

OUTSIDE OF BEING: AGAMBEN'S POTENTIAL BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

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ABSTRACT

Potential or potentiality is the central idea of Agamben's philosophy and informed from the very beginning his work, though implicitly at first. If the term entered Agamben's vocabulary only in the mid 1980s, it constitutes nevertheless already the logical structure of the experience of infancy, which is in fact not the actuality but the potentiality of speech. And it already marked, in Heideggerian fashion, human exceptionality: if only human beings have infancy, it is because only humans have the potentiality not to speak, that is, to remain in in-fancy. This is, for Agamben, the very structure of potentiality – not only the potentiality of something, but that not to do or be something –, and it is what gives humans a freedom denied to nonhuman animals. The article analyses the concept of potential in Agamben's philosophy, highlighting its fundamental anthropocentrism and logocentrism. However, with the 'biopolitical turn' of the 1990s and the publication of *The Open* in 2002, Agamben progressively seeks a way to overcome this still metaphysical structure, and will find it in the concept of 'outside of being' which precisely concludes *The Open*.

KEYWORDS

Giorgio Agamben, potentiality, animality, anthropocentrism, logocentrism, end of metaphysics

1. AGAMBEN'S POTENTIAL AND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

It has been noted early on, especially in his reception in English, that Agamben's central idea – that which is truly 'his own' and that all his works seek to express – is that of 'potential'¹. He says so himself very clearly, when he declares in the opening

¹ The Italian term Agamben uses is *potenza*, which is the common translation of the Aristotelian δύναμις (*dunamis*). In Agamben scholarship in English, a sort of 'norm' has been established by Daniel Heller-Roazen's early translations to render *potenza* as 'potentiality'; in Agamben's use, however, at times the connotation of the term approaches that of 'potency' and 'power', in a productive ambiguity often lost in the English translation. In his more recent translations, Adam Kotsko often recurs to the term 'potential', which is how *dunamis* is counterposed to 'act' (like 'potentiality' to 'actuality'). Here I will alternatively use all these terms according to the

of *On Potentiality*: “Following Wittgenstein’s suggestion, according to which philosophical problems become clearer if they are formulated as questions concerning the meaning of words, I could state the subject of my work as an attempt to understand the meaning of the verb ‘can’ [*potere*]. What do I mean when I say: ‘I can, I cannot’?” (Agamben 1999: 177). This point, as Leland de la Durantaye notes (2000: 4), is extended into a general definition of philosophy as such in *Bartleby, or On Contingency*, where Agamben writes: “In its deepest intention, philosophy is a firm assertion of potentiality, the construction of an experience of the possible as such” (Agamben 1999: 249). At a first glance, this declaration seems to collide with another famous Agambenian statement, appeared between the two quotations above, two years after *On Potentiality* was delivered as a conference paper (Agamben 1987) and four years before the original publication of *Bartleby* (Agamben 1993): in *Experimentum Linguae*, the 1989 preface to the French edition of *Infancy and History*, Agamben in fact writes:

If for every author there exists a question which defines the *motivum* of his thought, then the precise scope of these questions coincides with the terrain towards which all my work is orientated. In both my written and unwritten books, I have stubbornly pursued only one train of thought: what is the meaning of ‘there is language’; what is the meaning of ‘I speak’? (Agamben 1993a: 5).

This apparent conflict has led to different emphases in the interpretations of Agamben’s philosophy, whereby de la Durantaye, for example, singles out potentiality as his central idea (De la Durantaye 2009: 4ff.) whereas Alex Murray, among others, opts for language (Murray 2010: 11).

This conflict, however, as it has also been noted early on, is only apparent. In fact, as Daniel Heller-Roazen remarked, the originality of Agamben’s project consists precisely in “*conceiv[iving] the existence of language as the existence of potentiality*”, and the reflection on language must therefore be a reflection on the mode of existence of potentiality (in Agamben 1999: 13; emphasis in the original). Or, as de la Durantaye puts it, the two declarations quoted above are, in their deepest intuition, the same, they are “different facets of a single question”, and the “*experimentum linguae* [is in fact] an experience of pure potentiality” (De la Durantaye 2000: 5). Agamben clearly explains this point precisely in *Experimentum Linguae*:

The double articulation of language and speech seems, therefore, to constitute the specific structure of human language. Only from this can be derived the true meaning of that opposition of *dynamis* and *energeia*, of potency and act, which Aristotle’s thought has bequeathed to philosophy and Western science. Potency – or knowledge – is the specifically human faculty of connectedness as lack; and language, in its split

existing translations and the convenience of the context, though the productive polysemy of the Italian *potenza* must always be kept in mind.

between language and speech, structurally contains this connectedness, is nothing other than this connectedness (Agamben 1993a: 7).

