

THE POWER OF NOTHINGNESS: NEGATIVE THOUGHT IN AGAMBEN

Daniel Colucciello Barber (Marymount Manhattan College)

This paper addresses the nature and value of Giorgio Agamben's negative thought, which revolves around the theme of nothingness. I begin by observing the validity of negative thinking, and thus oppose those affirmative philosophies that reject Agamben's thought simply on the basis of its negativity. Indeed, the importance of negative thought is set forth by Agamben's attention to the specific biopolitical logic that governs the present. If we are to understand the present, then we must begin by understanding the nothingness inherent in the logic of biopolitics. At the same time, I argue, it is important to distinguish two kinds of negative thought. The first, ultimately limited manner of negative thought follows a strictly Heideggerian path of contemplation. While Agamben shows a certain affinity with this style of thinking, I call for increased focus on a different manner of negative thought, one that turns on the power to think nothingness. I develop this second manner of negative thought by advancing the concepts of love and exile, which provide the means by which the potentiality of nothingness may inhabited in novel ways.

Introduction

The philosophical endeavour of Giorgio Agamben is marked by a profound effort to think the architecture of our present philosophico-political nexus, and in doing so to discover a way out of the present (i.e., the presently regnant structures, which determine possible modes of existence). It has not gone unnoticed that, for Agamben, the accomplishment of this latter task depends wholly on the accomplishment of the former task. Such a relation of dependence, according to his critics, puts things backwards: rather than first critically displaying the present in order then to discern a path of departure, as does Agamben, it is preferable to pose immediately the path of departure, and then to direct this path against the present. Agamben's method, according to this line of critique, seems to compromise the political demand for a departure from, or refusal of, the present order. Indeed, Paolo Virno has remarked that Agamben is "a

thinker with no political vocation,”¹ while Antonio Negri observes that “there are two Agambens,” one marked by “the will to live” and the other by “the gloomy shadow of death.”²

There is, however, a virtue in Agamben’s approach, and it lies in his willingness to accept the restriction of an immanent method—that is, in his refusal to have recourse to something that transcends the given architecture of the present. In this specific sense, it is Agamben—and not, as might be supposed, Negri—who emerges as the thinker of immanence (where this last term includes any thought that proceeds without a transcendent point of reference). Though Agamben might be seen by some as a thinker of negative transcendence, and Negri as a thinker of affirmative immanence, such a judgement is reversed by an insistence on immanent method. Within this reversal, Agamben’s attention to the biopolitical organisation of the present appears to hew much more closely to the given than does Negri’s relatively transcendent invocation of a constitutive power concealed behind the constituted power that is given. One can effect this reversal because of the paradoxical character of the concept of immanence, which makes two divergent demands: to think the given, or the actual, on its own terms, rather than in terms of something that transcends it, but also to think a potentiality that exceeds given actuality. While Agamben attempts to conceive potentiality indirectly, by passing through the given, Negri does so directly and thus seeks to understand the given in virtue of this potentiality. Accordingly, the metaphysical dimension—that which concerns the potentiality of being—appears quite differently in these two thinkers. In Agamben, it must be discovered by way of negative thought, while in Negri, it is posed affirmatively.

It is in this context that we must comprehend Agamben’s somewhat obscure refusal, in a footnote within his early text, *Language and Death*, to utterly separate his project from Negri’s: “In the context of this seminar, the term metaphysics indicates the tradition of thought that conceives of the self-grounding of being as a negative foundation. Thus the problem of the possibility of a wholly and immediately positive

¹ Paolo Virno, “General Intellect, Exodus, Multitude,” (tr.) N. Holdren [<http://www.generation-online.org/p/fpvirno2.htm>].

² Antonio Negri, “The Ripe Fruit of Redemption,” (tr.) A. Bove [<http://www.generation-online.org/t/negriagamben.htm>].

metaphysics (such as that which Antonio Negri attributes to Spinoza in a recent book) remains uncompromised.”³ The aim of negative thought, then, is not to thematise a negative ground of being, but rather to grasp, through the thought of negativity, the ungrounded or groundless nature of being—that is, the nothingness that shadows the edges of being. Agamben’s aim is not to “replicate” the negativity of the present; it is, instead, to make “an attempt...to *understand* it.” (LD, xiii) What needs to be understood is the groundlessness of being, the peculiar immanence of being and nothingness. In any case, my concern here is not to track any rapprochement or separation between Agamben and Negri. I mention Negri simply in order to position Agamben’s thought as an attempt to think immanence in a negative manner. There is, in other words, validity—within criteria set by immanence—to negative philosophy. It is therefore premature to set up a fundamental distinction between negative and affirmative philosophy, such that immanence immediately demands affirmation. I wish, in what follows, to draw a line, but this line cannot be drawn along the fissure *between* negative and affirmative philosophy. Rather, it may be drawn *within* the sphere of negative philosophy set out by Agamben.

I begin by showing how Agamben’s immanent method, which takes as its object the specific biopolitical organisation of the present, provides a point of entry into his consideration of metaphysical questions. (I should note, here, that my aim is not to provide an immanent *reading* of Agamben, but rather to follow Agamben’s own immanent method, understood as the refusal to orient thought around something that transcends, or lies positively beyond, the given expression of the present.) The following section examines the affinity between the negative thought of being that Agamben develops—wherein being is irreducibly related to nothingness—and the metaphysical reflections of Heidegger. I contend that this affinity creates severe difficulties, for it leads Agamben to rely on an account of thought as contemplation rather than as power. It is here that I draw a line within negativity, rejecting negative thought when it takes the form of Heideggerian contemplation, and affirming it when it is understood as the power to think nothingness. I

³ Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, (tr.) K. Pinkus with M. Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xiii. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as LD.

then develop this latter mode of negative thought by investigating Agamben's concepts of love and exile, which provide the means for spatialising the potentiality of nothingness. In conclusion, I argue that the messianic character of love and exile is extremely significant for any departure from the present order.

