TOPOLOGIES OF ABANDON: LOCATING LIFE IN THE

PHILOSOPHY OF GIORGIO AGAMBEN

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DECLARATION:

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

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ABSTRACT

In the forty years separating *Stanzas* and the recently published final instalment of the Homo Sacer series, *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben has regularly turned to topological figures in pursuing his critical analyses of the biopolitical horizon of modernity. *Topologies of Abandon* provides the first sustained analysis of the topological orientation of Agamben's work, developing an alternative spatial genealogy of a series of key concepts and figures in Agamben's thinking. The thesis considers a series of conceptual *topoi* explored by Agamben and argues that his theoretical project consists of a series of interrelated investigations into the configuration of place and localisation: the ontological space of the exception, the location of the subject within language, and the place of life in contemporary configurations of power. In my analysis of each of these topologies I argue against the common conception of Agamben's work as providing a pessimistic and negative diagnosis of contemporary forms of biopolitical governance from which there exists little hope of emancipation. Paradoxically, the potentiality that marks Agamben's utopic *topos* of life is found in the place of an abandonment, and it is by exploring the negative and privative topologies of abandon in Agamben's work that the thesis seeks to re-orient future readings of the largely misunderstood affirmative dimension of this philosophical project. The thesis provides a comprehensive overview and analysis of Agamben's use of topological figures throughout his body of work. Considering Agamben's methodological use of paradigms, signatures, and archaeology from a topological perspective, the thesis reconsiders the relationship between the biopolitical studies of Agamben and Foucault on this basis. The project situates Agamben's topological interest within the context of a wider critical-philosophical turn to the field in the twentieth-century, showing that Agamben's work is influenced by the topological current informing philosophies of the lifeworld and the metalogical inquiries of structuralism. The thesis also reconsiders Agamben's relationship with the thought of his former teacher Heidegger in terms of the two thinkers' shared interest in a 'topology of being'. Following the topological thread running throughout Agamben's oeuvre, I

demonstrate how from his earliest works Agamben seeks to map out an affirmative *topos* of life that perforates the surfaces and limits of its philosophical, juridical, and political determinations.

Contents

Introduction

Harmonia

In the closing pages of *Stanzas* Agamben provides a memorable image of human life as 'the topological game of putting things together and articulating' (*S*, 156). Tracing the notion of 'putting together presence' to its origin as a modality of being in the 'dawning language of Greek thought,' Agamben suggests that this activity took the name of '*harmonia*,' derived from the terms *harmodzo* and *ararisco* which 'originally meant "join" or "connect" in the carpenter's sense' (*S*, 156-7). As Agamben notes, the experience of community and of language in the topology of *harmonia* is in a certain sense paradoxical: it is an 'agreement' in a 'juxtaposition,' and 'implies the idea of a laceration that is also a suture, the idea of a tension that is both the articulation of a difference and unitary' (*S*, 157). The 'topological game' of *harmonia* evoked in these pages gestures towards a region in which two seemingly opposed actions appear to enter into a 'zone of indistinction', and is as such a figure whose singular modality 'intervenes in the dichotomies of logic'. (*ST*, 20) Twenty years later, in *Homo Sacer I*, Agamben is still seeking to investigate a series of 'complex topological relations' (*HS*, 19) within which 'the very sense of the belonging and commonality of individuals is to be defined' (*HS*, 22), and Agamben will once again turn to a series of topological figures in order to grasp the paradoxical logic of the sovereign exception and the peculiar position of the eponymous *homo sacer*. What are we to make of this recurrence of interest in topology at either end of the Agambenian corpus?

I have chosen to open this study with the figure of *harmonia*, as it provides an image or form of thought through which we can get an initial grasp of the two central philosophical movements of Agamben's thinking. Furthermore, the image provides a remarkably prescient distillation of the role and function of topology within his work. In this introduction, I shall briefly outline the two Agambenian 'movements', which I describe here as 'critical-diagnostic', and 'recuperative', and provide an overview of topological thinking as I approach and deploy it

here. In so doing I will refer to some of the critical thinkers who have also turned to topology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, so as to provide an initial sense of how I see this 'topological turn' comprising a backdrop against which we can set the topological insistence informing Agamben's philosophical project. My guiding hypothesis here is that topology plays an important role in both the critical-diagnostic and recuperative registers of Agamben's project. Topology, I will be arguing, can be seen to form a crucial part of the critical-diagnosis of western metaphysical thinking that Agamben has developed during the course of forty years of research, and has an equally important part to play in the subsequent attempt to develop a recuperative approach to the emergence, organisation, and persistence of this tradition, with a view to fundamentally altering our understanding of it and the form of life to which it consigns us.

My interest in following this topological thread is borne in large part out of a sense that the affirmative possibilities presented in Agamben's work have been overlooked or simply ignored in the majority of critical responses it has generated, and that this somewhat myopic dismissal of Agamben's work as a resource for critical-progressive thinking has fermented in the past decade. In a number of studies there has, helpfully, emerged a growing interest in providing a more attentive analysis of the affirmative and emancipatory dimension of Agamben's thinking. The works of Alex Murray, Thanos Zartaloudis, and William Watkin, are the most significant responses to Agamben's work to have attempted to resist this tide of (mis)interpretation, and have provided readers with a more considered and in-depth analysis of the range and ambitions of Agamben's body of work.[1] And in the work of Miguel Vatter, Jessica Whyte, Claire Colebrook and Jason Maxwell,[2] to name some of the most recent examples, there appears a shared insistence on redressing the one-sidedness of much critical response to Agamben's work, a body of largely hostile literature that has focused almost

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[1] Alex Murray, *Giorgio Agamben*. Routledge: London, 2010; Thanos Zartaloudis, *Giorgio Agamben: Power, Law and the Uses of Criticism*. Routledge: London, 2010; William Watkin, *The Literary Agamben: Adventures in Logopoiesis*. Continuum: London, 2010; Watkin, *Agamben and Indifference*.

[2] Jessica Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*. State University of New York Press: Albany, 2013; Claire Colebrook and Jason Maxwell, *Agamben*. Polity Press: Cambridge and Malden, 2016; Miguel Vatter, *The Republic of the Living*. Fordham University Press: New York, 2014.

exclusively on the first instalment of the Homo Sacer series. As each of these works is at pains to point out, in much of the critical literature the onus has been placed on the problem of sovereignty and what is perceived as Agamben's wholly negative depiction of bare life and the emancipatory possibilities that exist in contemporary political formations.[3] Such responses to Agamben's work offer little in the way of a wider consideration of the philosophical gestation of his critique of sovereignty, nor the emancipatory potential that Agamben finds in the figure of bare life. As Agamben's work continues to develop its radical call for a new form of political life, and as a growing number of scholars consider this call in terms of the full, variegated breadth of Agamben's forty years of research, the sense is that a different thinker offering a different (though by no means unproblematic) set of possibilities is now emerging. In this study, I am working on the basis of the same conviction that the emancipatory orientation in Agamben has been under-theorised and that as such there exists an undiscovered Agamben, one whose work provides a series of compelling possibilities for contemporary thought. More specifically, my working hypothesis here is that in seeking to develop these last, the importance of topology for such a reorientation in approach to Agamben's work has yet to be fully explored. A sustained study of the influence of topological thinking upon Agamben is, I contend, both a timely and necessary addition to the scholarly debate surrounding this ambitious and provocative historical-philosophical project.

Critical Diagnosis: Against Difference

It is fitting that two of Agamben's more extended engagements with topology occur in *Stanzas* and *Homo Sacer I*, two texts which provide an approximate bookending of his philosophical project, for as I shall argue in this thesis there is an abiding topological orientation in Agamben's work, one which crucially informs the development of his methodology and the gestation of a series of key concepts. Perhaps the most significant of these last, and the one

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[3] For the initial and predominantly critical responses to *Homo Sacer I* see: *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer*. Ed. Andrew Norris. Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2005; and *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*. Eds. Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli. Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2007.

which can give us the clearest sense at the outset of the significance of topology for Agamben as a thinker, is the very old philosophical problem that *harmonia* presents us with, concerning the paradoxical relation between the one and the many. For Agamben, as for many modern thinkers, the problem takes the following form: what are the processes of formation, and the operative economy of relations, which ensures the immutable, foundational, and universal status of certain concepts or laws that are then subsequently held to provide 'structures of consistent unity'[4] for the multiplicity and heterogeneity of individual elements which, in turn, and as a consequence of their very heterogeneity, appear to necessitate the existence of such foundational concepts? And further, if the first formulation of the question seeks to explore in what, precisely, the difference between the two consists (what are the formal-logical characteristics proper to the one, or the 'common', and what are those of the many, or the 'proper', such that the two appear to form a hierarchical system and as such exist in a state of perpetual differentiation and contest), the decisive second question consequent on this first (and one that, it has been convincingly argued, is the distinguishing gesture of Agamben's work)[5] is to ask *why* there exists such a differential relation between the one and the many in the first place. This critique of Western oppositional-differential thinking is the first, and abiding critical-diagnostic aspect of Agamben's work. Why we have such a differential structure of thinking, the history of its formation and the conditions of its operation, are the key questions orienting all of Agamben's work.