The ontological split between *dynamis* and *energeia*, between potential and act, rests thus on the specific structure of human language and its double articulation in *langue* and *parole*, in a potential *langue* that, in each single instance, can (or can decide not to) actualize itself in a concrete and specific *parole*. Therefore, Agamben concludes, “the only possible answer” to the question of potentiality, to the question about “the grammar of the verb ‘to be able’ [... ,] is an experience of language” (Agamben 1993a: 7; cf. Colebrook and Maxwell 2016: 37-41). This point will mark Agamben’s philosophy in all its phases, and in *The Sacrament of Language* – the volume of the *Homo Sacer* series specifically devoted to language – it takes the following form: “Man is not limited to acquiring language as one capacity among others that he is given but has made of it his specific potentiality; *he has, that is to say, put his very nature at stake in language*” (Agamben 2011: 68, emphasis in the original). This structure qualifies Agamben’s reflection on potentiality as intrinsically logocentric.

As it is well known, the cornerstone of Agamben’s ontology of potential is his reading of the Book Theta of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, to which he returns time and again, from *On Potentiality* up to *What is Real?* (Agamben 2018) and beyond, in a double movement of referral to and distancing from Aristotle. In turn, Agamben’s interpretation owes much to Heidegger’s 1931 lecture course on Aristotle’s Book Theta (Heidegger 1995a): like Heidegger and against Aristotle, Agamben emphasizes the ontological precedence of potentiality over actuality, but, unlike Heidegger, who based his interpretation on the notion of “ownmost potentiality-for-being” [*eigensten Seinkönnen*], Agamben’s many readings all dwell on the ‘potentiality not to’ or ‘impotentiality’ as its essential and intrinsic peculiarity. This point has been well explained and interpreted in Agamben scholarship and there is no need to linger on it here. What I want to emphasize here is instead that, together with the centrality of the question of potential for Western ontology, Aristotle and Heidegger have also bequeathed to Agamben a logocentric and anthropocentric vantage that imprisons the originality of his project within the worn-out frame of human exceptionalism.

As in Aristotle, Heidegger and the whole Western tradition, also in Agamben human potential is always counterpoised to – or rather defined against – animal unfreedom through customary constructs such as “uniquely among living beings, man...” (Agamben 2011: 68). The basic formulation is already presented in *On Potentiality*:

Other living beings are capable only of their specific potentiality; they can only do this or that. But human beings are the animals who are capable of their own impotentiality. The greatness of human potentiality is measured by the abyss of human impotentiality (Agamben 1999: 182, emphasis in the original).

Human *potenza* (in the sense of potential/potentiality, but also in that of potency and power) is what ultimately marks human freedom compared to non-human unfreedom, as shown by the lines following immediately after:

the root of freedom is to be found in the abyss of potentiality. To be free is not simply to have the power to do this or that thing, nor is it simply to have the power to refuse to do this or that thing. To be free is [...] *to be capable on one's own impotentiality*; to be in relation to one's own privation. This is why freedom is freedom for both good and evil (Agamben 1999: 182-183).

And this is why freedom is an exclusively human precinct. In line with the exceptionalist tradition stretching from Aristotle to Heidegger and beyond, Agamben's potential is marked by *logos*/language and freedom, which are precisely what separates, according to this tradition, human from nonhuman animals.

This anthropocentric logocentrism marks already the Italian title of the 1987 conference paper that the English translation *On Potentiality* does not retain: the original title is in fact *La potenza del pensiero*, that is, the potential *of thought*, of a very and exclusively human *logos*. And this link between potentiality and *logos*, whereby potentiality is inherently the 'potentiality of thought', had already been established in the *Threshold* opening *Idea of Prose*, where Damascius, the last scholar of the School of Athens, finds in the wax writing tablet the perfect paradigm of 'absolute' and 'pure' potentiality – precisely that of thought (Agamben 1995: 34)². This link also marks the various figures of Agamben's soteriology (all identified, along the lines of Heidegger's *Dasein*, by potentiality), from the 'whatever singularity' of *The Coming Community*, construed upon the *experimentum linguae* and 'condemned' to be their own (im)potentiality (Agamben 1993b: 44, 82-83), to the 'form-of-life' of the *Homo Sacer* project, intrinsically bound to 'thought' as the "*experimentum* that has as its object the potential character of life and of human intelligence" (Agamben 2000: 9). As intrinsically bound to *logos*, moreover, the potential of both whatever singularity and form-of-life is pitched against what Agamben calls 'biological destiny' or 'biological vocation' (Agamben 1993b: 43; 2000: 4): biology, as for the whole Western tradition, is here reduced to *necessity* (instead of being seen as condition of possibility), to a prison from which only *logos* can grant an escape and that thus inevitably incarcerates nonhuman animals as the Aristotelian *aloga zoa*³.