From the Biopolitical to the Metaphysical

Let us begin to pursue Agamben's negative philosophy by foregrounding his immanent method and its object. The object that is given, which an immanent method takes up, is the biopolitical paradigm. Broadly speaking, the biopolitical names our present historical condition, where any thought of politics must take account (whether positively, negatively or neutrally) of the manner in which the political organisation of the present has become coextensive with the organisation of life itself. Because the organisation of the present is an organisation of life, questions of metaphysics are elicited by the actuality of the present. This provides an important means of approaching the metaphysical dimension of Agamben's philosophy, for it enables us to see that it is not a matter of producing metaphysics as first philosophy and then bringing this first philosophy to bear on the present. On the contrary, metaphysical investigation is required by the manner in which the present is organised. The injunction of an immanent method—to think that which is presently given—becomes an injunction to think the metaphysical. The biopolitical paradigm, as the object of immanent method, elicits the metaphysical object of being or life.

Agamben's immanent method analyses the specific biopolitical conjunction of the actual and the metaphysical most explicitly in *Homo Sacer*, which articulates a relation between "sovereign power" and "bare life."⁴ Sovereign power, in Agamben's reading of Carl Schmitt, constitutes itself by deploying a rule of law—that is, it is constituted not in virtue of the law itself, but in virtue of the capacity to make law. As the

⁴ Though I foreground *Homo Sacer* as a way into Agamben's thought, I recognise that one might just as easily find such an entry *via* earlier works. I adopt *Homo Sacer* as a point of entry due to its ability to render indiscernible the distinction between the question of being and the question of politics (or the question of unveiling new possibilities of existence.)

maker of law, the sovereign is both inside and outside of law. It is inside law, insofar it is bound to the law it creates, but it is also outside law, insofar as, by deciding on the law, it makes the law encompass everything. Agamben cites the noted pronouncement that Schmitt attributes to the sovereign: “I, the sovereign, who am outside the law, declare that there is nothing outside the law.”⁵ In order to grasp the nature of this encompassing, we must note that the law itself, in its content or positive character, cannot account for everything; it cannot become coextensive with all that is. If the rule of law is therefore non-coincident with what takes place, then the sovereign makes up for this non-coincidence by a decision over the state of exception. The fact of non-coincidence gives rise to the state of exception—the exception is, both phenomenologically and by definition, in disaccord with the rule of law. Yet the exception is simultaneously brought into relation with the law by sovereign power, which not only establishes the law to which there is an exception, but also decides the legal status of the exception. Thus the law and the law’s outside belong together on the basis of the sovereign. “The particular ‘force’ of law consists in this capacity of law to maintain itself in relation to an exteriority. We shall give the name *relation of exception* to the extreme form of relation by which something is included solely through its exclusion.” (HS, 18) On one hand, the law is constantly extended, apparently without limit, through a continually recommenced “taking of the outside” (HS, 19); on the other, in each moment of recommencement it must suspend its internal coherence—“what is outside is included...by means of the suspension of the juridical order’s validity” (HS, 18)—in order to decide on the exception.

There is, in short, a simultaneous inevitability and vulnerability involved in sovereignty, insofar as it both dominates and needs exteriority. The law, which “has its being in the very life of men,” “is made of nothing but what it manages to capture inside itself.” (HS, 27) Nonetheless, Agamben does not follow a path whereby this dependence of sovereignty’s law upon life could be turned against sovereignty. Instead of speaking of life apart from or prior to law, he addresses the life that is produced by this law, i.e., bare life. It is a sweeping address, running

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (tr.) D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 15. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as HS.

from Roman law, where “*homo sacer* presents the originary figure of life taken into the sovereign ban” (HS, 83), to contemporary biopolitics, which marks the omnipresence of bare life. Bare life traditionally “constitutes the immediate referent of sovereign violence” (HS, 113), but within the course of the history of this relation, its form, the state of exception, becomes less and less an occasional or aleatory event, and more and more the norm. The *polis* is traditionally delimited by sovereign decision over inside and outside, such that the life that belongs to the two sides of this boundary accords respectively with the two names of life, *bios* (inside, political) and *zoē* (outside, biological). As the state of exception becomes increasingly normalised, however, decisions stemming from a single sovereign recede. This recession, and the coeval accession of universal or global bare life (beyond any localisable sovereign), provide the lineaments of the biopolitical. “When life and politics—originally divided, and linked together by means of the no-man’s-land of the state of exception that is inhabited by bare life—begin to become one, all life becomes sacred and all politics becomes the exception.” (HS, 148)