According to Agamben the topology of *harmonia* introduced at the close of *Stanzas*, which describes a form of relationality that is not marked by a logic of difference and separation, was subsequently 'dismissed and eclipsed through its metaphysical interpretation.' (*S*, 136) By conjuring the figure of *harmonia* to describe the paradoxical movement of a 'laceration', Agamben refers us to one of the most ancient philosophical texts in the Western tradition, in which Heraclitus describes that which is most 'proper' and 'habitual' for man as what 'lacerates and divides,' and concludes that, as such, man is 'the principle and place of a

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[4] William Watkin, *Agamben and Indifference: A Critical Overview*. Rowman & Littlefield: London, 2014, p.xi
[5] The pre-eminent arguments for the originality of Agamben's thinking in this regard are to be found in Watkin's study *Agamben and Indifference*.

fracture.' According to Agamben's reading of this fragment, 'Man is such that, to be *himself*, he must necessarily divide himself.' (*S*, 155) For this vision of the human being as irremediably marked by a 'laceration' and 'fracture', Agamben is indebted to the thought of G.W.F. Hegel and Martin Heidegger, whose reassessments of the conception of life and thought as constitutively oppositional and divided have had a profound influence upon modern philosophical thinking. The paradox inscribed within the metaphysical articulatory system, that which concerns Heraclitus, Hegel, Heidegger, and latterly Agamben, is contained within the movement of 'laceration' (*lacerazione*),[6] one Agamben describes as an 'agreement in a juxtaposition…the idea of a tension that is both the articulation of a difference and unitary' (*S*, 157). One might suggest that the history of western thought can be understood as a series of attempts to overcome the irresolvable tension between the idea of unity (or identity) and difference; between the universal and the particular; between the common and the proper. It is the millennia-long 'gigantomochia' or 'battle' over how best to articulate this paradoxical relation that, perhaps above all, concerns Agamben in his own reassessment of the western philosophical tradition. If, however, Agamben concerns himself with the paradoxes of the ontological difference between the one and the many, and the apparent impasses of oppositional, binary thinking, he does so in a singular way. William Watkin's study, *Agamben and Indifference*, has perhaps done the most to give us a clear sense of exactly how, and to what end, Agamben seeks to depart from the metaphysical tradition. In Watkin's analysis, the key to approaching Agamben is understanding him as a thinker of *indifference*:

Arguably all [Agamben's] predecessors undermine philosophical structures of consistent identity through the valorisation of difference in some form. …Agamben does not participate in this tradition, making its basic presupposition indifferent or indistinct because he insists that difference is as much implicated in the system of metaphysics as that of identity, or the proper is as much a part of the metaphysical machine as the common. If, he argues, like his predecessors, that identity structures are historically contingent and

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[6] As the translator of Agamben's first book, in which the term also appears, points out: 'The word translated "split" in the title of this chapter and almost everywhere else in this book is *lacerazione*, which is in turn the Italian translation of Hegel's term *Zerrizenheit* [sic] in…the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. A more literal translation would be "the state of being torn."

not logically necessary, then so too are differentiating structures, which can then further be said to be complicit in metaphysics, not a means of overcoming it.[7]

Agamben thus shows that difference is not opposed to but an integral part of a 'consistent, foundational metaphysical identity.'[8] Pursuing a rigorous exposition of Agamben's methodology, Watkin's study argues powerfully in favour of Agamben's call for 'the movement beyond a metaphysics of both presence and difference which…does not disrupt presence but actually forms and distributes it.'[9] Stalling the economy of oppositional difference, disrupting the dialectic of common and proper, identity and difference, Agamben means to dissolve the logic of differential opposition, and thus reveal the relations that exist between elements to be indifferent. It is a kind of radical conceptual egalitarianism, in which all categorical-hierarchical relations are suspended, and the very economy which ensures the opposition of, say, the historical foundations of law and its actual applicability in everyday practice, or the biological substrate of life common to all living things and the innumerable individual manifestation of life, this economy of difference which always privileges a primary, superior, and foundational element over a multiplicity of secondary elements whose existence appears to *necessitate a founding element*, is bought to a standstill and shown to operate according to a logical inconsistency. In the space opened up by this flaw in the system, we enter into what Agamben will describe variously as a zone or threshold of indistinction, indiscernibility, inoperativity, suspension, or indifference. Watkin provides concise summation of this flawed space:

In this zone of indifference, the clear difference between the founding common and actual instances of this common foundation (the proper) becomes confused. First, it is difficult to ascertain which element *is* the common and which the proper. Second, it becomes therefore impossible to say that the common *founds* the proper as often the proper seems to construct the common as its foundation at a later date

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[7] Watkin, *Agamben and Indifference*, p.xiv
[8] Ibid., p.xiv
[9] Ibid., p.32

retrospectively and retroactively. Or simply, one cannot be sure which is really the common and which is the proper.[10]

It is primarily in terms of the revealed co-implication to the point of indistinction of common and proper, identity and difference, and indeed, as Agamben puts it, of 'all the binary oppositions defining our culture' (*ST*, 98), that I shall argue for the significance of topology for Agamben's project. If Watkin's aim is to argue for 'the dependency of the method on indifference,'[11] my intention here is to extend and enrich this reading by making a claim for the abiding presence of a topological orientation in Agamben's methodology. Such an approach is, I believe, entirely in keeping with and indeed complimentary to the indifferent imperative that Watkin's study has presented us with. Before we can begin to get a clearer sense of what exactly topological thinking is though, and of how it functions within Agamben's work, it is necessary to attend to the second key movement in Agamben's philosophical project, which advances upon the critical-diagnostic to introduce what I will term a recuperative dimension.

Recuperative Negation: Philosophical Archaeology

To re-state then, the first movement of Agamben's work that I have been outlining thus far is his critical-diagnostic survey of the metaphysical tradition. For Agamben, the *locus classicus* of the 'fracture' between common and proper that is productive of 'identity-difference metaphysics' is to be found in Aristotelian ontology. As will be seen, according to this conception 'pure Being', the 'ultimate metaphysical stake', serves as the 'empty space' which must remain 'devoid of any determination or real predicate' (*SE*, 60) so that it may function as the foundation for all individual beings. Seeking to counter the articulation of life in which beings have their being by virtue of their relation to the place of a lack and a privation, which individual beings must always in some sense fill-up or assume, Agamben will consistently reject what we might term the insubstantial foundationalism of this ontological tradition. Be it

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[10] Ibid., p.xii
[11] Ibid., p.36

the ontological difference between essence and existence, the presuppositional structure of signification, the 'sacrificial mythologeme,' the dialectic between law and applicability, or the impotent transcendence of God versus the earthly power of governance, Agamben seeks out the insubstantial ground of all such dichotomies in order to analyse their structural and operative conditions of possibility, and, ultimately, to render them 'inoperative'.

Agamben sets about this task by returning to a series of apparently foundational moments in the history of western culture which have come to sanction and organise behaviour over long periods of time and in a diverse range of areas of culture: religion, politics, aesthetics, the legal system, language, and philosophical thought itself. On this basis, Agamben develops a series of critical evaluations of existing structures of organisation, discursive practices, and the specific formal-logical operations at work in the composition and continuity of hegemonic cultural traditions. As will be seen at length in what follows, a recurrent method deployed by Agamben to explore the emergence and perpetuity of different socio-cultural formations, is the philological study of certain terminological pressure points and 'polarisations' within the discursive field of said formations. What is essential to foreground at this stage is that, in turning to the terminological and conceptual 'foundations' of western culture, Agamben is in no sense developing a historiographical account of the 'emergence of modernity', nor aiming to pinpoint within a chronology the 'origins' of our cultural institutions and practices. Underwritten by the insights gleaned from the critical-diagnosis of the logic of 'insubstantial foundationalism' produced by the metaphysical dialectic of common and proper, the recuperative dimension of Agamben's work – what he describes as a 'philosophical archaeology' – consists of working through what it means to recognise that the conceptual foundations of western culture are, precisely, *without substance*.

Watkin hits on the most significant implications of this re-appraisal in the two passages quoted above: the first of these is that foundational structures are 'historically contingent and not logically necessary'. Second: far from existing at the origin of their formation, such foundational principles are, in fact, constructed 'at a later date retrospectively and retroactively', by the very socio-cultural forms they are said to found. The most perspicacious and rigorous

meditation on this aspect of Agamben's philosophical-historical project is Thanos Zartaloudis's study, *Giorgio Agamben: Power, Law and the Uses of Criticism*. The disarmingly straightforward but no less illuminating point this work makes, following Agamben, is that the institutions, discursive practices, and the social relations that a culture produces, do not emerge from an obscure, transcendent, and so ungraspable source, but are, quite simply, *made up*:

The mythological presupposition of the existence of such a transcendental righteousness or power is grounded through the violence of the so-called foundations or sources of law or power, which rely, in turn, upon the presupposition of distinction between a pre-political, pre-legal or pre-historical human nature…and a legally qualified, social, or political culture (citizenship), removing each time from the archival memory of institutions the fact of such transcendental foundations being 'a product of man', an *action*.[12]

By placing an apparently necessary but empirically elusive element at its foundation, what Zartaloudis describes as the cultural 'mythologeme' of the west is able to function only by 'concealing the historicity of the production of such foundations'. As a result, 'a transcendental source of power and legitimacy is hypothesized,' to which, by its own logic, we can have no access.[13] What Agamben's work reveals is that the apparently transcendental 'foundation' is nothing more than 'an assumed element of the discursive formation', and that what is 'concealed' by this tradition is nothing more than the historically contingent point when it becomes possible for a given set of discursive formations to be 'assumed,' and thus become operative in the organisation and legitimation of certain forms of behaviour. Agamben's thought enquires first and foremost into the conditions and processes of emergence within which certain structures and forms of thought emerge. What is more, Agamben wants us to grasp that such 'emergences' are continually taking place, being reproduced under certain conditions and within certain processes which are – and this is the key affirmative gesture of Agamben's thought –

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[12] Thanos Zartaloudis, *Giorgio Agamben: Power, Law and the Uses of Criticism*. Routledge: London, 2010, p.x
[13] Ibid, p.xi

historically contingent and so – potentially at least – subject to recuperation, transformation, and change.

