

# HOMO SCHIZOID. DESTITUENT POWER AND NONRELATIONAL LIFE

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## **ABSTRACT**

For about thirty years, between 1940 and 1970, a strange entity made a passing and hesitant appearance on the radar of the West's intellectual history. Homo schizoid found its decisive articulation in the writings of Ronald Fairbairn and Harry Guntrip, two psychoanalysts who are barely known outside of professional circles. By now, this figure is all too often either forgotten or, even worse, confused with its psychotic relative, the schizophrenic. Giorgio Agamben and his commentators have made no serious effort to investigate the schizoid position in their attempt to imagine a politics that transcends the idea of relation and an ethics freed from the need for recognition. So this paper is guided by three questions: What does the notion of homo sacer have to do with homo schizoid? Is Agamben's approach to life as something that is never defined but only divided somehow connected to the split or *skhizein* which gives the schizoid its name? Finally, will the schizoid persist as a personality disorder, or can it become the harbinger of a destituent power?

## **KEYWORDS**

Agamben, Fairbairn, Guntrip, Laing, Psychoanalysis, Object Relations Theory, Schizoid

We are together and very close, but between us there is not an articulation or a relation that unites us. We are united to one another in the form of our being alone.

Giorgio Agamben (2017: 1243)

For about thirty years, roughly between 1940 and 1970, a strange entity made a passing and hesitant appearance on the radar of the West's intellectual history. After some preliminary psychiatric groundwork laid down in the first decades of the twentieth century by Eugen Bleuler and Ernst Kretschmer, *homo schizoid* found its decisive articulation in the writings of Ronald Fairbairn and Harry Guntrip, two psychoanalysts who are barely known outside of professional circles. The figure of the schizoid also played an important role in the thought of Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott, as well as in

R. D. Laing's *The Divided Self*, which introduced this figure to a larger audience. By now, however, *homo schizoid* is all too often either forgotten or, even worse, confused with his psychotic relative, the schizophrenic.

Agamben and his commentators have made no serious effort to investigate the schizoid position as part of their attempt to imagine a politics that transcends the idea of relation and an ethics freed from the need for recognition. Nor was there any sustained use of object relations theory (on which the schizoid logic is based) to help navigate the currents of subjectification and desubjectification on which Agamben's thought likes to sail. Which is not surprising, partly because his work is focused on the "essentially ontologico-political and not only psychological meaning of the division of the parts of the soul" (Agamben 2017: 1210).

Be that as it may, what does Agamben's notion of *homo sacer* have to do with *homo schizoid*? Is his approach to life as something that is never defined but only divided somehow connected to the split or *skhizein* which gives the schizoid its name? How does Winnicott's description of the infant's sensation of *infinite falling* relate to Agamben's notions of the ban, banishment, and abandonment? Can the feeling that Laing defines as *ontological insecurity* help in making sense of the psycho-political nexus in which we currently live? Will the schizoid persist as a personality disorder, or will it become the harbinger of what Agamben calls, in the epilogue to the entire *Homo Sacer* book series, *destituent power*? What follows is only a sketch for a future portrait of a twenty-first century schizoid man.

"Life, without feeling alive" is one evocative formulation of the schizoid condition in Laing's book (1990: 40). "This shut-up self, being isolated, is unable to be enriched by outer experience, and so the whole inner world comes to be more and more impoverished, until the individual may come to feel he is merely a vacuum" (Laing 1990: 75). First, the schizoid distances himself from an external life he deems impoverished, especially when compared to the rich life he cultivates within. But after a while, he "longs to get *inside* life again, and get life *inside* himself, so dreadful is his inner deadness" (Laing 1990: 75).

Introverted, self-sufficient, withdrawn, unemotional, impersonal, distant, lonely: these are some of the more common descriptors associated with schizoid personalities. Alternately, consider Franz Kafka's *The Burrow*, a story about some paranoid-schizoid animal (as Klein might diagnose it) who digs an increasingly complex maze of underground tunnels in an attempt to fend off an unspecified external threat. The animal's long and belaboured monologue, which constitutes the entire story, gradually leads the exhausted reader to realize that the structure's protection is, in fact, an entrapment, that the perceived sense of freedom is actually a prison, and that the burrow might even be the burrower's own grave.