Having thus encapsulated Agamben’s account of the biopolitical conjuncture of politics and life, let us return to the import of his immanent method and negative philosophy. Because of this immanent method, he will not turn to a metaphysical criterion by which biopolitics may be critiqued or resisted. Biopolitics elicits the question of metaphysics, but this does not license an immediate transposition of biopolitics into a more fundamental metaphysical domain. Metaphysics must be pursued in accordance with an immanent method, and thus as it emerges in the actuality of biopolitics. It is a matter not of “being” versus “biopolitics,” but of “biopolitical being.” Accordingly, any attempt to simply inscribe the biopolitical within the metaphysical will be inadequate, for it fails to negate the being of biopolitical actuality. This does not mean that criticism becomes impossible, only that it must be immanently pursued—and it is through this immanent pursuit that criticism emerges as a negative philosophy. But how can one negate the given biopolitical order of being if one does not call upon a prior account of being? Here we begin to grasp the nature of the negativity of Agamben’s philosophy: it negates biopolitical being not in virtue of a prior order of being, but rather by conceiving the negativity inherent in biopolitical actuality. Negativity can be understood here in a double sense. It refers, first, to

the operation by which thought negates, that is, to the critique of the given, and second, to the negativity inherent in biopolitical being.

We can begin with the latter—though it may be more precise to speak here of nothingness instead of negativity. At the heart of the sovereignty–bare-life conjuncture, there is, according to Agamben’s immanent critique of biopolitics, nothingness. It is nothingness, rather than sovereignty or even life, which provides the ultimate limit of biopolitics. Of course, sovereignty captures life, so it might seem feasible to turn life against sovereignty. After all, capture implies dependence, such that the term upon which sovereignty depends—life—might provide the ground for revolt against sovereignty. But life as such, or in itself, is not given. What is given is biopolitics, with its opposition between law and life, *bios* and *zoē*. Biopolitics is certainly the capture of life, but this capture occurs simultaneously with the production of the division between sovereignty and bare life. The proper point at which to attack biopolitics, then, is not life, which is always already divided into *bios* and *zoē*, but is rather this division itself. It is here that we approach the nothingness at the heart of biopolitical being, for we encounter the groundlessness of the *bios/zoē* scission. Concomitant with the groundlessness of this scission is the groundlessness of sovereign power.

I noted above that the law cannot become coextensive with all that is, that the rule of law is non-coincident with what takes place. Sovereignty responds to this non-coincidence with arbitrary force. Its groundless exercise of power provides the link that effaces this non-coincidence. For this reason, it is proper to say that sovereignty is the capture of nothingness. Agamben’s immanent method may not enable us to turn sovereignty’s dependence on life against subjectivity, since life is given in terms of the *bios/zoē* scission. It does, however, enable us to see sovereignty’s capture of and dependence on nothingness, and thus to posit nothingness against sovereignty. Rather than attempt to locate a power of life before the division of *zoē* and *bios*, Agamben turns to the groundlessness of their fracture; rather than attempt to turn the life captured in the state of exception against the capture, he seeks to think the nothingness that conditions the constitution of the capturing relation. The power exercised by sovereignty, he argues, is groundless, with no basis except simple self-assertion. A negative philosophy seeks the metaphysical condition for this sovereign exercise of power in the groundlessness of being itself. The hope of such a philosophy, then, is to

understand the nothingness that surrounds being's actuality in such an essential manner that metaphysical groundlessness becomes a mode of relation—or, more precisely, a mode of non-relation—capable of dissolving the sovereignty–bare-life relation.

At this juncture, advocates of a positive philosophy might believe their case has been made. All that Agamben offers, it may seem, is an exacting account of what is given—nothingness—with no point of departure toward something else. Yet that is not the case, for we cannot equate the nothingness conceived by Agamben's immanent method—namely, nothingness as the condition of possibility for the biopolitical sovereignty–bare-life relation—with the actual biopolitical exercise of this relation. In other words, nothingness as the immanent condition of the biopolitical, and the specific biopolitical actualisation of this condition, cannot be identified. This distinction reaffirms that the line to be drawn is not between affirmative and negative philosophy, but is, rather, within negative philosophy. Agamben's immanent method has effectively displaced nothingness from the present biopolitical operation to the orbit of thought. Here we see how the second sense of negativity—the nothingness at the heart of the actually given—coincides with the first sense of negativity—the negation of the actually given. The nothingness intrinsic to the biopolitical object of Agamben's immanent method is that by which he negates this object. The ensuing challenge, then, is to provide a direction of thought which inhabits nothingness, which finds in nothingness a mode of departure from the given biopolitical order.

Breaking Agamben's Affinity with Heidegger

It is important, in order to evaluate the nature of Agamben's displacement of nothingness, to observe his proximity to Heidegger. Agamben, in *Homo Sacer*, makes explicit the affinity between his account of the groundlessness of the sovereignty–bare-life relation and Heidegger's account of the groundlessness and nihility of being. He claims that the decisive moment in Heidegger's thought occurs when ontological difference is made to be not the difference between being and beings, such that it would constitute their relation, but rather, is made to be the difference prior to any relation between being and beings, such that it constitutes their non-relation, or the impossibility of any relation. "This is why it is

necessary to remain open to the idea that the relation of abandonment is not a relation, and that *the being together of the being and Being* [or of beings and being] *does not have the form of relation*. This does not mean that Being and the being now part ways; instead, they remain without relation.” (HS, 60) Just as Agamben conceives the nothingness at the heart of biopolitics, so Heidegger conceives the nothingness at the heart of Western metaphysics. In each case, any departure from the pre-existing relation—sovereignty–bare-life for Agamben, and being–beings for Heidegger—requires a novel rethinking of groundlessness, of the “non-” of these relations.