Biology, in this tradition, is not a neutral science but rather a powerful *dispositif*, an apparatus aimed at marking division lines by reducing nonhuman animals to their 'animality', by literally 'animalizing' them, in order for the freedom of humans to emerge. Therefore, as Agamben writes in *Form-of-Life*, "human beings – as

² The image of the writing tablet with nothing actually written on it to symbolize the potentiality of the intellect comes of course from Aristotle's *De Anima* (3.4, 430a1).

³ In these formulations, biology reminds of the notion of 'fate' as deployed by Benjamin in the early 1920s. Cf. Benjamin 1996.

beings of power [*potenza*] who can do or not do, succeed or fail, lose themselves or find themselves – are *the only beings* for whom happiness is always at stake in their living, *the only beings* whose life is irremediably and painfully assigned to happiness” (Agamben 2000: 4, emphases added). Humans are *the only beings*, as the later essay *The Work of Man* argues, who have no pre-established (in the sense of biologically determined) “work”, no necessary *energeia* as “a proper nature and essence”, and are thus open and “free” for happiness and politics (Agamben 2007: 1-10). This (all-too traditional) demonization of biology as unfreedom finds its clearest expression in the chapter *The Idea of Infancy* of *Idea of Prose*, where Agamben writes:

Animals are not concerned with possibilities of their soma that are not inscribed in the germen: contrary to what might be thought, they pay no attention whatsoever to that which is mortal (the soma is, in each individual, that which in any case is doomed to die), and they develop only the infinitely repeatable possibilities fixed in the genetic code. They attend only to the Law – only to what is written (Agamben 1995: 95).

Only human beings are “in the condition of being able [*poter*] to pay attention precisely to what has not been written, to somatic possibilities that are arbitrary and uncodified”, truly free from “any genetic prescription” (Agamben 1995: 95). *Only human beings*, as the only truly potential beings, are truly free.

2. THE APPARATUS OF INFANCY

The Idea of Infancy can be taken as paradigmatic for the anthropocentric bias of Agamben’s potential not only because it more explicitly and more clearly exposes the workings of the dichotomy between biology/necessity/unfreedom and *logos*/potentiality/freedom, but also because it constitutes in a sense a sort of turning point in the evolution of the concept of potential in Agamben’s philosophy. As, among others, de la Durantaye has pointed out (2000: 22-23), during the 1980s the concept and the terminology of infancy progressively fade out and are replaced by the vocabulary of potentiality; ‘infancy’, therefore, would be a sort of forebear of potentiality, and *The Idea of Infancy* (originally published in 1985) stages precisely the passage from one concept to the other.

In the early phase of Agamben’s reflection, infancy had taken central stage as the transcendental experience through which the human animal becomes ‘Man’⁴. The eponymous first essay of *Infancy and History* identifies in infancy (where etymologically the prefix in- negates the Latin verb *fari*, to speak) not a subjective and

⁴ That Agamben uses the neutral universal ‘man’ (*uomo*) instead of (the politically correct) ‘human being’ (*essere umano*) is not only due to a still very common and widespread practice in Italian academia and society at large, which marks a certain ‘gender blindness’ characteristic of Agamben’s writings; it also signals the specific normative notion of patriarchal humanity that is here counterpoised to animality.

psychological state chronologically preceding language and that ceases to exist once the in-fant acquires language, but rather the transcendental gap separating *langue* and *parole* – in the later vocabulary: the potentiality of speech and its actualization – that forces the human animal into speech as subjectivation and always persists beside language as its (im)possibility. Again, this argument is construed upon the disavowal of animality:

It is not language in general that marks out the human from other living beings – according to the Western metaphysical tradition that sees man as a *zoon logon echon* (an animal endowed with speech) – but the split between language and speech, between semiotic and semantic [...], between sign system and discourse. Animals are not in fact denied language; on the contrary, they are always and totally language. In them la *voix sacrée de la terre ingénue* (the sacred voice of the unknowing earth) – which Mallarmé, hearing the chirp of a cricket, sets against the human voice as *une* and *non-décomposée* (one and indivisible) – knows no breaks or interruptions. Animals do not enter language, they are already inside it. Man, instead, by having an infancy, by preceding speech, splits this single language and, in order to speak, has to constitute himself as the subject of language – he has to say *I* (Agamben 1993a: 51-52)

It is important for Agamben to point out that this infancy is not the human developmental stage – the child – and in *On Potentiality* (written only two years after the publication of *Idea of Prose*) he will connote, with Aristotle, the potentiality of the child as ‘generic potentiality’, that which necessitates an alteration and a becoming to develop into actuality (e.g., the child learning to read and write); ‘true’ potentiality is instead the ‘existing potentiality’, that of the poet who can already read and write and has thus the potential to write poems (Agamben 1999: 179; cf. Faulkner 2010)⁵. However, the first connotation keeps creeping up into the various uses of the concept, together with a number of suggestions from a sentimentalized view of childhood, marking thus infancy with a fundamental ambiguity (Faulkner 2010) that probably led in the end to its abandonment. This is precisely what happens in *The Idea of Infancy* where, on the one hand, infancy denotes ‘pure potentiality’, but, on the other, also clearly refers to a physical and psychological phase, precisely and chronologically tied to language learning.

The ambiguous paradigm of infancy in *The Idea of Infancy* is the axolotl, a neotenic salamander native of Mexico that is used as a key to interpret the process of anthropogenesis. Like the axolotl, who retains larval (or infantile) traits in

⁵ In *Bartleby* (1999: 246-247) Agamben uses Avicenna’s metaphor of writing to illustrate the various levels of potentiality: “There is a potentiality (which he calls material) that resembles the condition of a child who may certainly one day learn to write but does not yet know anything about writing. Then there is a potentiality (which he calls possible) that belongs to the child who has begun to write with pen and ink and knows how to form the first letters. And there is, finally, a complete or perfect potentiality that belongs to the scribe who is in full possession of the art of writing in the moment in which he does not write (*potential scriptoris perfecti in arte sua, cum non scripserit*)”.

adulthood, perhaps “man did not evolve from individual adults but from the young of a primate which, like the axolotl, had prematurely acquired the capacity for reproduction” (Agamben 1995: 96). This ‘eternal infancy’ of man would explain human potentiality: the human being is “so completely abandoned to its own state of infancy, and so little specialized and so totipotent that it rejects any specific destiny and any determined environment in order to hold onto its immaturity and helplessness” (Agamben 1995: 96). Here Agamben makes use of the theory of neoteny as a key feature in human evolution first proposed in the 1920s and still discussed today in evolutionary debates. The term ‘neoteny’ (extended youth) was coined in 1884 by the German zoologist Julius Kollmann (1834-1918) precisely to describe the axolotl, but it was applied to human evolution and popularized by the Dutch anatomist Louis (Lodewijk) Bolk in the 1920s in a series of papers which culminated in the 1926 pamphlet *Das Problem der Menschwerdung (The Problem of Hominization)*. It is in this text that one finds Bolk’s famous definition that also Agamben quotes (without quotation marks): “Man, in his bodily development, is a primate fetus that has become sexually mature” (Bolk 1926: 8).

The evolutionary advantages of neoteny rest on the fact that, by slowing down growth and extending the childhood phase, the organism indefinitely prolongs the phase of learning that guarantees heightened receptiveness, mental flexibility and plasticity of behavior (i.e., its *potentiality*), and it is obvious why this hypothesis was and is able to exert so much fascination, especially on philosophers like Agamben. It is paradoxical, however, as Sergei Prozorov points out (2014: 73), that the example Agamben chooses to illustrate the exclusively human phenomenon of infancy belongs to the animal realm. In fact, the phenomenon of retarded development is common in nature (Gould 1996: 148), and the risk that the proponents of this hypothesis run, including Agamben, is to build upon it a teleological construct that sees neoteny as the peak of a pyramid culminating in the human species (Mazzeo 2014: 120).