This reading echoes Agamben's claim in *Nudities* that another one of Kafka's protagonists, K from *The Trial*, is persecuted not by external forces, but only by internal ones; that he actually accuses himself of a crime he did not commit. In other words, K slanders himself. Instead of following Agamben's rationalization for this suicidal move, let us turn instead to Lionel Trilling, who points out that from the get-go K "is without parents, home, wife, child, commitment, or appetite; he has no connection with power, beauty, love, wit, courage, loyalty, or fame" (quoted in Laing 1990: 40). These are the trial's conditions of possibility, rather than its outcome, and this is the ground for Kafka's position as a schizoid paradigm in Laing's influential analysis.

The schizoid tends to let go of many needs and desires, treating her emptiness as an ideal of human existence, thus becoming detached, meeting everything and everyone with a Bartleby-like silent resistance. She prefers not to actualize her potential. The self, by itself, feels that it deserves nothing. The less one wishes, the safer one feels, the further one retreats, the harder it gets for others to break through her shell. The more the world disappoints, the more appealing the schizoid strategy becomes. But this split or *schiz* between the inner self and the outer world is not simply the subject's realistic reaction to a particular threatening object. It inevitably becomes the schizoid's relentless mode of being once a patina of futility begins to descend on her entire surroundings. Like mice, the schizoid strategy is to timidly venture out and then quickly retreat back in to regroup. Like Arthur Schopenhauer's porcupines, the schizoid dilemma is that when they are close to each other they sting, but by keeping a distance they get cold.

How does one become the schizoid one is? When personal relationships frustrate us, we often feel either anger or hunger. "When you cannot get what you want from the person you need, instead of getting angry you may simply go on getting more and more hungry" (Guntrip 1992: 24). This *love made hungry* is at the core of the schizoid experience. Such social malnutrition makes it difficult to digest meaningful interpersonal connections, which can then be easily substituted by unemotional relations that only give instant gratification but little nourishment (for example, through casual sex). Because love is to a schizoid what sugar is to a diabetic. While anger or aggression can lead one to feel guilty, schizoid withdrawal leads one to feel *nothing*. If hate becomes destructive, it is still possible to love someone else. But if love seems destructive, then there is no exit strategy. True hell is the life of a person who cannot shake this conviction that hell is other people.

The opposite of love is not hate. "Hate is love grown angry because of rejection. We can only really hate a person if we want their love" (Guntrip 1994: 45). The true opposite of both love and hate is *indifference*, which is the most common schizoid mood: "Having no interest in a person, not wanting a relationship and so having no reason for either loving or hating" (Guntrip 1994: 45). According to William Watkin, indifference

is the cornerstone of Agamben's philosophical edifice). While narcissists need to be seen and to receive constant approval from others, schizoids would much prefer to disappear, since they could not care less whether they get either positive or negative feedback. To substitute their failed relations with people, they can construct and engage with an elaborate world of internal objects (philosophical or mathematical, artistic or fantastic). This inner experience encases the subject in a closed system that slowly dims the light coming from the external world.

How can a psyche cope with the trauma of being forsaken? Fairbairn's answer is called *the moral defense*: imagine a father who broke his young daughter's arm. The abused child will usually convince herself (and anyone who asks, like a doctor) that all of it happened because she was bad. Otherwise she will need to face a truth about her father that is too hard to bear. Put otherwise, "it is better to be a sinner in a world ruled by God than to live in a world ruled by the devil" (Fairbairn 1972: 67). This bind leads to the first splitting: God, like father, must be wholly good, while the child, like humanity (at least since St. Augustine), must take the full blame. For the adult schizoid, as for Kafka's K, life is but a life sentence, served daily in the ordinary world.

The terms of the split may vary—good and evil world, true and false self, inner subject and outer object, relational and vegetal life, mind and body, culture and nature, subject and object—because *homo schizoid* is essentially a machine that produces every dualistic division under the sun. Hence for Fairbairn, "everybody without exception must be regarded as schizoid", since "the basic position in the psyche is invariably a schizoid position" (Fairbairn 1972: 7). These grand claims ring true to the extent that "the fundamental schizoid phenomenon is the presence of splits in the ego; and it would take a bold man to claim that his ego has so perfectly integrated as to be incapable of revealing any evidence of splitting at the deepest levels" (Fairbairn 1972: 7). The nature and severity of these fissions fluctuate, but their ability to trigger a person to cancel external relations and live a detached and withdrawn life—where dualistic distinctions can only stay static—is their true existential threat.