Here the influence of Foucault upon Agamben is at its strongest. For though Agamben is at pains to reveal the philosophical logic informing all insubstantial foundationalisms at the basis of socio-cultural formations, and in so doing to attempt to 'dispel the chimeras of the origin', he is also and equally committed to approaching the emergence of a given set of discursive formations that come to organise and legitimate certain ways of speaking and behaving as *historically existent social categories*. Bringing these levels of analysis together means persistently seeking out the conceptual work that is productive of 'historical materialities'.[14] Hence the project-defining tension which has proved most troubling to many readers of Agamben's studies: the tightrope it treads between 'the empirical and temporal nature of a historical enquiry [and] the reasoned ahistorical nature of philosophical thought.'[15] In particular, it is the persistent search for what Agamben terms the '*arché*' of certain cultural, political, and philosophical traditions, their 'moment of arising', that requires the reader to walk what Foucault described as the 'path…maybe very narrow', between 'social history and formal analysis';[16] that is, between the demands of historical specificity and the abstract nature of conceptual categories. This is because, as already seen and despite appearances, the 'descent' into the past undertaken here does not involve a return to a moment locatable in a chronology; '*arché*' does not mean origin, which is to say, it can have no recourse to an identifiable 'foundational element' (for example, the Law of law). Philosophical archaeology is in pursuit of something much harder to grasp: 'the identifiable moment when it became possible for a set of discursive formations to be operative.'[17] It is not the *content* of a given tradition or discursive formation that is in question in the 'moment of arising', but the very *formal conditions* which enabled it to become operative *at all*. And because this 'moment' has never before been available for conscious consideration and analysis (obscured as it has been by the dense weave

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[14] Watkin, *Agamben and Indifference*, p.29
[15] Ibid., p.30
[16] Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*. University of Massachusetts Press: Massachusetts, 1988, p.10
[17] Ibid, p.33

of cultural 'mythologemes' that simultaneously guard and obscure their own foundation), Agamben can describe the quarry of philosophical archaeology as a series of historically existent events that have not yet been experienced. Seeking out the *arché* of a tradition does not mean returning to a primal scene in order to recover a hidden and more authentic 'repressed' element:

On the contrary, it is a matter of conjuring up its phantasm, through meticulous genealogical inquiry, in order to work on it, deconstruct it, and detail it to the point where it gradually erodes, losing its originary status. In other words, archaeological regression is elusive: it does not seek, as in Freud, to restore a previous stage, but to decompose, displace, and ultimately bypass it. (*ST*, 102-3)

The tension between conceptual abstraction and historical materialisation reaches its point of maximal intensity at the 'moment of arising', the 'moment' when a tradition becomes rigidified through the process of 'concealing the historicity of its own production.' This interest in the seemingly insubstantial *arché* of socio-cultural institutions has been the cause of much controversy surrounding Agamben's work. It is also, I would argue, its most compelling aspect. By describing his method as one of philosophical archaeology, Agamben situates his work on the nerve-ending of philosophical reflection on 'what has been'. Simply put, how can an historically existent category be said to have no substance, no factual veracity?

   In attempting to describe his own method of genealogical study, which sought out the conditions of possibility for the emergence of contingent historical materialities, Foucault turned on one occasion to the 'at first sight paradoxical direction of a materialism of the incorporeal.'[18] And, in the early programmatic statement which opens *Stanzas*, Agamben has recourse to an equally paradoxical formulation in seeking to elucidate on his proposed project for a 'philosophical topology': 'from this vantage,' he suggests, 'once can speak of a topology of the unreal'. (*S*, xviii) I will spend some time unpacking these apparently obscure statements

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[18] Michel Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', in Robert Young, ed. *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*. Routledge: London, 1981, p.69

of intent, and, in particular will seek to better grasp just what a 'topology of the unreal' might comprise. Both thinkers, it is clear, are attempting to formulate an image, adequate if not exact, to describe their confrontation with the 'peculiar, paradoxical empiricism'[19] of an historical analysis whose object remains in some way insubstantial and lacking in factual veracity; it is not an 'absolute reality,' but nor for that reason does the critic deny or seek to escape from it. As we have seen, for Agamben the exigency of investigating these insubstantial *topoi* derives from the philosophical and political pressure points they reveal. In seeking to work through these, Agamben has turned frequently to a recuperative modality of thinking, which represents the second movement of his philosophical project, which I understand to be its abiding affirmative gesture. As the reference to Freud in the passage from the 'Archaeology' essay may have alerted us, it is in this regard that Agamben engages directly with the psychoanalytic tradition. Indeed, Agamben's interest in describing an experience of privation that produces a place of constitutive inaccessibility – which should be understood, to say it once more, as being both conceptual and historical, philosophical and political – first emerges in the context of his most sustained engagement with psychoanalytic theory in *Stanzas*. By turning back to Agamben's early interest in theories of melancholia, fetishism, and the Freudian theory of repression, and bringing them into dialogue with his more recent turn to this tradition, my intention is twofold and is, broadly speaking, representative of the wider ambitions of this thesis.

First, I want to suggest that there exists a sustained topological imperative informing Agamben's reflections on 'the impossible task of appropriating what must remain in every case inappropriable'. (*S*, xviii) From the earlier, philosophically abstract and subject-oriented confrontation with a constitutive experience of privation in *Stanzas*, to the mature historical-materialist approach to cultural strategies of repression and exclusion, I show that Agamben remains committed to exploring the paradoxical empiricism of a 'topology of the unreal.' The guiding question is formulated concisely in the 'Archaeology' essay: 'how is it possible to gain access, once again, to a non-lived experience, to return to an event that somehow for the subject

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[19] Zartaloudis, *Power, Law and the Uses of Criticism*, p.6

has never truly been given?' (*ST*, 89) At the same time, by elaborating on the persistence of interest in the experience of privation from a topological perspective, my aim is to show that the affirmative dimension of Agamben's thinking involves a sustained and rigorous confrontation with negativity. My argument will move towards an account of the ways in which Agamben develops a theory of *recuperative negativity*, that is, a *creative* and affirmative experience of privation that is formulated in direct opposition to the dead-ends of philosophical nihilism underwriting metaphysical-differential thinking (which the early works so painstakingly scrutinise). Thus, whilst I spend some time in what follows discussing themes of negation and negativity, it should be made clear out the outset that I do so – following Agamben – only in the interest of producing a 'dialectical leavening capable of reversing privation as possession.' (*S*, 7)

If, according to Agamben, 'topological exploration is constantly oriented in the light of utopia', we must understand this u-topic dimension of Agamben's thinking quite literally as a '*topos outopos*', a placeless place. (*S*, xviii). A number of critics have detected a problematic, 'blank' and even 'post-apocalyptic' utopian imperative informing Agamben's work.[20] Nothing could be further from the truth. Agamben proposes no image of the future, provides no blueprint for alternative social-political formations, but instead subjects the institutional and discursive formations of the present to intense and rigorous *study*. What such study opens to is the sheer potentiality of the present – the always present possibility that life not only *can* be, but *is* other than it is. As Carlo Salzani has argued, Agamben's project 'exudes an intrinsic and intense anti-utopianism.'[21] Far from referring us an 'other place' or future destination, the *topos outopos* alluded to in *Stanzas* invites the reader to explore those aspects of the contemporary conjuncture which have – for reasons only study can unravel – remained inaccessible to thought.

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[20] Dominik LaCapra, "Approaching Limit Events: Siting Agamben," in Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life, ed. Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p.155, 161
[21] Carlo Salzani, 'Quodlibet: Giorgio Agamben's Anti-Utopia'. Utopian Studies Volume 23, Number 1, 2012, p.213

Dislocating the Present

Topology crucially informs both the critical-diagnostic and recuperative dimensions of this project. By outlining the two movements of this ambitious and quite grand philosophical system, I have been suggesting that, for Agamben, topological thinking provides a powerful tool for dealing with the indistinction between empirical-historical analysis and transcendental concepts, and for overcoming the difficulties produced by the paradoxical empiricism of an historical analysis whose object is in some sense insubstantial and lacking in factual veracity. Agamben's thought can be understood as in incessant movement between the two apparently incompatible spheres of analysis. I will argue here that Agamben's interest in and use of topology provides a compelling rubric under which to trace the development and maturing of this complex interweaving. From the first, speculative turn to topology in *Stanzas*, where the attempt to grasp the ungraspable object of analysis and 'conjure' the phantasm of an insubstantial experience first emerges, to the later analyses of the camp and the topology of the ban in the Homo Sacer series, in which the historically contingent structures and processes through which the materialisation of certain formations of power occur come under intense scrutiny, back and forth, between the empirical-temporal demand of historical enquiry and the reasoned ahistorical call of philosophical thought, Agamben's philosophical project attempts nothing less than a historical materialism of the conceptual structure of western culture.