As contemporary supporters of the neoteny hypothesis remark, humans also present peramorphic (i.e., non-pedomorphic, non-neotenic) traits, such as large noses and long legs, so only some juvenile traits are retained while others are relinquished; neoteny is thus not an all-or-nothing hypothesis and does not explain hominization as such (Gould 1977: 364-65). More disturbingly, these supporters, such as American biologist and zoologist Stephen Jay Gould, must distance themselves from the ideological distortions that Bolk impressed on the neoteny hypothesis: in line with some racial theories of the 1920s, Bolk used neoteny to ‘rank’ human races from the least neotenic (black Africans) to the most neotenic (white Western Europeans), whereby the degree of neoteny also expressed a racial hierarchy (black Africans as inferior – more apish, ‘less human’ – and white Europeans as superior) (Bolk 1926: 38; Bolk 1929: 25-27). Gould underlines Bolk’s racist intellectual dishonesty in ranking white Europeans at the top, since, from a purely anatomical

point of view, Asians and not Western Europeans are the most neotenic, and women are more neotenic than men (Gould 1977: 358-59; Gould 1996: 149-50). The neoteny hypothesis as a racist apparatus, moreover, was not an epiphenomenon of the ‘racist’ 1920s, but is still present and actual: for example, in the 1970s, precisely when Agamben was developing his theory of infancy, the German-born British psychologist Hans Jürgen Eysenck (1971: 1973) proposed again a neotenic argument to justify the inferiority of black people (cf. Gould 1996: 150).

Finally, neoteny in animals is also one of the major factors in domestication, *which is the biopolitical apparatus par excellence*⁶: juvenile behaviors and characters are selected in order to domesticate more easily the species, since young animals are less aggressive and more easily manageable. Neoteny – and infancy with it – is therefore just another apparatus in what Agamben will later call the ‘anthropological machine’, just another stick to draw divisions and separations along racist, sexist and speciesist lines. The later notion of potentiality will divest itself of many of the ambiguities of infancy, but it will retain nonetheless a logocentric and anthropocentric bias which strongly limits its efficacy in biopolitical discourses. Though Agamben from the very beginning freely (albeit cursorily) acknowledges the intrinsic *violence* of human *potenza* (as potential, potency and power) – as at the end of *Language and Death*, where he blames for the violence of human action its lack of (biological) foundation (Agamben 1991: 105-106)⁷, or in *Experimentum linguae*, where he blames the original split in language (Agamben 1993a: 7)⁸ – he will have to take a

⁶ The complex of techniques and knowledge (or power-knowledge) deployed to achieve the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations that characterizes biopower is what defines, first and foremost (both chronologically and conceptually), the human domestication of animals, which can therefore be considered the *ur-form* of biopower. This is already evident in the Foucauldian paradigm of ‘pastoral power’: the image of the good shepherd caring for its flock and tending to all its needs from birth to death not only unveils the essence of biopower (where ‘care’ is a function of domination), but also clearly spells out the material and historical origins of this form of power. That traditional biopolitical thinkers from Foucault to Agamben and beyond did not focus on these origins is due again to the anthropocentric bias of this tradition. On this point see, among many others, Wadiwel 2015.

⁷ “Violence is not something like an originary biological fact that man is forced to assume and regulate in his own praxis through sacrificial institution; rather it is the very ungroundedness of human action (which the sacrificial mythologeme hopes to cure) that constitutes the violent character (that is, *contra naturam*, according to the Latin meaning of the word) of sacrifice. All human action, inasmuch as it is not naturally grounded but must construct its own foundation, is, according to the sacrificial mythologeme, violent. And it is this sacred violence that sacrifice presupposes in order to repeat it and regulate it within its own structure. The unnaturalness of human violence – without common measure with respect to natural violence – is a historical product of man, and as such it is implicit in the very conception of the relation between nature and culture, between living being and logos, where man grounds his own humanity. *The foundation of violence is the violence of the foundation*”.

⁸ “The double articulation of language and speech seems, therefore, to constitute the specific structure of human language. Only from this can be derived the true meaning of that opposition of *dynamis* and *energeia*, of potency and act, which Aristotle’s thought has bequeathed to

much more radical step to evade the Scylla and Charybdis of logocentrism and anthropocentrism that keep threatening to engulf his soteriological proposal.

3. OUTSIDE OF BEING

Agamben's 'biopolitical turn' of the early 1990s forced him to reconsider his anthropocentric bias and to distance himself (at least partially) from his previous logocentrism, since in biopolitics political life becomes increasingly indistinguishable from the (animal) life of the body and (human) animality takes thus a radically new political role. In biopolitics, the clear and neat Heideggerian 'abyss' separating human and nonhuman animals – precisely via the concept of potentiality – becomes more and more blurred and murky, and this also meant for Agamben a rethinking or refashioning of the concept of potential.