With all the current talk about loneliness as a public health crisis, the deeper schizoid issue, of which loneliness is often merely a symptom, is rarely discussed, though its infantile origins are well known, thanks in part to Winnicott's work on good-enough mothering and John Bowlby's attachment theory. Due to compromised parental care, a person can grow up feeling "stranded in an impersonal milieu, a world empty of any capacity to relate to him and evoke his human potential. He can develop the worst of all psychopathological states, the schizoid condition of withdrawn isolation, fundamental loneliness, profoundly out of touch with his entire outer world; so that people seem like 'things' and the material world around him seems like a flat unreal imitation" (Guntrip 1994: 277). In the beginning, an object betrayed a subject's trust. Since then,

everything slowly concentrated into a point without extension of a being that feels utterly alone. To use today's parlance, schizoid life is (self-inflicted) social death, or social distancing, even under the confident disguise of a Stoic existence.

Haunted by his ontological insecurity, by doubting his very being, Laing describes a schizoid patient's startling method of defending his empty core: "Under the conviction that he was nobody, that he was nothing, he was driven by a terrible sense of honesty to *be* nothing... Being anonymous was one way of magically translating this conviction into fact... He was going from anywhere to anywhere: he had no past, no future. He had no possessions, no friends. Being nothing, knowing nobody, being known by none, he was creating the conditions which made it more easy for him to believe that he *was* nobody" (Laing 1990: 131-132). Under the rule of an Object Relations Ontology, such object privation is a will to nothingness, which is at least still a will, as Friedrich Nietzsche insists in his not-unrelated genealogy of the ascetic ideal, though the subject who is doing the willing, according to the schizoid ideal, seems to be missing in action.

The above case study bears striking resemblance to Ludwig Binswanger's description of his schizophrenic patient Lola Voss, in her desperate attempt to hold on to every straw due to her fear that with any step she takes, the metaphorical thin ice on which she walks might break. Binswanger contrasts Voss's state to that of a secure existence, with both feet firmly planted on the ground, confident of itself and of the world. Voss lacks this "indisputable protection of existence from falling, sinking, breaking through into an abyss", resulting in a naked being that is not quite *there* in the world (Binswanger 1963: 290). A bare life, perhaps, separated from its form. Hence Laing's pivotal notion of *ontological insecurity* (following Binswanger, following Martin Heidegger). But is anyone's existence truly secure? Don't we all try to hold each other lest we fall? So why do we constantly let relationships dissolve and keep to ourselves?

The schizoid is a general position. Schizophrenia is an acute manifestation of a breakdown of the schizoid strategy. Or schizophrenia is the limit case of the schizoid configuration. For our non-clinical purposes, we could add that a schizoid is a functioning schizophrenic. Schizoids hold themselves together by employing a variety of defense mechanisms—their symptoms—as they struggle to partake in everyday life and maintain what they have, who they are, and most importantly, *that* they are, without breaking apart to expose their fragile, fragmented, nihilistic, and catatonic self, which is kept locked, as it were, in a safe. Does this description begin to explain why schizophrenia got such disproportionate public attention over the years, while the schizoid form of life remains largely unknown? But isn't it a bit like trying to explain nuclear power by focusing exclusively on meltdowns? Instead of exploding, schizoids implode.

Inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's approach to schizophrenia (2015: 70), we also see *homo schizoid* as a "conceptual persona who lives intensely within the

thinker and forces him to think”, rather than as a “psychosocial type who represses the living being and robs him of his thought”. Part of the task is to discover the cultural manifestations of our deeply schizoid world. Another task is to imagine schizoism as a line of flight, by turning apathy into pathos. The goal, in short, is not to block the schizoid experience, but to put it into new use. This, however, is where the comparison to *Anti-Oedipus* ends (for a compelling alternative account, see Louis Sass’s *Madness and Modernism*). Fairbairn and Guntrip’s thought is an *ante-Oedipal* stance, focusing on the infantile condition that precedes the child’s later contention with the parents. For Guntrip (1992: 278), “schizoid problems represent a flight from life, oedipal problems represent a struggle to live”. For Fairbairn, the schizoid structure, not Sigmund Freud’s Oedipal complex, is humanity’s most fundamental and inescapable force.