But Agamben's willingness to blur the distinction between the apparently distinct 'fields' of historical analysis and philosophical reason has been the cause of much controversy surrounding the theses developed in the Homo Sacer books. As Paul M. Livingston has convincingly argued however, the aim of this kind of thought is 'not…to "ontologize" politics but rather simply to demonstrate the implications of general phenomena such as inclusion, representation, organization, and the desires for consistency and totality, as these are thought and modelled formally, for the questions of political life.'[22] As an analytical device, Agamben's topological approach to the persistence of certain logical-formal articulatory patterns is a crucial

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[22] Paul M. Livingston, *The Politics of Logic: Badiou, Wittgenstein, and the Consequences of Formalism*. Routledge: New York and London, 2012, p.60.

aspect of his investigation into the operative logics of particular modes of socio-historical organisation and transmission, and how these are 'thought and modelled formally'. Topology, as already suggested, is to be understood then primarily as an *analytical tool*, not a hermeneutic (or anti-hermeneutic) device, nor a metaphor for Agamben's mode of philosophical practice. It is, I want to argue, a central component of his method. My focus throughout will thus be on the function of topology within Agamben's methodology, of which he has written at length in recent years. This concentration on method is, I believe, indicative of Agamben's often overlooked propensity for critical evaluation of existing structures of organisation, discursive practices, and the specific formal-logical operations at work in the composition and continuity of hegemonic cultural and political traditions. The aim of Agamben's project, broadly conceived, is to render such traditions 'transparent as a structure that one can describe, analyse, criticize, and change.'[23]

There is a certain irony that the widespread 'success' of a thinker who has consistently sought to problematize the 'merely historiographical theses or reconstructions' (*ST*, 9) of historicism has consisted largely of a debate as to the explanatory force his work offers as an historical account of the origins of contemporary socio-political phenomena. Indeed, the first three instalments of the Homo Sacer series provided a rich source of material for addressing the 'new geographies'[24] produced by the global 'war on terror' that followed the 9/11 attacks, and Agamben's discussion of the state of exception, the camp, bare life, *homo sacer*, and the Muselmann, have received a huge amount of critical attention during the last fifteen years. Perhaps most pertinently, Agamben's analysis of the state of exception provided a valuable historical and structural resource in the face of the immediate and systematic suspension of the law by various state powers under the aegis of the war on terror following the events of 9/11and their geopolitical fallout. The suggestion that the suspension of law, which once characterized an exceptional measure taken by the head of state in order to restore order, has now become the

[23] Eve Geulen, 'The Function of Ambivalence,' in Agamben's Reontologization of Politics,' trans. Roland Végsó, in *A Leftist Ontology: Beyond Relativism and Identity Politics*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, London, 2009, p. 28
[24] Paolo Giaccaria and Claudio Minca, 'Topographies/Topologies of the camp: Auschwitz as Spatial Threshold,' in *Political Geography*, 30 (1), January, 2011.

normal operative paradigm of governance in advanced liberal-democratic states, appeared

startlingly prescient in the years which saw the establishment by the United States Government

of detention centres and 'black sites' for interrogation of suspects across the globe, together

with the steady erosion of the limits and checks placed on state surveillance of the populace. But

I would suggest Agamben has to a certain extent been the victim of his own success, as the

majority of responses to these works – largely critical – have sought to analyse their strengths

and weaknesses on the basis of a model of historiographic reconstruction which Agamben

explicitly rejects. Though Agamben has subsequently stated that he did not in the early volumes

of the Homo Sacer series intend in any way to 'explain modernity by tracing it back to

something like a cause or historical origin' (*ST*, 31), this is nonetheless precisely what his work

has become (in)famous for. Readings which approach the Homo Sacer studies as

historiographical theses or reconstructions ignore the singular treatment given to the historical

sources in the work and, in so doing, presuppose the methodological *problem* that Agamben is

trying to bring into critical view.

Agamben sought to redress some of the misreadings of this approach – undertaken in

'more or less good faith' (*ST,* 9) as he coyly notes – in *The Signature of All Things*, a work

which has nonetheless (notwithstanding some exceptions)[25] done little to alter the critical

consensus which developed in the years following publication of the first three volumes of the

Homo Sacer series and has crystallized around a set of stalled critical assumptions. These mark

Agamben out as at best a latter-day 'post-structuralist' or 'postmodern' thinker, who after some

interesting work on language and aesthetics veered into the realm of political thought with little

success; and at worst, a kind of philosophical aristocrat whose sustained interest in arcane

ontological and theological questions, pursued through a suspect and idiosyncratic historical

method, have little to offer as analyses of contemporary life besides a utopian 'dream of

ultimate redemption' from the malaise of contemporary political reality.[26] The most damning

piece of evidence called on in order to dismiss the critical value of Agamben's work was his use

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[25] Most notable in this regard is Watkin's detailed analysis of Agamben's method in his *Agamben and Indifference*.
[26] Mark Mazower, 'Foucault, Agamben: Theory and the Nazis.' *Boundary*, 2, 35, 2008, p.34

in the early volumes of the Homo Sacer project of a series of historical figures, most

prominently the *homo sacer*, the camp, the Muselmann, and the state of exception. This turn to

historically specific – that is historically *situated* – figures appeared, for many, to be totally

incompatible with the ontological sweep of Agamben's overall account and his apparent desire

to 'metahistoricize' the concept of biopower.[27] What is more, Agamben made a series of bold

claims as to the relation that these historical figures maintained with the present (at its crudest,

this was reduced to the accusation that Agamben was comparing the actions of the US

government in the wake of the 9/11 attacks with those of the Nazi regime).[28]

In the wake of the predominantly negative and dismissive decree placed by the

philosophical-political consensus upon Agamben's ill-advised foray into biopolitics, and

alongside the more rigorous critical re-assessments already mentioned, a handful of studies

approached this still-developing line of research from a series of alternative disciplinary angles

– international relations, critical geography, architectural theory, utopian studies.[29] Most

significantly for the present study, interest began to grow in Agamben's use of topology in the

early instalments of the Homo Sacer studies. On the basis of a more thoroughgoing

investigation of the function of topology within Agamben's analysis of biopolitics, a number of

critical responses provided a more sensitive – and cautiously positive – approach to the

possibilities that Agamben's work introduced for the study of contemporary configurations of

power.[30] At the same time, as a result of the focus on the spatial-topological register, there

began to emerge an alternative and more affirmative appreciation of the apparently abject figure

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[27] Mathew Coleman and Kevin Grove, 'Biopolitics, Biopower, and the Return to Sovereignty'. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Volume 27, 2009, p.489

[28] Responding to one interviewer regarding these accusations Agamben makes his position clear: 'But I spoke rather of the prisoners in Guantánamo, and their situation is legally-speaking actually comparable with those in the Nazi camps. The detainees of Guantanamo do not have the status of Prisoners of War, they have absolutely no legal status. They are subject now only to raw power; they have no legal existence. In the Nazi camps, the Jews had to be first fully "denationalised" and stripped of all the citizenship rights remaining after Nuremberg, after which they were also erased as legal subjects.' Giorgio Agamben, 'Interview with Giorgio Agamben - Life, A Work of Art Without an Author: the State of Exception, the Administration of Disorder, and Private Life', *German Law Review*, 5:5, 2004, p. 612.

[29] See for example Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'The generalised bio-political border? Reconceptualising the limits of sovereign power'. *Review of International Studies*, 35, 2009; Oliver Belcher et al, 'Everywhere and Nowhere: The Exception and the Topological Challenge to Geography'. *Antipode* Vol. 40, No.4, 2008; T.E. Lewis, 'The Architecture of Potentiality: Weak Utopianism and Educational Space in the Work of Giorgio Agamben'. *Utopian Studies* Volume 23, Number 2, 2012; Carlo Salzani, 'Quodlibet: Giorgio Agamben's Anti-Utopia'. *Utopian Studies* Volume 23, Number 1, 2012.

[30] François Debrix, 'Topologies of vulnerability and the proliferation of camp life,' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, volume 33, 2015; Claudio Minca, 'Agamben's Geographies of Modernity'. *Political Geography*. 26 (1), 2007; Giaccaria and Minca, 'Topographies/Topologies of the camp'; Belcher et al, 'Everywhere and Nowhere'.

of bare life and its structural correlate the logic of the ban, which continues to gain more critical interest as Agamben has developed and enriched this affirmative response to biopolitics in the subsequent volumes in the Homo Sacer series. Taking my cue from these studies, and in order to begin to develop the grounds for my claim that there exists an abiding topological orientation informing this project, I will now provide an overview of the key features of topological thinking taken up by Agamben. Having introduced these, I will briefly discuss the 'topological turn' in modern philosophical thinking, and signal Agamben's indebtedness to and departure from this line of thinking.

Topological Thinking

As it is centrally concerned with investigating the role and function of topology in Agamben's work, the following study does not involve a historical or theoretical overview of topological thinking, nor discuss in any great detail the many different concepts and definitions which are a prerequisite for gaining a full understanding of topology from a mathematical-geometrical perspective. Whilst I shall describe some of the central characteristics of topological thinking, and introduce a series of topological figures that appear in Agamben's work, I do not attempt to offer a detailed examination of the nature and function of topology in mathematical theory and practice. My interest in topology here has primarily to do with the way in which it features in Agamben's work, what use he makes of it as an analytical tool, and how approaching Agamben as a topological thinker can help us to better understand the development of his philosophical practice. The following schematic outline covers those aspects of topological thinking that I shall be most directly concerned with here, and is intended to give the reader a clear sense of the main areas of Agamben's work that I will be exploring under the topological rubric, whilst also continuing to unpack the implications for Agamben's historical-philosophical method of his commitment to pursuing a 'topology of the unreal'.

