claim—that in dire conditions, especial those brought about by exclusion, there appears the potential for fullest happiness. It is essential to see, for instance, that the image of Saint Francis at the gate is an allegory for what Agamben calls “bare life,” a life whose existence of exposure to violence is brought about precisely by the law's refusal to recognize in it anything worthy of protection. Like Francis at the gate, shelter comes with recognition, but in this case not by way of the gatekeeper, but through the juridical apparatus of the law. The figure of bare life undeniably carries with it a strong negative tone and most of the critical commentary on Agamben's work reads bare life as exclusively negative, reflecting perhaps a bias for identifying in any theoretical framework its positive and negative poles. But Agamben's use of the concept has, from its very first appearance, been far more ambiguous, bearing indications of an optimistic political vision which has been present in his work from the start.

Throughout his writing, and within a wide range of contexts, Agamben has maintained that the conditions of exclusion and nihilism that have come to characterize modern life may also serve as the basis for the emergence of a new form of life. Thus, the proximity between destitution and redemption that characterizes Agamben's work precludes the possibility of easily separating out positive and negative conditions. The poles overlap, and thus the conditions of exclusion that produce bare life, here represented by Francis at the gate, are not strictly speaking problems to be solved. In fact, any search for a more effective, exception-proof political order is entirely self-defeating. As is made clear in the parable of Francis, the path to joy does not lead to being brought into the fold but consists rather in the deactivation of the grip that this vision of belong has on us. In many respects, Agamben's political project begins and ends with this problem, and the entirety of what he means by a community of

90 Agamben dedicates “The Idea of Awakening” chapter to Italo Calvino with whom he was friends when they were both in exile in Paris. During these years (1974-1976) they, together with Claudio Rugafori, began formulating a project to produce a journal that would examine categories. The journal would never materialize, but it would frame one of Agamben's earliest books, *The End of the Poem*, whose Italian title was simply *Categorie italiane*. Moreover, Calvino's novel, *Mr. Palomar*, would arise from these reflections on categories. (He states in an interview that he began *Mr. Palomar* in 1975). In this work, the protagonist, Mr. Palomar, struggles to experience the world without categories.

those who have nothing in common turns on this point.⁹¹ Shedding the need to be recognized, to be included or to include, and to be at ease in precisely the condition we find ourselves, this is the gateway to the peace—the joy—Francis teaches. In those moments when we find that we are no longer recognized, that we no longer belong, this is an opportunity for awakening.

AWAKENING

The chapter on awakening ends with Saint Francis, but it begins with Nāgārjuna. The first short section of this equally short chapter has a distinctly narrative form and begins with the narrator recounting Nāgārjuna's many travels during which he taught the doctrine of emptiness. Often, we are told, he would encounter adversaries: orthodox monks who would accuse him of being a nihilist and of distorting the dharma, but among all these opponents none tormented him more than those logicians who did not present themselves as adversaries at all, but rather claimed to profess the same doctrine as himself: "The difference between their teachings and his own was so subtle that at times he himself was unable to grasp it. And yet one could not imagine anything farther from his own position. For it was in fact the same doctrine of emptiness but one constrained within the limits of representation."⁹² The logicians espoused the idea of emptiness, placing it at the center of their concerns but, as we have seen, they did so by treating emptiness itself as a thing, not only in the language they used but in the manner in which they conceived of it. In showing the emptiness of all things, "they did not reach the point at which these principles revealed their own emptiness," and so fell into the trap of teaching the absence of the very principles they used to arrive at their conclusions—"they taught knowledge," we are told, "without awakening."⁹³ Even Nāgārjuna's closest disciple, his beloved Chāndrakīrti, succumbed to this error and so Nāgārjuna faced the task of formulating a way of communicating the doctrine of emptiness without

⁹¹ According to Agamben, the coming community is precisely a community that is comprised of those that have nothing in common. But perhaps there is a double entendre here: not only the idea that no two things have anything in common, that they are singular in their "suchness," but also the idea that all things have "nothingness" in common. But, of course, this nothingness is not a quality or an attribute but is rather emptiness as such—a term around which no category of inclusion or exclusion could ever be built. The tragedy is that we assume that the more fixed our categories are, and the more we can convince ourselves of their actuality, the more secure and happy we assume we will be. But the lesson Agamben takes from Francis is that the opposite is the case. Joy comes from realization that not belonging, and shedding the cognitive impulse to belong, is the proper path.

⁹² G. Agamben, *The Idea of Prose*, p. 131.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 131-132.

falling back on representations. The solution to this problem would become his *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, the *Treatise on the Middle Way*.

The remainder of this section of the chapter consists of a long hypothetical quotation, ostensibly from Nāgārjuna, which draws upon many of the major themes found throughout the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. “Those who profess the truth as a doctrine,” it begins, “treat the void as if it were a thing, they make a representation of the emptiness of representation.”⁹⁴ Instead, Nāgārjuna maintains, any true awareness of emptiness is not, nor can it be, a representation. In fact, true emptiness is simply “the end of representation.”⁹⁵ The instinct to turn emptiness itself into a thing, to represent it or reify it, has its roots in the anxiety associate with this task of thought. At the brink of emptiness, when, as Nietzsche tells us, we realize that our most cherished beliefs are untenable and yet we are incapable of living without them, we are tempted by a second pole—not foundationalism, but nihilism, i.e., not the awareness of emptiness as such, but the mistaken belief that emptiness is the opposite of foundationalism, that it resides at the other end of an ontological spectrum. “If emptiness doesn’t itself remain empty,” Agamben writes, “if you attribute being or non-being to it, this and only this is nihilism.”⁹⁶