The affinity between Agamben and Heidegger is evident not only in their respective conceptions of groundlessness, but also in their respective accounts of the sort of history occasioned by the failure to think the groundless. For Heidegger, as is well known, the history of metaphysics is marked by a fall whose condition is thought’s failure to think the difference between being and beings, prior to their relation. This originary failure is historically played out and amplified in a rather mono-directional manner up to the twentieth century, when the consequences of this originary failure fully manifest themselves in a generalised nihilism. The only means of departure from this history—a departure that constitutes Heidegger’s endeavour—is a return to the original scission between being and beings. This return must think the scission in itself, the groundlessness concealed by the scission. It is not difficult in *Homo Sacer* to discern Agamben extending the same sort of dynamic to biopolitics. Here, the originary fall is the scission between *bios* and *zoē*, the mono-directional history occasioned by this originary failure is articulated by the sovereignty–bare-life relation, and the full manifestation of this failed history arrives in the contemporary generalisation of the state of exception.

The stakes of this affinity are raised by the fact that Agamben does not wish simply to point to a structural homology between the biopolitical and the metaphysical. He does promote such a homology, but he makes his relation to Heidegger even more significant when he contends that the history of these two relations—the biopolitical and the metaphysical—are intertwined. In other words, Agamben not only reproduces a Heideggerian structure in the context of biopolitics; he also argues that the key to the biopolitical problematic and the key to the (Heideggerian) metaphysical problematic are one and the same. Or, to

put it more precisely, the key to the biopolitical problematic may be found in the metaphysical problematic, and the key to the metaphysical problematic may be found in the biopolitical problematic.

Yet precisely these two empty and indeterminate concepts seem to safeguard the keys to the historico-political destiny of the West. And it may be that only if we are able to decipher the political meaning of pure Being will we be able to master the bare life that expresses our subjection to political power, just as it may be, inversely, that only if we understand the theoretical implications of bare life will we be able to solve the enigma of ontology. (HS, 182)

It is here, the point at which Agamben links his account of biopolitics to Heidegger's narrative of the destiny of being, that any assessment of the Agamben–Heidegger affinity must take its bearings. The reason for pressing Agamben in this regard is the lingering ambiguity as to what sort of thought is demanded by this narrative. To a certain degree, the narrative's function is clear: it accounts for the present in terms of an original failure, such that the present and the original failure serve as bookends to the history occasioned by the failure. These bookends assume the foreground, while the history in between recedes to the background, thus forcing a fundamental encounter between the present and the originary failure. In short, this narrative enables a restaging of the original failure.

If all of this is clarified by the Heideggerian narrative that Agamben adopts, then why do we insist on a problematic ambiguity? It is because the narrative does not provide a means for staging the encounter between the present configuration and the original failure. Indeed, if the narrative provides any indication of how to stage this encounter, it lies in Heidegger's "step-backward-beyond," upon which Agamben also sometimes relies.⁶ What is ambiguous, however, is the manner in which the "step-backward"—the encounter of the present with the originary failure—gives rise to a "beyond." The implicit claim is that the contem-

⁶ For an explicit example, see Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, (tr.) R. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 156–57.

plation of this narrative is capable of generating something beyond the narrative itself. In fact, if one uses the language of conceptual representation—which Heidegger carefully avoided in favour of contemplation—then it is not difficult to discern a kind of inverted Hegelianism by which the conceptualisation of thought’s history generates an advance of thought (though by means of a step-backward-beyond rather than of progressive development). The danger of the ambiguity intrinsic to the Heideggerian narrative, then, is that it fails to conceive the way in which thought may generate, or at least sustain, the displacement of nothingness from the actuality of the present. Heidegger’s narrative does provide an encounter between the present and an original failure, for the nothingness manifest in the present is drawn into the same orbit as the original failure to think this nothingness. But the narrative does not provide a way of making nothingness into a point of departure from the historical trajectory that the original failure occasions and the present manifests. Contemplation of this narrative does not amount to departure from this narrative.

To depart truly from this historical trajectory, it is not enough to narrate it. The Heideggerian narrative may initially displace nothingness from the present, for it distinguishes nothingness in itself from the present’s actual manifestation of nothingness. Nonetheless, it is hard to see how a renewed contemplation of nothingness can maintain, much less extend, the initial displacement. Contemplation runs the risk of collapsing initial displacement into a somewhat mystical identity (identity here operating in a loose modality, as the contemplative oscillation between actual, manifest nothingness and nothingness in itself). For this reason, Agamben’s negative thought—insofar as it resolves itself in this Heideggerian style, and insofar as it displays an affinity with Heidegger’s destinal narrative—remains inadequate. In order to overcome this inadequacy, Agamben needs to move beyond contemplation and to conceive a *power* of negative thought.