1) In its focus on the formal-logical composition of sets and groups, topology provides a tool for thinking about the nature, possibility, and limits of containment, belonging, and

the logical basis of the relation between an individual element and the group or set of which it forms a part. We can thus view topology as a way of understanding the organising concepts through which we become able to distinguish between what is inside a system, group, or set, and what is outside it. And so, with topology we can ask such questions as, what is the logical form of the relation between an individual element and the general set of which it is said to form a part? To put this in the first-philosophical language introduced above, what is the nature of the relation between the common and proper elements such that they combine to form a set? In the construction of a set, group, or system, how do we distinguish between that which is inside and outside it? From what position does it become possible to make such a distinction? In terminology that moves us closer to Agamben's interest in the topological approach to these questions, we can say quite broadly that topology is primarily concerned with the logical and metalogical inquiry into totalities and their structure.[31]

2) In its focus on the spatial-logical form of the relation between inside and outside, interiority and exteriority, topology is not to be confused with topography. This is a crucial point in my reading of Agamben's topological approach to philosophy. Topography can be understood as the science of 'cartographic reason'; it is the means by which the borders and limits of spatial configurations are established and maintained. As such, it relies on fixity, placement, grounding, and mapping, and is often referred to as a 'static geometry'. Topology, by contrast, is less interested in the maintenance of certain demarcations and boundaries within space than with the structural possibilities and systematic properties that allow for the formation of any kind of space at all. It is in this sense that it can be described as 'metalogical'. And, as will be seen in detail in what follows, topological thinking demonstrates that the logic informing the formation of totalities and their structures is constitutively flawed. As such, thinking topologically means appreciating space – discursive, relational,

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[31] Paul M. Livingston, *The Politics of Logic: Badiou, Wittgenstein, and the Consequences of Formalism*. Routledge: New York and London, 2012, p.20

geographical, and historical – not as 'fixity, placement, or grounding,' which is the approach of topography, but instead as 'a matter of relationality, connectivity, distribution, assemblage, transformation, and supplementation.'[32] As opposed to ensuring the conceptual and material integrity of boundaries, borders, and the logics of containment (with their attendant logics of separation and exclusion), topology views the limits of our conceptual-material mappings as essentially porous, shifting, and always potentially transmutable. Where topography describes static structures and predetermined organising principles, topology, on the contrary, seeks to engage the dynamic and emergent possibilities that continually form and deform our conceptual and material conceptions of spatial organisation. By demonstrating that key methodological strategies in Agamben's work (the paradigm, signatures, philosophical archaeology) can be productively approached as topological figures, the wider claim I develop here is that this dynamic topological perspective, which deeply informs Agamben's thinking, is key to understanding the tension generated in his work between historical specificity and philosophical generality.

3) There are a number of consequences of the topological approach to the construction and limits of spatial-logical configurations outlined above. From the present perspective, the most significant of these is the capacity of topology to trace properties of space that remain constant despite surface transformations. Topological transformations can take place without regard for the size or shape of the object being changed as long as the object retains its continuity. Hence topology is also known as a 'rubber' geometry. Here I approach this 'rubber' capacity of topological thinking from a temporal-historical perspective in my reading of Agamben's historical method. Insofar as Agamben seeks to show that certain formal-logical strategies of organisation can be seen to persist over long periods of time despite certain 'surface transformations' in the specificity of their

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[32] François Debrix, 'Topologies of vulnerability and the proliferation of camp life,' Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, volume 33, 2015 p.444

content, I will suggest that his 'philosophical archaeology' can be understood as topological.

4) A related characteristic of topological thinking, which has equal significance for an understanding of Agamben's historical method, is its interest in places of 'emergent spatialisation'.[33] In the Homo Sacer series Agamben turns to topology in order to address crucial transformations in the functional relation between power and spatialisation in modernity. According to Agamben these concern the question of the material limits and borders of a given territory (a camp, a city, a nation), that is, the functional relation between localization and order that lies at the heart of sovereign power, and the very spatial-logical structures and processes through which the emergence and materialisation of certain formations of power can occur in the first place. In his controversial discussion of the camp, for example, Agamben will focus in detail on the existence of the camp as a distinct 'historical materiality', but will also seek on the basis of this site-specificity to consider the logical and formal structures of possibility within which such an ensemble of power relations can be produced in the first place. For Agamben, then, the question of why political power has chosen to represent itself territorially and topographically forms part of a deeper genealogy of the ontological basis of contemporary power. In considering this aspect of Agamben's 'philosophical topology' we are, once again, confronted by the tension between the empirical and temporal nature of a historical enquiry, and the ahistorical nature of philosophical thought. In his analysis of the historical transmutations of sovereign power, topology becomes a vital critical device for Agamben because it allows him to think about the spaces of *possible emergence*, as well as spaces of *actual emergence*, of power. In direct opposition to topography, which stops short at the delimitation of preformed categories and boundaries, and thus unproblematically reproduces the tight referential bond between localisation and order that grounds sovereign rule, a

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[33] Belcher et al, 'Everywhere and Nowhere: The Exception and the Topological Challenge to Geography'. Antipode Vol. 40, No.4, 2008, p.499

topological approach to the relation between power and territory can analyse the logical form of this relation itself, and furthermore on this basis, can speculate as to the conditions that make possible the emergence of a dynamic set of power relations, a series of contingent and singular strategies which are always in the making, so to speak, and are not the product of pre-formed categories and boundaries – conceptual and/or material. Indeed, as one critic has suggested, Agamben's topologies operate at the 'edge of materiality'[34] and, as will be seen, seek to analyse the ways in which power continues to function when faced with the *breakdown* of the referential link between localisation and order that signals the decline and subsequent transmutations of sovereign models of governing. I shall thus argue that topology forms a central component of Agamben's approach to the interrelation between sovereign and governmental modalities of governance.

5) Finally, I will be interested in what follows in considering the significance of topology as a guiding influence upon Agamben's critical engagement with the metaphysical tradition. The ability to map discrete locations or particular objects involves a set of criteriological assumptions about territorial, cartographical, and representational arrangements whose epistemic significance exceeds the geometrical purview of topography as a mathematical and geographical discipline. Gunnar Olsson has suggested that at the philosophical heart of this logic lies the 'dual question of scale and orientation.' Simply put, what this involves is the spatial determination of individual beings through their relations with the world in which they exist: 'the position of being,' Olsson concludes, 'is consequently nothing but a place in the mindscape of reason, a privileged standpoint in the mapping of human thought-and-action.'[35] This is the classical Cartesian move: to posit the external, material world as straightforwardly present, but simultaneously subordinate to the immaterial (i.e. abstract) cognitions by which we reflect upon it. In keeping with the animating tension between historical

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[34] Debrix, 'Topologies of Vulnerability', p.446
[35] Gunnar Olsson, 'Towards a Critique of Cartographic Reason'. *Ethics, Place and Environment*, Vol. I, No. 2, 1998, p.148

materialities and philosophical concepts that drives his work, and his longstanding

rejection of all insubstantial foundationalisms, Agamben wants to address the nature (or

the forgetting of the nature) of this philosophically sanctioned and 'privileged

standpoint': where is Being located in the 'mindscape of reason,' what is its structure,

such that it has the privileged status of what Olsson calls the 'taken-for-granted'.[36]

Claudio Minca and Paolo Giaccaria take up certain Agambenian themes to describe

some of the problems that emerge when the privileged status of the foundational

element is taken for granted, that is, *presupposed*, in the processes of locating being:

If we conflate, as we have for long, these metaphors [of interior and exterior] with geographical

(i.e. geometrical) space, forgetting that they are nothing other than an 'open' description of the

possible, we risk creating a veritable monster, the cartographer sovereign (or the sovereign

cartographer) who, inhabiting a space of indistinction, situates himself neither inside nor outside

the metaphor but, rather, excludes himself from the world it describes in order to decide, time

after time, the principle of inclusive exclusion.[37]

As will be seen, it is both the abstract-conceptual and historical-geographical space of

exclusion – the 'privileged standpoint' described above – that Agamben seeks

relentlessly to deconstruct. What we can describe as the topographical impulse to

provide the spatio-temporal coordinates within which discrete subjects encounter

equally discrete objects, goes to the core of the historical-philosophical tradition of the

west. Such mappings answer a need for referentiality: to demonstrate not only that

philosophical concepts can, paradoxically, derive their transcendence precisely from

their relation to the material world, but also that geopolitical power, force, or violence

need to have a physical or material anchor. If the metonymic adversary for Agamben in

his critique of the metaphysical tradition is the Cartesian subject, product of the

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[36] Ibid, p.150
[37] Paolo Giaccaria and Claudio Minca, 'Topographies/Topologies of the camp: Auschwitz as Spatial Threshold,' in Political Geography, 30 (1), January, 2011

philosophical 'cartographer sovereign' *par excellence*, then the target of Agamben's investigation into the *politicisation* of this metaphysical-topography is Carl Schmitt. For Schmitt, the stability of social formations depends on the absolute inviolability of the privileged space of the exclusion, from which position the sovereign gives itself the right to determine who or what goes where, who or what can be included and excluded through the construction of 'spatial geographies', a 'series of cognate demarcations' such as normal–abnormal, good–evil, safe–dangerous, here–there, inside–outside, friend–enemy, citizen–foreigner.'[38] It is in this sense that the concept of '*Ortung*', the 'fundamental localisation' (*HS*, 196), becomes central to the Schmittian thesis on power and its functioning. For Schmitt, then, the location of the sovereign – the nexus between location and power, territory and order – relies on the Cartesian organisation of space, and can occupy the space of exclusion because there is presumed to be a 'container' within which the 'objects' (or better subjects) of its power can be ordered and contained. If the philosophical-political 'cognate demarcations' of Descartes and Schmitt can be described as essentially *topographical*, my aim here is to make the case for approaching Agamben's historical-philosophical project as profoundly topological in its inspiration and methodology.