This rethinking begins at least with the chapter *Potentiality and Law of Homo Sacer*, where the Aristotelian analysis of potentiality is said to provide nothing less than the 'paradigm of sovereignty' to Western philosophy:

For the sovereign ban, which applies to the exception in no longer applying, corresponds to the structure of potentiality, which maintains itself in relation to actuality precisely through its ability not to be. Potentiality (in its double appearance as potentiality to and as potentiality not to) is that through which Being finds itself *sovereignly*, which is to say, without anything preceding or determining it (*superiorem non recognoscens*) other than its own ability not to be. And an act is sovereign when it realizes itself by simply taking away its own potentiality not to be, letting itself be, giving itself to itself (Agamben 1998: 46, emphasis in the original).

In this sense, "potentiality and actuality are simply the two faces of the sovereign self-grounding of Being" (Agamben 1998: 47), they build up the ontological structure that characterizes Western metaphysics. Heidegger (1995a) had already claimed that the Aristotelian subjection of potentiality to actuality had marked the entire history of metaphysics by determining its fundamental ontology; but Agamben takes here a step further: it is not the subjection of one to the other, but rather the very split of Being into potentiality and actuality that constitutes the structure of metaphysics. When he calls here for a radical rethinking of the relation between potentiality and actuality and for a new ontology of potentiality, therefore, Agamben points precisely "beyond this relation" (Agamben 1998: 44):

philosophy and Western science. Potency – or knowledge – is the specifically human faculty of connectedness as lack; and language, in its split between language and speech, structurally contains this connectedness, is nothing other than this connectedness. Man does not merely know nor merely speak; he is neither *Homo sapiens* nor *Homo loquens*, but *Homo sapiens loquendi*, and this entwinement constitutes the way in which the West has understood itself and laid the foundation for both its knowledge and its skills. The unprecedented violence of human power has its deepest roots in this structure of language".

one must think the existence of potentiality without any relation to Being in the form of actuality – not even in the extreme form of the ban and the potentiality not to be, and of actuality as the fulfillment and manifestation of potentiality – and think the existence of potentiality even without any relation to being in the form of the gift of the self and of letting be. This, however, implies nothing less than thinking ontology and politics beyond every figure of relation, beyond even the limit relation that is the sovereign ban (Agamben 1998: 47).

Since, as we have seen, the opposition of potential and act originates from the double articulation of language into *langue* and *parole*, language itself is caught in the same *sovereign* logic:

Language as the pure potentiality to signify, withdrawing itself from every concrete instance of speech, divides the linguistic from the nonlinguistic and allows for the opening of areas of meaningful speech in which certain terms correspond to certain denotations. Language is the sovereign who, in a permanent state of exception, declares that there is nothing outside language and that language is always beyond itself. The particular structure of law has its foundation in this presuppositional structure of human language. It expresses the bond of inclusive exclusion to which a thing is subject because of the fact of being in language, of being named. To speak [*dire*] is, in this sense, always to “speak the law,” *ius dicere* (Agamben 1998: 21).

This anthropocentric logocentrism of human potential comes increasingly under fire in Agamben’s biopolitical critique precisely because it ultimately constitutes the ontological frame of Western metaphysics from which his soteriology seeks a messianic way out. So, just like the critique of operativity points to a new ontology of potentiality beyond the sovereign split/relation between potentiality and actuality, also the critique of language points to a new ‘use’ beyond its communicative and signifying – that is, sovereign – structure (cf. Salzani 2015). The end of the parable begun in *Infancy and History* and especially *Language and Death* with the analysis of human language in contraposition to animal ‘voice’, where it was argued that there is no ‘human voice’ “as the chirp is the voice of the cricket or the bray is the voice of the donkey” (Agamben 1993a: 3), is the conclusion of *The Sacrament of Language*, where Agamben writes:

It is perhaps time to call into question the prestige that language has enjoyed and continues to enjoy in our culture, as a tool of incomparable potency, efficacy, and beauty. And yet, considered in itself, it is no more beautiful than birdsong, no more efficacious than the signals insects exchange, no more powerful than the roar with which the lion asserts his dominion (Agamben 2011: 71).

What William Watkin calls “Agamben’s turn against language” (2014: 249) is his later emphasis on the fact that language as well is but a historical contingency emanating from a now-exhausted metaphysical tradition, that language as well is

ultimately a 'signature' (Watking 2014: 249) of Western metaphysical anthropocentrism (and humanism⁹).