Agamben’s short essay, “Form-of-Life”⁷—which contains in abbreviated form a number of the arguments of *Homo Sacer*, and which was published two years prior to this book—is of significant value for

⁷ Giorgio Agamben, “Form-of-Life,” in *Radical Thought in Italy*, (ed.) M. Hardt and P. Virno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as FL.

this task. Despite its similarity to *Homo Sacer*, a central difference emerges: the counterposition of bare life⁸ with form-of-life. This last term is defined as “a life that can never be separated from its form” (FL, 151), and it stands as the possible solution to the philosophico-political problem of bare life. What is interesting at this point, however, is not the specific character of “form-of-life” so much as the very possibility of its generation by thought. This possibility derives from an account of thought’s nature that is understood in terms of power. “To think,” Agamben remarks, “does not mean merely to be affected by this or that thing, by this or that content of enacted thought, but rather at once to be affected by one’s own receptiveness and experience in each and every thing that is thought a pure power of thinking.” (FL, 154)

This account of the power of thought stands in stark contrast to the account implicit in *Homo Sacer*, where departure from the present fate requires a Heideggerian contemplation of the intertwined historical deployments of being and biopolitics. Set against the backdrop of his approach in “Form-of-Life,” Agamben’s decision (in *Homo Sacer*) to invoke a step-backward-beyond the scission between *bios* and *zoē*, and to frame bare life’s becoming-the-norm as something bound to a Western historical fate, is a bit strange—that is, it is not clear why it is necessary. Heidegger’s refusal of an account of thought’s power is less mysterious. For him, the language of power belongs to the Latin period of philosophy, which is utterly inscribed within the fall of Western metaphysics. As such, the mere discussion of thought as power entails complicity with a failure. The only recourse, for Heidegger, is to return to the contemplative apprehension of being as exemplified in various pre-Socratics. A treatment of thought as power, then, is irreconcilable with a Heideggerian narrative. Yet, as is evident from “Form-of-Life,” Agamben does not wholly accept this prohibition against thought as power. He is right not to accept this prohibition, for without a sense of thought’s power, it is impossible to stage an encounter between thought and nothingness that effects a genuine displacement of the present’s manifest nothingness. If there is any merit to the claim that there are two Agambens, it lies here, in the disjunction between an approach that contemplates nothingness according to the lineaments of a Heideggerian narrative, and an approach

⁸ In Agamben, “form-of-life,” the Italian term *nuda vita*, normally rendered into English as “bare life,” is translated as “naked life.”

that insists on the power to think nothingness. The line I wish to draw within negative thought runs right through this disjunction, rejecting the negative thought that makes a step-backward-beyond, and affirming and developing the negative thought that displaces nothingness from its given configuration through an exercise of negativity.

Love and Exile as Practical Powers of Nothingness

We are now able, having given an account of negative thought as contemplation of nothingness, to set out the problematic to be pursued—namely, the intersection between nothingness and the power of thought. This intersection is somewhat counter-intuitive, for there is a tendency to align power with an act. Power, in other words, tends to be seen as that which exceeds nothingness, which brings mere potentiality into actuality. For Agamben, however, it is precisely such a presumption, whereby power is aligned with actuality in excess of potentiality, which is to be refused. What is lost in this presupposed alignment is the link between power and nothingness. The alignment of power with the actual ties thought to the given, thus obscuring the power that breaks with the actualised or the given. For this reason, Agamben, in “Form-of-Life,” distinguishes between two kinds of power—*potenza* and *potere*. “Political power as we know it” (FL, 152), i.e., that which is given—and which, importantly, *actualises* the biopolitical coupling of sovereignty and bare life—is denominated *potere*, while thought, in which inhere “*possibilities* of life, always and above all power” (FL, 151), is understood as *potenza*. What is of interest is that, amidst the actual *potere* of the biopolitical present, the *potenza* of thought remains as a real, experiential and experimental capacity. By thought, he says, “I do not mean ... a psychic faculty, but rather an experience, an *experimentum*⁹ that has as its object the potential character of life and human intelligence.” (FL, 154)

Agamben affirms an immanent, infrangible link between thought and its power, but at the same time he de-links this power from actuality. Thought’s power is conceived as *potenza*, in opposition to the *potere* of actuality. Does this mean that Agamben insists on the power of potenti-

⁹ The term carries the double [I know philosophers like to use the non-word “valence,” but in this context, would “meaning” work?] valence of an experience as well as an experiment.

ality in opposition to the power of actuality? He does, provided that we add a qualification that makes the gap between potentiality and actuality insuperable. The qualification is that potentiality must not be seen as the potentiality *for* actualisation. On the contrary, potentiality must be understood as utterly autonomous, separate from actuality. This is why, for Agamben, the power of thought belongs to nothingness. Only nothingness, as that which is irreducible to actuality, which does not draw on the *potere* of what is, preserves the autonomy of thought's *potenza*. Accordingly, Agamben is concerned throughout his work with the notion of potentiality as something other than a means to actualisation. He conceives a potentiality that fulfils itself not, as is generally presumed, by being actualised, but rather by *not* being actualised—that is, by retaining the potentiality of nothingness against the actuality of what is. Put otherwise, this potentiality actualises itself precisely by refusing actualisation and maintaining itself as potentiality. “Contrary to the traditional idea of potentiality that is annulled in actuality,” what we should seek is “a potentiality that conserves itself and saves itself in actuality. Here potentiality, so to speak, survives actuality and, in this way, *gives itself to itself*.”¹⁰

The essence of Agamben's thought is concentrated in this intersection between power, or potentiality (as *potenza*), and nothingness (which is irreducible to *potere*). But how is it possible to pursue this potentiality by encountering nothingness, i.e., by a refusal of actuality? What is required is an exercise of nothingness, a practice through which we experiment with and seek to experience that which is irreducible to the determinate order of actuality. I should, by way of clarification, make explicit that, when I argue, as I am now doing, that our understand-