To recap then: topology is a means of analysing the spatial-logical composition of sets, groups, and more generally of totalities and their structures. It also, by extension, provides a tool for critically analysing the formal-logical relations that allow for the construction of an 'inside' and an 'outside'. Further, by concentrating on properties of space that remain constant despite surface transformations, topology seeks to understand the boundaries and limits of spatial configurations. A topological approach to space is less interested in the maintenance of certain demarcations and boundaries within space than in the structural possibilities and systematic properties that allow for the formation of any kind of space at all. Topology has a certain,

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[38] Debrix, 'Topologies of vulnerability', p.448

singular versatility in that it can involve the configuration of any kind of space – geographical space, signifying space, conceptual, material, and historical space. We will see that Agamben uses topology to map a series of distinct but ultimately – that is, structurally and topologically – related spaces: the space of language and of the subject, the space of community, political modes of spatialisation, and the 'cognate demarcations' of historical and philosophical inquiry themselves. More abstractly, we will see, Agamben's topologies also seek to explore the space of lack and of privation, the space of singularity, of interiority and that which is outside; they comprise a study of the space of thresholds, limits, and borders; finally, Agamben's *topoi* are the spaces of possibility; spheres of potentiality. Michel Serres aptly describes the spatial possibilities topology introduces as follows: 'What is closed? What is open? What is a connective path? What is a tear? What are the continuous and discontinuous? What is a threshold, a limit?'.[39] In seeking to delineate the 'limits of possible spatial relationships'[40] topology also extends and warps those boundaries beyond their traditional conceptualisation: 'Topology, in short, extends the possibilities of mathematics far beyond its original Euclidean restrictions by articulating other spaces.'[41] Topology thus poses in a radical way the question of *containment* – of what is contained, what contains, and what escapes containment. Therefore, the abstract and conceptual nature of topology imagines space as being supple and malleable rather than rigid and fixed, and in this way Manuel DeLanda's remark is particularly acute: topology, he suggests, is about 'the structure of the space of possibilities.'[42] In pursuing Agamben's topologies it is important to remember that the limits of language, the suppleness of being, the thresholds of subjectivity, community, and politics, their capacities for containment and porosity, are all treated not as fixed, totalising and closed systems, but above all as spaces of potential transformation.

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[39] Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*. John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1982, p.44
[40] François Dosse, *History of Structuralism, Volume 2: The Sign Sets, 1967-Present*, trans. Deborah Glassman. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1997, p.437
[41] Annemarie Mol and John Law, 'Regions, Networks and Fluids: Anaemia and Social Topology.' Social Studies of Science, Volume 24, No. 4 (November 1994), p.643
[42] Manuel DeLanda, 'Intensive and Topological Thinking,' 2011.

The Topological Turn

Agamben, of course, is not the first philosopher to take an interest in topology. In his study *Topologies of the Flesh*, Stephen Rosen describes the emergence of what we might term the 'first-wave' of topological thinking in the early nineteenth-century. Pushing at the limits of Euclidean assumptions about space, in its earliest manifestations which saw the emergence of 'projective' systems of geometry, the emphasis was on topology as a tool of mathematical abstraction, capable of gaining complete objective knowledge of the world by means of abstract reasoning. In the early twentieth-century, however, this 'mainstream' model of topological thinking was outstripped by models which sought to respond to the profound and far-reaching twentieth-century formal-logical investigations of modern physics, analytical, and mathematical philosophy. These are what Livingston describes as the 'logical and metalogical enquiries into totalities and their structures.' As Rosen suggests, 'uncertainty was burgeoning in a number of scientific disciplines,' and the belief in the attainability of 'completeness and consistency' informing the rage to abstraction underwent a profound crisis in the first half of the twentieth-century.[43] This is not the place to trace the broader intellectual and cultural context within which topological thinking develops, but what is of interest here is Rosen's description of topology as a 'modernist discipline par excellence.'[44] Where Rosen elides modernism in a quite cut-and-dried way with the 'ambitious and totalizing' spirit of science, I think we get a more nuanced version of the relation between modernism and abstraction – and by extension of the appeal of topology for philosophical thinking – from Fredric Jameson's remarks on the emergence of a certain 'perspective of form on itself' that marks modernism:

> [I]n isolating the pure forms of their representations and substituting the play of those formal categories for an older or now traditional representation of content…we have begun to pass over into the perspective of form on itself, of a formalistic production of form; and also into the historical moment designated as modernism, in which the ideological forms of an older content

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[43] Steven M. Rosen, *Topologies of the Flesh*: *A Multidimensional Exploration of the Lifeworld*. Ohio University Press: Athens, 2006, p.4-5
[44] Rosen, *Topologies*, p.23

are somehow neutralized and bracketed by an abstraction that seeks to retain only from them their purely formal structures, now deployed in a kind of autonomy.[45]

If, as Rosen suggests, topology is a 'modernist discipline par excellence,'[46] then as Jameson's remarks suggest what this 'moment' signals is not so much a determination to order and control the external world through abstract analysis, but perhaps signals above all an intense interest in and exploration of the limits of formal, logical, and spatial configurations, what Livingston has described as 'the formalization of formalism itself, the reflection of formal-symbolic structures within themselves, and thus of the possibility of these structures coming to comprehend and articulate their own internal constitution and limits.'[47] This interest in formal abstraction is, I would suggest, the guiding impetus behind the 'topological turn' in modern philosophical thought. Thinkers as diverse as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Carl Schmitt, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Serres, Jacques Lacan, and Alain Badiou, have all made use of a topological perspective. Though diverse in the extreme, I would suggest that, faced with the uncertainty of all previously totalising and coherent logical systems, together with the increasing instrumentalisation of human life which marks the 'Crisis of European sciences',[48] a broadly shared aim of these thinkers is to test the conceptual and material constitutions of the boundaries, limits, and logical structure of all totalising systems. Jeff Malpas provides the following broad description of the 'idea' of topology as it features in modern philosophical thought:

The idea of topology suggests that it is a mistake to look for simple, reductive accounts..., the point is always to look to a larger field of relations in which the matter at issue can be placed. This means…that it will seldom be possible to arrive at simple, univocal definitions. Significant terms will generally connect

[45] Fredric Jameson, *The Modernist Papers*. Verso: London, 2007, p. xvii
[46] Rosen, *Topologies*, p.23
[47] Livingston, *Politics of Logic*, p.7
[48] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, 1970.

up with other terms in multiple ways and carry a range of connotations and meanings that cannot always be easily or precisely separated out.[49]

In his attempt to think 'topological space as a model of being' which would be directly opposed to the 'positive…network of straight lines' that defines Euclidian perspective, Merleau-Ponty sought to re-conceive the relations between the body and its environment according to a topological space that was 'a milieu in which are circumscribed relations of proximity, envelopment.'[50] Similarly, as will be seen, in Heidegger's attempt to rethink the place of being a topological approach to the embodied subject involves opening up the previously closed surfaces of the subject, radically altering its 'situatedness' within its environment. As Malpas puts it, 'to talk of situation…introduces topological, that is place-related, considerations.'[51] As we have seen, the philosophical antagonist in re-thinking the situatedness of the subject in terms of the topological porosity of its inter-worldly relations is the 'disembodied', 'smoothly functioning mindlessness'[52] of the Cartesian organisation of space. In a different vein (but certainly building on the rejection of the philosophically closed surface of the subject), Foucault has recourse to topology when entering that 'larger field of relations in which the matter at issue can be placed'. As Stephen Collier has argued, in his studies on the emergence of biopower, Foucault turns to topology to trace 'patterns of interrelationship among techniques, forms of knowledge-power, and institutions' across historical epochs. As I shall come to discuss, whilst analysing particular historical cases, and paying close attention to what is singular about them, Foucault takes up the 'rubber' analytical tool to give himself 'leverage in describing forms of correlation that can be observed across many cases...[t]his is the register of topology.'[53]

    If the critical current briefly outlined here marks a decisive rejection of the 'consistency and completeness' pursued by scientific reason, which Agamben certainly shares, such thinking

[49] Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World*. MIT Press: Massachusetts and London, 2006, p.35
[50] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, 1968, p.210
[51] Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology*, p.34
[52] Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*, p.126
[53] Stephen J. Collier, 'Interview with Stephen J. Collier on Foucault, Assemblages and Topology'. Available online at: http://www.theoryculturesociety.org/interview-with-stephen-j-collier-on-foucault-assemblages-and-topology/

is still haunted by a particular variant of the emancipatory faith of modernism: to separate a form of 'pre- or non-formalized' life and bestow upon it a privileged position of critique:

[L]amenting the progressive instrumentalization and technicization of reason in the twentieth century [such critiques] undertake…to reject "instrumental rationality" altogether. This yields an invocation of supposedly distinctive organic or "non-instrumentalized" conceptions of reason (Adorno, Horkheimer) or, in a more extreme variant, the neo-Romantic invocation of an explicitly *ir*rational nostalgic lifeworld or 'ground' (Heidegger).[54]

This double-pronged critique of the rationalization of life and the internal constitution and limits of formal-symbolic structures comprises a crucial backdrop against which Agamben's project for a 'philosophical topology' develops. What I will be arguing here is that an interest in topology can be seen to run through and intersect these different areas of thinking, and that Agamben's sustained critical engagement with the metaphysical tradition, together with his affirmative practice of recuperative negation, can be understood as working in direct opposition to the tendency of modern and postmodern critiques of instrumental reason to secure for criticism an autonomous, privileged standpoint.

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The first chapter of the thesis provides a broad survey of Agamben's references to topology, and isolates a set of critical and conceptual criteria that emerge from the various deployments of topological figures across Agamben's body of work. I suggest that the topological in Agamben provides a medium within which we can better understand the tension animating Agamben's work, between philosophical concept and historical analysis, between social history and formal analysis. Situating Agamben's references to topology within the context of his wider philosophical project, the chapter provides the theoretical frame within which I shall develop my approach to the more affirmative dimension they seek to open for critical thought.

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[54] Livingston, *The Politics of Logic*, p.283

Though there has been no connection made between topology and Agamben's use of the paradigm, in the second chapter I argue that such an approach provides an original perspective on Agamben's methodology. I suggest that Agamben's use of topology is central to his approach to the concept of the paradigm, and develop a reading of his reception of Foucault's own use of the figure on this basis. Exploring Agamben's methodology further from this topological perspective, I consider his use of 'signatures' and 'archaeology' as critical tools through consideration of his approach to historical and textual analysis as a distinct form of 'philosophical presentation'. Demonstrating that the attempt to locate the structural origins of historical knowledge through a form of 'semantic polarisation' is conceived by Agamben as early as the 1970's, I argue that a re-consideration of the philological imperative informing his thinking offers us a more versatile and theoretically productive thinker than the either/or model of philosopher or political theorist propounded by many of his critics.