It can be and has been argued (especially Castanò 2018; also e.g. Prozorov 2014 and Colebrook and Maxwell 2016) that the overcoming of the metaphysical split between *dynamis* and *energeia* and between *langue* and *parole* (as also between voice and *logos* and all the other dichotomies generated by this split), which endows Western ontology with its deadly negativity, has always been Agamben's agenda and the goal of his messianic philosophy. Therefore, a substantial continuity should be seen beneath the superficial 'turn' that biopolitics impressed upon his thought, and the apparent discontinuity between his anthropocentric/logocentric and non- (or less) anthropocentric/logocentric phases should be toned down. However, it is only in *The Open* that an explicit 'way out' from the negative deadlock of anthropocentric metaphysics is concretely named: if "potentiality and actuality are simply the two faces of the sovereign self-grounding of Being" (Agamben 1998: 47), then Being is the name itself of Western metaphysics, and the only way out is 'Outside of Being'. This is of course the title of the last chapter of *The Open*, and it is here that a proper anti-metaphysical and post-anthropocentric strategy should be sought.

The core of *The Open* is devoted to a reading of Heidegger's take on animality which basically rehearses Agamben's own anthropocentric theory of potentiality. As it is well known, in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1995b) Heidegger adopted Jakob von Uexküll's notion of *Umwelt* as the species-specific, spatio-temporal, subjective reference frame of animal life, which ultimately cages animality within a limited set of possibilities, determined by what Uexküll called "carriers of significance" and Heidegger re-named "disinhibitors". Heidegger called "captivation" (*Benommenheit*) the animal's limited and deterministic relation with its disinhibitors, and it is the impossibility to escape the limits of its captivity that constitutes the animal's 'poverty in world'. The *Dasein*, to the contrary, experiences in profound boredom "the disconcealing of the originary possibilitization (that is, pure potentiality) in the suspension and withholding of all concrete and specific possibilities" (Agamben 2004: 67). For Heidegger,

[w]hat appears for the first time as such in the deactivation [...] of possibility, then, is *the very origin of potentiality* - and with it, of *Dasein*, that is, the being which exists in the form of potentiality-for-being [*poter-essere*]. But precisely for this reason, this potentiality or originary possibilitization constitutively has the form of a potential-not-to [*potenza-di-non*], of an impotentiality, insofar as it is *able to* [*può*] only in beginning from a *being able not to* [*poter non*], that is, from a deactivation of single, specific, factual possibilities (Agamben 2004: 67).

This is basically the form that Agamben's own theory of potentiality had taken until then, but in *The Open* it is presented as the culmination of the metaphysical

⁹ On the 'human' itself as signature, cf. Salzani 2019.

tradition: excluding animal life from potentialities and freedom represents the core workings of the anthropological machine. Agamben's trademark call for a *désoeuurement* of metaphysical machines and apparatuses implies here a deposition of his own anthropocentric philosophy of potentiality.

Instead of listening, with Heidegger, to Being's self-disclosure in language, Agamben evokes thus an exit from Being itself based on the very deposition of language and/as *logos*. The chapter *Outside of Being* opens in fact with an epigraph taken from Furio Jesi's *Esoterismo e linguaggio mitologico* (*Esotericism and Mythological Language*, 1976): "Esotericism means: the articulation of modalities of non-knowledge". What interests Agamben here, as it clearly emerges from an essay on Jesi originally published in 1999, is the self-expropriation and self-abolition Jesi identified in Rilke's esotericism as "modalities of non-knowledge" (Agamben 2019). *Outside of Being* revolves in fact around a definitive "farewell to the *logos* and to its own history" (Agamben 2004: 90) that Agamben calls *ignoscenza*, a neologism he coins from the Latin verb *ignoscere*, which is at the root of "ignorance" (Italian: *ignoranza*), but that in Latin means instead "to forgive". The English translator chooses to render it as 'a-knowledge', pointing out, however, that it should best be understood as a sort of 'forgetful forgiveness' (Agamben 2004: 99n3). The *désoeuurement* of the anthropological machine as farewell to *logos* and a-knowledge, Agamben writes, "means in this sense not simply to let something be, but to leave something outside of being, to render it unsavable" (Agamben 2004: 91). "[O]nly with man can there be something like [B]eing, and beings become accessible and manifest" (Agamben 2004: 91), so bidding farewell to the *logos* and its permanent state of exception means to take leave of Being and knowledge:

The zone of nonknowledge - or of a-knowledge - that is at issue here, Agamben writes, is beyond both knowing and not knowing, beyond both disconcealing and concealing, beyond both being and the nothing. But what is thus left to be outside of being is not thereby negated or taken away; it is not, for this reason, inexistent. It is an existing, real thing that has gone beyond the difference between being and beings (Agamben 2004: 91-92).