Freud defines an object as the target of a drive, which is either libidinal or aggressive in its nature. Drives are always innate, basically uncontrollable, and often dangerous forces. In order for them to be kept in check they require education, socialization, and sometimes therapy (as well as the Church, according to Augustine). In Freud’s theory, libido comes first, and then the subject who contains it latches on to this or that sexual object to get some relief. Freudian psychoanalysis focuses on the individual as a discrete entity, ultimately divorced from its interpersonal context. Society is then imposed on already-complete persons for their own protection. The Freudian dogma cannot integrate the Winnicottian realization that there is no such thing as a baby, that there is always a baby and *someone*.

Fairbairn defines an object as whatever a subject relates to, though anyone who ever ventured beyond the mere name of his ‘object relations’ theory knows that by object he principally means another person with whom the human subject develops an emotional and meaningful relationship. Without relying on the concept of the drive—which is an unverifiable hypothetical construct—he postulates that at bottom “we seek persons, not pleasures”, as Guntrip sums it up (1992: 21). Pleasure is just a means to the true end: relating to others. Jay Greenberg and Stephen Mitchell, who wrote the definitive account of this psychoanalytic paradigm shift, elaborate: “The problem for Freud is the inherent opposition among instinctual aims and between instinctual aims and social reality; the problem for Fairbairn is that the person cannot maintain the integrity and wholeness of his experience of himself within his necessary relations with others and is forced to fragment himself to maintain contact and devotion to the irreconcilable features of those relations” (1983: 167). Yet Fairbairn takes his priorities to be more fundamental than Freud’s: splitting over repressing, a schizoid position over a depressive one, schizophrenia over melancholia.

We can now see how the moral defense is unwittingly employed by Freud (but also by Thomas Hobbes and Nietzsche) in conceiving our civilization and its discontents.

Guntrip wonders about the origin of “man’s age-old conviction that all his troubles come from his possession of mighty if nearly uncivilizable instincts of his animal nature”, which “turns out to be our greatest rationalization and self-deception. We have preferred to boost our egos by the belief that even if we are bad, we are at any rate strong in the possession of ‘mighty instincts’. Men have resisted recognition of the truth that we distort our instincts into antisocial drives in our struggle to suppress the fact that deep within our make-up we retain a weak, fear-ridden infantile ego that we never completely outgrow” (1992: 125). In short, we would rather pretend that we are bad than admit that we are weak.

To be bad is not to control your inner beast and resist the process of socialization. To acknowledge your fundamental schizoid weakness is not only to bring about a “shift in the center of gravity in psychodynamic theory”, but also to lead to what Guntrip believes to be a “radical reassessment of all philosophical, moral, educational, and religious views of human nature” (1992: 126). In his final analysis, both sexual and aggressive conflicts are “defenses against withdrawal, regression, and depersonalization” (1992: 129). We use them because we do not want to face “the terrors of realizing how radically small, weak and cut off, shut in and unreal” we ultimately are (1992: 129). Human beings are violable long before (and long after) they are violent. Hence the elementary psychopathological problem is this “schizoid problem of feeling a nobody, of never having grown an adequate feeling of a real self” (1992: 129).

But isn’t this also a good description of our biopolitical problem? Doesn’t object relations theory end up articulating our *precarious life*, as Judith Butler calls it? For better or for worse, the coming politics as envisioned by Agamben and others (including the antirelational or antisocial turn in queer, afropessimist, and decolonial thought) is schizoid politics. If we accept Agamben’s view of the human “as having been and still being an infant” (2007: 58), as what “is always the place—and, at the same time, the result—of ceaseless divisions and caesurae” (2012: 16), as “the suspension of the immediate relation of the animal with its environment” (2017: 1197), then the human must be understood as *homo schizoid*, with all its ego-weakness and defiant destitution (for a cinematic illustration of this set of problems, see Jordan Peele’s *Us*).

In Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Abandoned Being*, which inspired Agamben’s notion of the ban, we find this explanation of the crucified’s last words to his heavenly father: “What the ‘God of love’ means is that love alone can abandon...and it is by the possibility of abandonment that one knows the possibility, inverted or lost, of love” (Nancy 2009: 41). Is it a coincidence that both Moses and Oedipus were abandoned at birth, while Jesus was also abandoned at death? And what about Abraham’s dreadful abandonment of Isaac, not to mention Ishmael? Agamben, like Kafka, is not interested in the ways that law applies to life, but in how the law (Abrahamic, Roman, paternal, or otherwise)

constantly abandons a life. Nancy's intervention would be to wonder about the existence of some primary or perverse love, which must precede this pervasive legal abandonment. Agamben, however, seems to want to throw the relationship baby out with the abandonment bathwater. Like Cartesian doubt, the mere threat of exclusion means for Agamben that he cannot trust any inclusive embrace whatsoever.

Since our political space is far from being a benevolent *holding environment*, as Winnicott calls it, every relation is at least potentially an abandonment. For Agamben, "the relation of abandonment is not a relation" (2017: 52), because it is an abandonment of the very possibility of a relation. As an aside, notice the curious use of abandonment as a literary gesture throughout Agamben's writings: his readers are often asked to abandon a concept, idea, tradition, or institution. He even claims that *Homo Sacer* as a whole is an investigation that "cannot be concluded but only abandoned" (2017: 1019). And there is also the case of his book dedicated to the most colossal act of abandonment in human history, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, which opens with an *in memoriam* to no one other than his mother, plus this quote: "To be exposed to everything is to be capable of everything" (2017: 765). And a life that begins and ends with an experience of abandonment, of a failed relation, is a life that can never be separated from its schizoid form.

One surprising source for Agamben's radical attempt to dream up a schizoid politics "set free from every figure of relation" (2017: 1269) is Jacques Lacan, even though the latter's influence is mainly limited to the former's *Stanzas*, from 1977. While remaining committed to Freud's Oedipal complex and the concept of the drive, Lacan also made an important contribution to object relations theory, to which Seminar IV from 1956 is dedicated. It revolves around his insistence that the true object to which the subject wants to relate is, in some fundamental sense, always already lost, so all attempts to find it again remain insufficient. Since he sees object lack as the origin of desire, Lacan can later add that true *jouissance* and real sexual relations are virtually impossible. What he calls *objet petit a* is not a real object, but something which we can neither get a hold on nor let go of. If Fairbairn thinks that we don't seek pleasures but persons, then Lacan adds that we don't seek persons but phantasms. Hence the Lacanian subject is also a schizoid of sorts, at least according to its recent characterization as "the-one-all-alone", whose relations to others are nothing but a growing string of frustrations (Miller 2005).

Agamben's antipathy toward relations has one telling exception. In his most recent engagement with Michel Foucault, he rejects the idea of a subject as a kind of author or sovereign who acts and *relates* to an object. There is, in fact, no subject but only subjectification, a process of transforming oneself by *relating* to oneself: "'Self' for Foucault is not a substance nor the objectifiable result of an operation (the relation with

itself): it is the operation itself, the relation itself. That is to say, there is not a subject before the relationship with itself and the use of the self: the subject is that relationship and not one of its terms” (Agamben 2017: 1118). Ethics is not a relation to a norm but a relation of the self to itself, which, according to Foucault, is “not just a brief preparation for life; it is a form of life” (quoted in Agamben 2017: 1120).

As a way to conclude (or abandon) this paper, let us turn to one of the most poignant manifestations of Agamben’s schizoid tendencies, to be found in an early allusion to St. Francis, which is also an early formulation of his critique of intersubjective recognition as the basic building block of ethics. In *The Idea of Prose* from 1985, we read: “Every 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. Such a peace is only and always a peace amongst states and of the law, a fiction of the recognition of an identity in language, which comes from war and will end in war” (81-2). As an alternative model to the Hegelian dialectics of mutual recognition, Agamben alludes to this beautiful Franciscan tale, quoted here in full:

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.”

Then Francis said, “So 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” (quoted in DeCaroli 2012: 132).

This story about the joy of non-recognition, reminiscent of Kafka’s *Before the Law*, can be updated and restated as a rather disturbing prayer: “May I be denied entrance to my own country, home, or office. May I be locked out of my phone, email, or social media. May I be canceled”. For many, this is the stuff nightmares are made of. For

schizoids, especially those who hold on to even a modicum of social privilege, it is a secret blessing. They understand that, rather than to fight for the inclusion of others, the truly radical and exemplary ethical position today is to *exclude thyself*.

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