In the third chapter I focus in more detail on perhaps the best known of the paradigmatic figures in Agamben's work: *homo sacer*. Concentrating on the topological relation the *homo sacer* maintains with the figure of the sovereign, I develop a reading of the structural analogy between the two which seeks to counter the common reception of the *homo sacer* as simply an abject and impotent figure. This discussion will augment my claims for a topological re-assessment of Agamben's paradigmatic method in the previous chapter, and will open the way to a reconsideration of the concept of bare life. Working against the mistaken (and prevalent) elision of *homo sacer* and bare life, I suggest there exists a crucial differentiation between the two figures. On this basis, I shall bring into focus the affirmative potential of bare life as a cipher for political-philosophical imperatives to *locate life*. I suggest that the figure cannot be seen as correlative to *homo sacer* nor (an equally prevalent misconception) to *zoē*, but rather functions as an articulatory nexus within which a determinate relation between life and form takes place. Arguing that the figure of bare life serves above all to expose the presupposition of a 'biological substrate' of life which underwrites the philosophical matrices of biopolitics, I move on to re-consider Agamben's reception of Foucault's hypothesis on the emergence of biopower in light of this discussion. Here I suggest that Agamben departs from Foucault's

account in considering the topological *interrelation* of sovereignty and biopolitics which marks the emergence of governmentality as the place of a transformation in the articulatory structure of power, and move to consider the possibility that there might in fact be a topological affinity between Foucault and Agamben which has thus far been overlooked.

The final chapter seeks to situate Agamben's interest in topology within the broader context of two theoretical developments of the twentieth century: the turn to the sphere of the lifeworld and the meta-logical analyses of structuralism. Arguing that the interrelated critiques of the rationalization of life and the internal constitution and limits of formal-symbolic structures comprise a crucial backdrop against which Agamben's project for a 'philosophical topology' develops, I provide a broad introduction to the central problematics informing the critical turn to the sphere of the lifeworld and the inquiries of structuralism. Demonstrating that each of these areas of thinking had recourse to the register of topology as a means of orienting itself in uncharted conceptual territories, I then focus on Agamben's reception of these lines of critical analyses. Considering Agamben's critical encounter with theories of the lifeworld and their formative role in his approach to the philosophical substrate of biopower, I shall look at the broader influence of Heidegger's own response to the philosophies of life and subsequent attempt to develop a topology of being. After demonstrating the centrality of topology for the structuralist 'discovery' of the order of the symbolic, I move on to consider Agamben's reformulation of three key concepts through which he develops his response to structuralism: Claude-Levi Strauss's work on the function of the 'floating signifier'; Emile Benveniste's theory of the 'middle voice'; and Jacques Lacan's concept of the 'extimate' figure. In conclusion, I review the trajectory of the thesis and consider its implications for an understanding of Agamben's affirmative theory of form-of-life.

Chapter One

Philosophical Topology: An Introduction to Agamben's Topoi

Topological Figures: An Overview

Agamben refers to topology on seven separate occasions, in seven different works: *Stanzas* (1977), *Language and Death* (1980), *The Coming Community* (1990), *Homo Sacer I* (1995), *Means Without End* (1996), *State of Exception* (2003), and *The Use of Bodies* (2014).[55] As is clear from the foregoing list Agamben's interest in topology spans the length of his writing career. Though the references vary in detail and significance we can trace throughout his work a recurrent interest in introducing a topological perspective. In what follows I will refrain from extended commentary on the passages and will simply provide a brief description of each and its place within the text in which it appears. Having introduced the textual evidence, I will discuss the implications of Agamben's use of topological figures for his wider philosophical project.

Agamben's first reference to topology occurs in *Stanzas*, his second work published in 1977, in the following passage from the introduction:

Only a philosophical topology, analogous to what in mathematics is defined as an *analysis situs* (analysis of site) in opposition to *analysis magnitudinis* (analysis of magnitude) would be adequate to the *topos outopos*, the placeless place whose Borromean knot we have tried to draw in these pages. Thus topological exploration is constantly oriented in the light of utopia. (S, xviii-xix)[56]

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[55] Dates provided are for the original Italian publications.

[56] In calling for an *analysis situs* Agamben may be referring to the famous 1895 paper of the same name by the mathematician Henri Poincaré, widely regarded as the foundational text of algebraic topology. Or again, given his philosophical inclinations he perhaps has in mind Leibniz's use of the phrase to describe his interest in the relational structures among groups of objects. In his attempt to describe these relations Leibniz develops a formal language for the understanding of space in terms of situation, an approach he summarises in a letter to Samuel Clarke in 1716. In describing an abstract space within which an 'order of situations' and their relational structures can be formulated Leibniz provides the theoretical apparatus for the later development of general topology: 'I don't say that space is an order or situation, but an order of situations, or an order according to which situations are disposed, and that abstract space is that order of situations when they are conceived as being *possible*' (my italics). Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, trans. Leroy E. Loemker. Kluwer Academic Publishers: Dordrecht, 1989, pp. 675-721; Henri

Here we are clearly dealing with a conception of space which has left the restrictions of Euclidian geometry far behind. And in Agamben's turning to a 'placeless place' and its variant, a 'topology of the unreal' (*S*, xviii), we are surely not dealing with a fixed and rigid delimitation of space but rather with something more structurally diverse and changeable. The Borromean knot is the figure Agamben chooses to illustrate the spatial dimensions he intends to explore through his 'philosophical topology'. The knot consists of a series of three rings linked in such a way that if one is unlinked they all become separated. To put it another way, they are interwoven so that no two are connected and only in the arrangement of the three does the consistency between them occur. If one of the rings is cut, all three rings will fall apart. Named after the Italian Renaissance family who bore the image on their coat of arms the Borromean knot, 'rings,' or 'links' as they are variously called, are the most basic example of what in the topological study of knot theory is known as a Brunnian Link. To simplify, this is any configuration of rings in which if one ring is cut the rest of the rings in the series will fall apart.[57] The allusion to the knot in *Stanzas* refers implicitly to Lacan's use of the figure in his attempt to develop Freud's topographical approach to the human psyche. Agamben's remarks are somewhat obscure in this first passage, and they remain so in the one that follows it:

Each of these essays [in *Stanzas*] thus traces, within its hermeneutic circle, a topology of joy (*gaudium*), through which the human spirit responds to the impossible task of appropriating what must in every case remain inappropriable. (*S*, xvii)

Poincaré, *Papers on Topology: Analysis Situs and Its Five Supplements*, trans. John Stillwell. American Board of Mathematics, 2010.

[57] Charles Livingston, *Knot Theory*. Mathematical Association of America: Washington, 1993, pp.9-10. [57] I would suggest the Borromean knot can be productively 'read' as an image of potentiality as Agamben understands the concept. The knot, we might say, is nothing other than tension between its own potential to be and to not be, that is, between its actualization and its potential for actualization: it would appear at first glance that in the knot the potential for three separate rings to produce a knot has been actualized, but the significance of the Borromean knot is that in its three-dimensionality and the porosity of its boundaries and intersections, in a certain sense the potentiality of the rings remains visible, but only as that which is inapparent in the knot. In this sense the rings carry over or 'preserve' their potentiality in the formation and 'actualization' of the knot. If the complex interrelation between the rings produces a knot that exposes an irresolvable dialectical relation between potentiality and actuality (and between the individual parts and the whole) then the very tension generated by the game of reciprocal negation-affirmation it plays appears to open the sphere of a different form of relation between possibility and actuality. We can perhaps describe the Borromean knot in paradigmatic terms as a figure which displaces the dichotomies of logic and establishes 'a broader problematic context that [it] both constitutes and makes intelligible.' (*ST*, 17)

There is some work to be done before we can draw out what Agamben might be getting at in his referring in these remarks to a hermeneutic practice which proceeds under the sign of a '*topos outopos*,' and the appropriation of what must remain 'inappropriable,' not to mention what role the strange construction of the Borromean knot might play in this proposed 'philosophical topology'. The topologies that Agamben's remarkable early work moves through include medieval theories of *acedia* (sloth), the Freudian theory of melancholy and fetishism, the relation between the work of art and the commodity, the poetic theories of the Provençal poets, and the history of western reflection on the process of signification from Plato to Derrida. All of these *topoi* revolve around a single and for now perhaps somewhat abstract question: what does it mean to maintain a relation to something that is lacking, to be in relation to a privation? As well as the more familiar use of the term in poetics it should be noted that 'stanza' in Italian is literally translated as 'room'. The subject of *Stanzas* is the place of this lack and the experience of that which cannot be appropriated. According to Agamben, this lack is inaugurated in the foundational project of western ontology, which introduces a 'fracture' and a constitutive relation to privation in the place of the human being.