It is admittedly not very clear what this exit from Being would concretely involve - hence the criticisms, like those of Krzysztof Ziarek (2008) or Matthew Chrulaw (2012), that the power relations between humans and animals in Agamben's scheme would ultimately remain unchanged. The jamming of the anthropological machine and the deposition of the human-animal divide would not destroy the terms of the dichotomy - this is precisely the point of Agamben's notion of *désoeuurement* - but would de-activate their functions and thereby open them to a new 'use', which cannot however be foreseen and foreordained. So one cannot tell in advance what a new 'use' of humanity and animality would or could look like. The important point, however, is that the old use - the discourse of Being and/as anthropocentrism - would be deposed: the animal, Agamben writes, insofar as

“knows neither beings nor nonbeings, neither open nor closed, it is outside of being; it is outside in an exteriority more external than any open, and inside in an intimacy more internal than any closedness. To let the animal be would then mean: to let it be *outside of being*” (Agamben 2004: 91). Likewise, to let ‘Man’ be outside of Being would mean the deposition of anthropocentrism itself.

What this all means for a philosophy of potentiality is sketched out or hinted at in the epilogue to *The Use of Bodies*, the final volume of the project *Homo Sacer*, titled *Toward a Theory of Destituent Potential*. The concept of destituent potential (*potenza destituente*) is the attempt to fulfill the task Agamben had set for himself twenty years before in the chapter *Potentiality and Law of Homo Sacer* (which is in fact extensively quoted: 2016: 267-68): that of thinking potential beyond any relation to act and actuality. To this end, in *The Use of Bodies* Agamben recurs to the notion of ‘contact’ as developed by Giorgio Colli: the ‘metaphysical interstice’ or the moment in which two entities are separated only by a void of representation. “In contact,” Colli wrote, “two points are in contact in the limited sense that between them there is nothing: contact is the indication of a representative nothing, which nevertheless is a certain nothing, because what it is not (its representative outline) gives it a spatio-temporal arrangement” (Colli qtd. in Agamben 2016: 237). So, for Agamben, destituent potential is a potential

that is capable of always depositing ontological-political relations in order to cause a contact [...] to appear between their elements. Contact is not a point of tangency nor a quid or a substance in which two elements communicate: it is defined only by an absence of representation, only by a caesura. Where a relation is rendered destitute and interrupted, its elements are in this sense in contact, because the absence of every relation is exhibited between them (Agamben 2016: 272).

A life no longer divided from itself and finally appearing in its free and intact form (Agamben 2016: 272-273) would be, as Claire Colebrook and Jason Maxwell propose (2016: 103), ‘mere life’ as “a life that is perfect potentiality because it need not act in order to be what it is – as the zone of a new ethics beyond humanism and recognition”¹⁰. Whether this is enough for a philosophy of potential to genuinely overcome anthropocentrism remains an open question.

Ultimately, the frame of Agamben’s thought remained consistent throughout his long and rich career, and all successive recalibrations never removed the human from the center of his work (cf. Colebrook and Maxwell 2016: 167). That is to say

¹⁰ Prozorov (2014: 152-153) notes that the distinction between *zoé* and *bios* makes sense only for human life, and the same holds for the notion of ‘bare life’, which is precisely the product of the inclusionary exclusion of *zoé* from *bios* and is thus ‘species-specific’ (Shukin 2009: 10). However, as, among others, Cary Wolfe (2013: 46) remarks, in biopolitics the animal becomes “the site of the very ur-form of [the biopolitical] *dispositif* and the face of its most unchecked, nightmarish effects”, and thus, Anat Pick (2011: 15) adds, animals “constitute an exemplary ‘state of exception’ of species sovereignty”, where relations of power operate with the fewest obstacles, in their exemplary purity.

that he did not really follow up on the clear anthropocentrism of *Outside of Being* and soon ‘relapsed’ into his more traditional (and more anthropocentric) vocabulary and categories. By ‘abandoning’ his work for other to continue it (Agamben 2016: xiii), however, Agamben has assigned a clear task to the coming philosophy, that of picking up his demand to bidding farewell to anthropocentrism and ferry philosophy beyond the dire straits of metaphysics at its end: outside of Being.

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