¹⁰ Agamben, *Potentialities*, (tr.) D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 184. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as P. Agamben's remarks here are deeply Aristotelian, though in a somewhat heterodox manner. His reading of Aristotle, whereby potentiality “gives itself to itself,” de-links potentiality from actuality. This is in contrast, for instance, to the Aristotelianism of Thomas Aquinas, who always conceives potentiality in relation to actuality. For Aquinas, potentiality is always *for* an actuality. It is a condition for the becoming of actuality, but an insufficient one, for it cannot actualise itself; it can only be introduced into movement by a prior actuality. The infinite regress or aporia which could result from this arrangement is solved, for Aquinas, by God, who is not becoming. While becoming belongs to a composition of potentiality and actuality, God is Pure Act.

ing of Agamben be pushed in the direction of an experimental exercise of nothingness, I am attempting both to remain faithful to his texts and to construct an exposition of them that allows certain themes to gain priority. It is precisely the paradox that arises from a reading of Agamben's texts (that of the relation between nothingness and *potenza*) that requires the sort of constructive exposition for which I am arguing, and this, in fact, is why exposition of and argument about Agamben's thought are here intertwined. All of this is to reaffirm what I have, in looking at various texts, already addressed—namely, that Agamben's negative thought, while valid and profound in its insistence on an encounter with nothingness, runs the risk of passing over into a purely contemplative mode. The way forward, then, lies in giving greater interpretive value to those texts—such as “Form-of-Life,” as well as *The Coming Community*¹¹ and *The Time That Remains*,¹² both of which I will examine in what follows—that centre around power or potentiality (*potenza*).

We can, in order to begin moving in this direction, turn to Agamben's intriguing appropriation of Heidegger in a discussion of love. In this instance, Agamben looks outside the confines of Heidegger's destinal history and contemplative modality, and focusses instead on the early Heideggerian discussion of “facticity.” (This is not, in other words, the contemplative Heidegger.) The Heideggerian emphasis on facticity—wherein beings must be understood as thrown into a world, and in such a way that the point of departure for thought is this thrownness and this worldly milieu, rather than a faculty of reason or datum of objectivity—allows Agamben to address life in terms of experience and experiment. For Heidegger, being-in-the-world is prior to subjectivity and objectivity, which must be understood as epiphenomena, as inessential fragments torn away from the more originary and dense experiential modalities of being-there. Concomitantly, love—as such a modality—is not an intersubjective matter, a trafficking between two (or more) subjects, nor is it possible for the lover and the beloved to assume the respective

¹¹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, (tr.) M. Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CC.

¹² Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, (tr.) P. Dailey (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2005). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as TR.

roles of subject and object. On the contrary, Agamben observes, love and hatred form

the two *Grundweisen*, the two fundamental guises or manners, through which Dasein experiences the *Da* [the there], the opening and retreat of the being that it is and must be. In love and hate...man establishes himself more deeply in that into which he is thrown, appropriating his very facticity and thus gathering together and opening his own ground. (P, 199)

The reason hate and love are paired together is, we might say, the intensity common to them. To experience them is to experience something more than one's own subjectivity or another's objectivity; in them, one experiences the very there-ness of oneself and the other, thrown together in the world.

This experience is conceived as passion, and fairly so, for in love (or hate) one is undone, one is stripped of expectations that are grounded in subjectivity and objectivity. It is an experience irreducible to subjects and objects, and to those relations that arrange them. We might imagine the way that someone in the event of love (or hate) is charged with passion, as well as with a sense of incredulity—a sense that what is happening cannot actually be, that it is impossible—and yet it is happening. Such experiences bear particular resonance for Agamben because they make apparent a potentiality that is irreducible to the order of actuality—in this case, to the relation of subject and object. To be “in” love is to experience an irreducible passivity, yet it is a passivity in which potentiality remains. Importantly, this potentiality is “for” the continuation or recommencement of love. To pass from potentiality to love is thus to pass back into—or to remain in—potentiality.¹³ The practice of love is a prolongation or repetition of the original passivity and potentiality. It is in view of this potentiality to remain in potentiality that Agamben speaks of love's “impotentiality” (P, 181)—understood as a potentiality that refuses the potentiality-for-actuality. In the experience of love, passion becomes not a weak relation to the actual, but a strong relation to the potential, the potentiality that “gives itself to itself.” Love's essential impro-

¹³ Once again, we see the deeply Aristotelian dimension in Agamben's account of Heidegger.

priety, then, is that it falls short of actualisation, of its proper end, remaining instead within the nothingness of potentiality (or impotentiality). Agamben, through this reading of Heidegger, conceives a field of nothingness that retains its own peculiar potentiality. However, it is a potentiality that belongs to experience and experimentation rather than to contemplation. It must be practiced, for example, by lovers who “go to the limit of the improper in a mad and demonic promiscuity.” (P, 204). As this is a field of nothingness, its practice proceeds without any initially referenced ground. Indeed, the practice of love is pushed “to the point of revealing [the lovers’] essential abyss” (P, 204), or non-relation. There is only the circuit between the practice of potentiality and nothingness. The power here remains abyssal precisely because one cannot fix its coordinates apart from this experiential and experimental practice.

At this point, an important, if crudely stated, question may be posed: If this field is of nothingness, if it does not pre-exist its practice, then where do the lovers “go”? Insofar as a field of nothingness cannot be resolved within actuality’s determinate ordering of space, there is indeed no “place” to go. But this is why Agamben’s negative thought must be understood in terms of displacement. If space is encompassed by actuality’s determination of place, by actual placing, then Agamben is left with a simple abyss, with a lack of place. But if the field of nothingness may be experientially and experimentally practiced, independently of actuality’s determinate placing, then the potential for displacement remains. This displacement is an exile from actuality—it has no determinate place to go, yet the exilic journey in itself possesses the means to make a place.