94 Ibidem, p. 132.

95 Ibidem.

96 Ibidem. Translation modified. In *Potentialities*, in an essay entitled “The Messiah and the Sovereign,” Agamben addresses the problem of nihilism by first acknowledging “the equivalence between messianism and nihilism of which both Benjamin and Scholem were firmly convinced,” and second by recognizing that to sustain this equivalence we must “distinguish two forms of messianism or nihilism.” The first form, which Agamben refers to as “imperfect nihilism,” is that which nullifies the law and stops its enforcement but which “maintains the Nothing in a perpetual and infinitely deferred state of validity.” Not unlike Nāgārjuna’s lament for those who embrace emptiness without recognizing the emptiness of emptiness itself, Agamben speaks of a nihilism (which is also a form of messianism) that ends the law but keeps the force of law in place—what he calls “force without significance.” The second form, which he refers to as “perfect nihilism,” does away even with this suspended validity. It “does not even let validity survive beyond its meaning but instead, as Benjamin writes of Kafka, ‘succeeds in finding redemption in the overturning of the Nothing.’” Thus, with respect to messianism, the task of the messiah is not only to confront the law at the level of its operation, but to reckon with the law at the level of its validity. Only when the Nothing of the law, which is the force of law that subtends all positive law and makes it possible, is also overturned will we be freed from the logic of the juridical order. But like those who mistake the representation of emptiness for true emptiness and succumb to the temptation to use emptiness as a shelter from emptiness, those who remain within the emptiness of the law assuming that the law itself had been undone, are as Nāgārjuna says, “uncurable.” In being reduced to this “state of Nothing,” Agamben writes, the law “becomes ungraspable” and because we cannot grasp it the law without content remains “ineradicable.” Thus, Agamben continues, “we can compare the situation of our time to that of a petrified messianism that, like all messianism, nullifies the law, but then maintains it as the Nothing of Revelation in a perpetual and interminable state of exception.” And it is precisely this state of exception that, for Agamben, characterize our age.

Confronted with the temptation of using emptiness as a shelter from emptiness, the sage, not unlike Francis who embraced non-recognition, chooses to dwell without shelter. But for those who fail in this, those who insist that the unrepresentable is a representation, and that the unsayable has a name, these we are told are the incurable: “Precisely this is the most difficult test: if, at this point, you don’t understand the nature of emptiness and you continue to make of it a representation, then you fall into the heresy of the grammarians and the nihilists; you’re like a magician bitten by the serpent he didn’t know how to take hold of.”⁹⁷ If, however, one avoids this, “if instead you patiently dwell in the emptiness of representation [...] [this] is what we call the middle way.”

Between Francis standing before at the gate and Nāgārjuna facing emptiness in the absence of representation, there is a parallel. Each lingers on a threshold and in both cases they take us beyond the choices offered by the dualisms of belonging or not-belonging, and of being or non-being. In both cases, the solution, if we can even use this word, is the deactivation of terms of the problem itself—neither by rearranging the divisions, nor by denying their existence, but by rendering them inoperative.

Understood in these terms, and enhanced by familiarity with the Buddhist worldview, the few passages in Agamben’s writings that engage Buddhist principles become less opaque—offering not only a way to assess Agamben’s project, but also a way to extend it. As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, an appreciation for what our western tradition does not have—in this case, an encounter with principles unique to the Buddhist tradition—offers us a way to observe our own assumptions so as to upset the system of categories that our minds are always in danger of becoming mired. Because beneath the questions we ask ourselves are not only the constraints of our tradition which govern what it is possible to ask, but also that which prompts us to ask. The world we experience is tethered to our habits of thinking, just as our modes of thinking are shaped by the experiences of our tradition. There is, in other words, an inescapable connection between a particular way of being and how the world appears to us, but we must be willing to suspend this circuit. We must, in short, be willing to refrain from the habit of being certain. If this tempts nihilism, then this is a danger we must confront, for nihilism is not merely a negation of all that is positive, but is also a pathway to opportunities that have been sequestered by certainty.

⁹⁷ G. Agamben, *The Idea of Prose*, pp. 132-133. Agamben is referencing a stanza from Chapter XXIV of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* which reads: “By a misperception of emptiness a person of little intelligence is destroyed. Like a snake incorrectly seized or like spell incorrectly cast.” See Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*, XXIV, p. 11.

Central to the Mahāyāna tradition is the realization that groundlessness or emptiness begets not nihilism, but compassion (*karunā*), and one achieves compassion not in accordance with a juridical model of adherence to moral laws, but by way of the cultivation of mindfulness and an abiding awareness of impermanence. Emptiness, as the loss of ground is the source out of which arises the unguarded openness through which compassion is channeled. The condition for the possibility of compassion is the relinquishing of the habit of clinging to permanence—both of the world and the self—along with the perceptual and linguistic reflexes that facilitate its phenomenal constitution.⁹⁸ The groundlessness that we are left with is a manner of abiding released from all notions of propriety and inclusion which is, I believe, akin to what Agamben's work directs us toward, i.e., a political community where distinctions remain but are rendered inoperative not through the command of law but by way of cultivating an awareness of life's ungroundedness, which is to say, its profanity. What is absolutely necessary, however, but what Agamben's work does not yet contain, is a practice that is equal to the task of this political vision. Buddhism offers a path in this direction.

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98 The fact that Agamben does not discuss the impermanence of the self and its fundamental emptiness, which lies at the core of Buddhist theory and practice, marks a significant disjunction between Agamben's work and the Buddhist tradition.