Agamben addresses this practice of exile in connection with the Talmudic notion that the number of places in Eden are equal to the number of existent people, as are the number of places in Gehenna. Accordingly, each person who goes to Gehenna leaves a place empty in Eden, and each person who goes to Eden leaves a place empty in Gehenna. In order to fully populate both Eden and Gehenna, each person must occupy not only his or her own place, but also the place left empty by someone who goes to the alternative realm. Each person must substitute for the other: the resident of Eden inhabits the place left empty by his or her neighbour in Gehenna, while the resident of Gehenna inhabits the place left empty by his or her neighbour in Eden. Here we face a fundamental impropriety, for Eden and Gehenna are not merely moments within actu-

ality's determination of place. Eden and Gehenna determine the proper placing of history in its entirety, they put the final judgement in place. The relations invoked by substitution cannot be placed in Eden or Gehenna; they are, instead, an exile from the actual ordering of place and into nothingness. Agamben insists on understanding this logic of substitution not as "an economy of compensation" (CC, 24), but as an exercise of hospitality; one takes the place of the other not to make up for the other's absence, but to generate an improper relation between oneself and the other. The substitutive inhabitation of the other's place is a means of multiplying relations, not of balancing them. Eden and Gehenna are ultimate places of rest, demarcating a final organisation of space, yet they, too, must contend with emptiness. Accordingly, Agamben proposes that these empty places be understood not as unactualised places, but rather as places of potentiality. The empty places of Eden and Gehenna provide a field of nothingness, which must be matched by a practice of potentiality—that is, by substitutive, exilic relation.

Let us now try to articulate the relation between exile and love, beginning with a simple question: When one loves, what is it that is loved? It is obviously tautologous to say "the beloved," yet the directness of this reply indicates an important feature of the experience of love. That one loves no more and no less than the beloved shows that it is the beloved *as such*, rather than something about the beloved, that is loved. As Agamben observes, "Love does not allow for copulative predication, it never has a quality or an essence as its object. 'I love beautiful-brunette-tender Mary,' not 'I love Mary because she is beautiful, brunette, tender,' in the sense of her possessing such and such an attribute." (TR, 128) One must distinguish between the beloved and the attributes or properties of the beloved—not because it is possible or advisable to separate the beloved from its properties, but because one loves the properties precisely insofar as they belong to the beloved. "The moment when I realize that my beloved has such-and-such a quality, or such-and-such a defect, then I have irrevocably stepped out of love, even if, as is often the case, I continue to believe that I love her, especially after having given good reason for continuing to do so. Love has no reason." (TR, 128) The nature of love is to seek no ground outside of itself, for love is groundless. Love is measured only in terms of itself—that is, only in terms of its experience of the beloved. This is why to love the beloved in virtue of something outside of the lover-beloved encounter—

such as the beloved's properties—is to cease loving. Love is immanent to itself.

Such an account of love has special relevance for the displacement of individuals from the actual order of being. The encounter between lover and beloved is unintelligible in terms of the actual order of being, which defines individuals in terms of their properties. The lover loves not a property of the beloved, but the singularity that is the beloved as such. Singularities, Agamben claims, must be extricated from the classical framework, which circulates them between the universal and the individual and, in doing so, obscures the potential to relate to singularity. In this classical framework, singularities are conceived in terms of universalised properties—being- x , being- y , being- z , and so on, where all x 's, y 's and z 's are the same—and then predicated of individuals—individual A is x and y , individual B is z and x , and so on. The difficulty is that what becomes intelligible is the universal x , y or z , while the individual becomes unthinkable, or thinkable only as the bearer of some combination of properties.

Agamben, in order to lift singularity from this obscurity, proposes an account of “whatever being” (CC, 1), where “whatever” names the singularity of singularities, prior to their reduction to properties. The singularity of an individual being is the whatever of its being-such, its coming-into-being, and cannot be reached by a collection of properties. The fundamental advance of the theory is twofold. First, it conceives a relation to individuals unmediated by their properties. Let the properties be “whatever” they may be, for they do not give sense to the individual. On the contrary, it is the singularity of the individual that gives sense to the properties. Second, the theory of “whatever being” provides a way of conceiving the commonality of singularities without reference to a hierarchy determined by properties. Singularities have in common no property, nor do they share the ideal of some property to which they are more or less proximate. What singularities have in common is their sheer singularity, their singular being such as it is, whatever that may be. As Agamben says, “such-and-such being is reclaimed from its having this or that property, which identifies it as belonging to this or that set, to this or that class ... and it is reclaimed not for another class nor for the simple generic absence of any belonging, but for its being-*such*, for belonging itself.” (CC, 1–2)

Returning to the practice of love, we can say that one loves the beloved in its singularity, whatever properties the beloved possesses. “The lover wants the loved one *with all of its predicates*, its being such as it is. The lover desires the *as* only insofar as it is *such*.” (CC, 2) In this sense, love will always be improper, insofar as the proper ordering of relations is cast in terms of classes of properties. One loves the beloved not because of the way the beloved is placed within an order of classification, but because of the sheer taking-place of the beloved. Love becomes a practice of the potentiality of singularities, a potentiality that is left out of the frame when individuals are set in place through predication. Yet if individuals are put in place by virtue of their properties, then love displaces them by virtue of their singularity. Love dislodges singularities from their placement within spaces of actuality. Singularities are scattered into nothingness, but this must not be understood as a privation of actuality. They are displaced from actuality in order to retain and renew their potentiality. Indeed, the scattering of singularities gives determination to the field of nothingness. Dispersal of whatever-singularities poses the power of spatialisation against actual space. There remains, within the field of nothingness determined by singularities displaced from actuality, a power of spatialisation unaccounted for in actual spaces.

This power of spatialisation is set forth by the practice of love, and it is prolonged by exile. If love names an encounter of singularities, if it regards singularity independent of its actual placement, then exile names the mode of relation between singularities. Exile names the practice by which novel relations between singularities are generated—generated out of nothing, or out of nothing but singularities. Importantly, it is a matter of “*exiling oneself to the other as he or she is*.” (CC, 24) Exile does not impose conditions; its hospitality is “irrevocable” (CC, 33), its love endures whatever, it is impassioned by all. This absence of preconditions for relation is what makes such relations exilic. There is no condition by which one mediates one’s relation to the other, there is only the relation itself, generated by an unmediated encounter between singularities. In the practice of exile, the only condition is “whatever,” i.e., the other’s “as he or she is,” the other’s “as such.” Love is concerned not with the placement of the beloved, but with the beloved’s singular taking-place. If love is “the experience of taking-place in a whatever singularity” (CC, 25), then exile gives determinacy to the relations

made possible by love. Exile prolongs these relations and thus constitutes a new spatial configuration, one driven by the potentiality of spatialisation. The spatial configuration is immanently generated by exilic interaction between singularities dispersed by love. Exile does not arrive in a preconfigured space, for exilic interaction is spatialisation itself. It is in this sense that exile is a wandering into nothingness.

The Messianic

The movement of exile wanders into nothingness, yet this is its very power—it makes nothingness into a power of spatialisation. Exile makes what actuality calls nothingness into a power exceeding any and every order of actuality. This points to the messianic character of exile, its capacity to annul the actually existing order in favour of what this order sees as nothing. The messianic, Agamben argues, must not be conflated with the eschatological or the apocalyptic. These latter name an event in the future, an event that brings time to a close or to its fulfilment. The messianic, however, names the time *between* the present and the eschatological or apocalyptic event that brings time to an end. Agamben defines it as “the time that remains between time and its end.” (TR, 62) Accordingly, it belongs neither to the present order nor to the future, absolutely other order that replaces the present order.¹⁴ The messianic is irreducible to these orders or times.

Though Agamben understands the messianic as the *time* that remains, I prefer to give it a different inflection, as the *space* that remains. I do so because Agamben, in calling the messianic a time between two times (or between time and that which transcends time), effectively measures time in terms of spatial coordinates. The messianic becomes the space that stretches out between time and its end—indeed, time and its end are also cast in spatial terms, as points demarcating the present and the end. Putting the messianic in spatial terms, then, and returning to our discussion of the opposition between nothingness and actual configurations of space, one can understand the messianic as the field of nothingness: it displaces the present configuration of space, yet it cannot be identified with some future (or final) configuration of space (such as the

¹⁴ Here, of course, we cannot miss the imprint of Walter Benjamin on Agamben’s thought.

end of time configured by Eden and Gehenna). The messianic is neither here in the present nor there in the future. This is because here and there, present and future, are spaces configured by an actual order of being. The messianic, however, is nothing in relation to such actual spaces; it is, instead, the potentiality of spatialisation itself. For this reason, we should understand the messianic not as a future actuality, but rather as the potentiality to dislodge individuals from their embeddedness in actual orders of being. To practice the messianic is to displace individuals from their actual placements, to make nothingness into a field of displaced individuals that remain in potentiality and exercise their potentiality not to be actualised, not to be put into place.

It is from this vantage that we are able to address a question that might understandably arise: Is Agamben's philosophy ultimately critical rather than constructive? We must answer negatively. Agamben's philosophy is, in fact, more constructive than critical, though this will be missed if we forget that the *potenza* bound up in nothingness is very much a power, a kind of force. Potentiality, in other words, is not abstract. To posit potentiality against the actual order of being is not merely to criticise this actual order, as if to call to mind that there are potentialities not permitted in a given order. It is, much more significantly, to practise and experiment with a power that does not submit to the accords legitimated within the given order. The thematic of space brings this out: potentiality in exile breaks with the given order of space, it wanders into nothingness, but in doing so, it exercises a power that generates novel connections (between singularities) that do not simply negate what is given, but construct new spatial relations out of nothingness. This discovery of a power at the heart of nothingness is what makes Agamben's negative philosophy—his insistence on thinking and practising that which is nothing in relation to the actual order of being—fundamentally constructive. Of course, the constructive power articulated by Agamben is one that cannot be located in a given political space, since the givenness of an actual spatial order is precisely what his negative philosophy critiques. This means that, from the vantage of one who is located (whether physically, affectively, or theoretically) in such a space, Agamben may appear to be a mere contemplator of potentiality. While I have observed that, in his more Heideggerian moments, he runs this risk, I have also argued that he evades this danger—that of falling away from construction and into contemplation—when his account of

potenza is given priority of place amongst his philosophical themes. It is, then, this very *potenza* that is exercised in Agamben's account of love and exile, and that motivates his conception of the messianic.

danielcbarber@gmail.com