In *Language and Death*, published five years after *Stanzas*, Agamben's interest in a topology of privation remains strong. In this text, which develops a number of lines of inquiry introduced in *Stanzas*, the topological and spatial orientation is put to work in a detailed reading of the theories of indication in the work of Hegel and Heidegger. *Language and Death* is subtitled 'The Place of Negativity,' and the guiding emphasis throughout on spatial and topological considerations is formulated by Agamben in a disarmingly straightforward question: 'Where is language located'? (*LD*, 31) The answer Agamben develops in the course of his study pushes us to the threshold of a certain understanding of the surfaces of language and its capacity for the containment of the subject; the *topos* explored in *Language and Death* 'is situated,' Agamben writes, 'in a certain sense, at the limits of the possibility of language.' (*LD*, 20) Here Agamben directs our attention to the sphere of the pronoun, a dimension of discourse which provides indices for the most straightforward and presupposed aspect of language: the pronoun indicates nothing other than the taking-place of language itself, that is, the very fact *that there is*

language. And it is also of course the means by which a subject takes its place within language. What Agamben's analysis reveals is that the structure of presupposition through which the logic of signification operates consigns the event of language and the subject it generates to a *negative relation* to that which is other than itself, namely the non-linguistic. If Agamben is considering the space of the possibility of language itself – and by extension the status of the subject – then this possibility for existence is one marked by negativity and privation. In order to provide examples of an alternative experience of language at this limit-point Agamben has recourse to another topological figure, this time derived not from the field of mathematics but rather the ancient theory of rhetoric: 'In ancient rhetoric, the term *topics* referred to a technique of the originary advents of language; that is, a technique of the "places" (*topoi*) from which human discourse arises and begins.' (*LD*, 66-67) This 'technique' allowed for entry into the space which 'sets off the very advent of discourse and assures the possibility of "finding" language, of reaching its place.' As such, '*topics* conceived of its duty as the construction of a place for language'. (*LD*, 67)[58] Agamben turns once more to the Provençal poets and focuses on their 'radical' interpretation of this tradition through which they wished not simply to recall with rhetorical prowess the arguments 'already in use by a *topos*' but rather 'wish to experience the *topos* of all *topoi*, that is, the very taking place of language'. These poets sought for nothing less, Agamben suggests, than to '*live the topos itself.*' (*LD*, 68)

Again, we are confronted with more questions than answers after this brief survey: What does it mean to '*live the topos itself*'? And how does such a 'radical' reinterpretation of the ancient theory of *topics* bear on the tradition of metaphysics which 'locates' the taking-place of language as the 'place of negativity'? From this brief glance at *Language and Death* it is clear that Agamben's approach to the experience of language – at this time the central problem of his thought – is topological from the outset. If it is the total system of language itself whose

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[58] Agamben returns to the rhetorical spatialisation of language in his discussion of Stoic rhetoricians' use of the term '*oikonomia*'. This forms part of the extended archaeology of the 'analogical extension' of the semantic sphere of the term in *The Kingdom and the Glory*. The emphasis that runs throughout this text on notions of ordering and arrangement in the spatialisation of power through government is not addressed directly in this study, but certainly pursues the same line of topological analysis elaborated here.

limits are problematized in this study, we will see that this same gesture of making-porous a supposedly self-contained, closed totality is a recurrent one in the Agambenian topologies.

The Provençal poets appear once again in the next reference to topology we come across in Agamben's work, in *The Coming Community* published in 1990. Here again Agamben is exploring the implications of a 'taking-place' but the accent is no longer (at least not explicitly in these passages) solely on language but more on the place of the individual subject itself. (As will be seen, for Agamben the place of language and the place of the individual are intimately related; the individual being is always the individual *speaking being*.) In *The Coming Community* Agamben's focus is on the question (to put it somewhat clumsily) of the individuality of the individual as traditionally conceived on the basis of the relation between the universal and the particular.[59] Here the structure of presupposition determinative of the negative place of language is taken to task at its ontological roots. Agamben moves, as ever, through a series of theoretical fields and conceptual figurers in exploring this old philosophical theme. It is also in this text that his interest in a number of theological paradigms begins to emerge, and in his description of a Haggadah of the Talmud a topological perspective is introduced:

According to the Talmud, two places are reserved for each person, one in Eden and the other in Gehenna. The just person, after being found innocent, receives a place in Eden plus that of a neighbour who was damned. The unjust person, after being judged guilty, receives a place in hell plus that of a neighbour who was saved. Thus the Bible says of the just, 'In their land they receive double,' and of the unjust, 'Destroy them with a double destruction.'

Agamben glosses the passage thus:

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[59] Agamben's book is a response to the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot on the same subject. Both Nancy and Blanchot are responding in turn, of course, to the work of Georges Bataille. For a brief but suggestive discussion of Agamben's work in relation to this constellation of thinkers see Stefano Franchi, 'Passive Politics,' in *Contretemps* 5, December 2004, pp.30-41. See also, Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community,* trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland, and Simona Sawhney. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1991; and Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris. Station Hill Press: New York, 2000.

In the topology of this Haggadah of the Talmud, the essential element is not so much the cartographic distinction between Eden and Gehenna, but rather the adjacent place that each person inevitably receives. At the point when one reaches one's final state and fulfills one's own destiny, one finds oneself for that very reason in the place of the neighbor. What is most proper to every creature is thus its substitutability, its being in any case in the place of the other. (*CC*, 23)

Here Agamben draws on the difference between a determinative cartographic or topographical mapping of place, and a topological approach which instead of providing fixed configurations of the limits or borders of a certain region (geographical and spiritual realms are formed according to the same cartographic principles it would seem) seeks instead to account for an undecidability as to where one sphere ends and another begins, and as such allows for a certain transformation (or 'substitutability') of position for the subject in its worldly relations. According to Agamben the topology of the Haggadah disrupts the surface of the 'fiction of the unsubstitutability of the individual' and opens to an 'empty' and 'unrepresentable' place in which the individual exists as an 'unconditional substitutability, without either representation or possible description.' (*CC*, 25) Agamben appears to want to conceive of the individual subject in topological terms here – in their deformations of space and by virtue of their problematic surfaces, topological figures confront the supposedly totalising, bivalent logic of mathematics and geometry with a series of spaces which, precisely, defy both representation and description. In its resistance to determinate representation but also through a certain capacity for the deformation and transformation of its location, surface, and limits, this topological deformation of the subject opens, Agamben suggests, to an ethical dimension: 'to be in the place of the other'. What better way to describe the topology of the individual that is mapped out here than as a being which *exceeds its own containment*? In terms of the topological structure that is revealed here we see the complication and blurring to the point of indistinction of two apparently opposed terms or figures (subject-other, individual-universal) which appears to produce in some sense another, empty place between the two; what might be described as the place of an intimate estrangement. And it is to the Provençal *topics* that Agamben turns to

provide illustration of such an 'empty place in which each [individual] can *move freely*' (my emphasis): 'The Provençal poets…make ease a *terminus technicus* in their poetics, designating the very place of love…as the experience of taking-place.' (*CC*, 25) So the Agambenian topological space becomes ever more complex: into the placeless, negative place of language and on the seemingly porous surface of the subject, at the limit of a certain logic of structure, spatial configuration and containment, comes the experience of desire; a topology of joy and of love is promised as the proper place of this 'coming' community of speaking beings.

No longer seeking to map a topology of joy, in *Homo Sacer I* Agamben is surveying an altogether bleaker *topos*: the operations of sovereign power. Early in the work Agamben turns to the following figures in order to describe the paradoxical logic of the exception upon which this power operates:

The state of nature and the state of exception are nothing but two sides of a single topological process in which what was presupposed as external (the state of nature) now reappears, as in a Möbius strip or a Leyden jar, in the inside (as state of exception), and the sovereign power is the very impossibility of distinguishing between outside and inside, nature and exception, *physis* and *nomos*. (*HS*, 37)

The Möbius Strip (another figure of interest for Lacan) is a three-dimensional shape formed by twisting a strip of paper 180º and then binding the edges to form a one-sided surface. If we consider the 'inside' of a piece of paper and its 'outside' as the most obvious instance of an oppositional relation (an 'orientable' surface in mathematical terms) in the configuration of the Möbius strip the two sides are not, as the presuppositions of bivalent logic would insist, absolutely distinct but are rather in a kind of constant oscillation or transversal between the inner and outer surface to the point of their indistinction (creating a 'non-orientable' surface). So again Agamben is interested in the limit-point of a relation between two apparently opposed 'dimensions'; specifically, the relation of a political community to that which is outside its borders; the apparently oppositional relation between the interior of the political space (*nomos*,

exception) and the non-political *topos* (nature, *physis*) that constitutes its exterior or 'outside'.[60]

This state of indistinction enters the field of legibility for analysis once the state of exception, in

which the legal order is suspended and the conditions for the applicability of the law 'float free'

of their foundation in a normative conception of legal authority, becomes the operative

paradigm of governmental authority. When this state of exceptional circumstances becomes the

'norm,' the formal-logical operations – the 'complex topological operations' (*HS*, 14) – of the

juridical order become intelligible in a distinct way. Agamben's focus in his studies of the

deformations of the juridical order in the state of exception focuses on one specific dimension of

sovereign power, the relation that the state and the legal order entertain with the biological life

of human beings. Most importantly for Agamben's argument in *Homo Sacer I* it is bare life, a

form of life produced by this increasing indistinction in modernity between the classical

separation of biological (*zoë*) and politically qualified (*bios*) life, that in its 'inclusive exclusion'

in the *polis* (*HS*, 12) passes incessantly through the topological indetermination of interior and

exterior. 'It is,' Agamben suggests, 'precisely this topological zone of indistinction…that we

must try to fix under our gaze.' (*HS*, 37) The Möbius strip is a significant figure for Agamben in

this context because its infinite surface disrupts and complicates the 'dichotomies of logic' (*ST*,

20) underwriting the relations of interior-exterior, *nomos* and *physis*. On the 'single surface' of

the strip the two sides' relation is maintained we might say (as with the rings in the Borromean

knot) through their non-relation, and, as will be seen, Agamben finds a similar form of non-

relational relation at work in the 'exceptional' production of bare life through the logic of the

ban. The ontological problem of the universal-particular relation whose topology was explored

in *The Coming Community* thus takes on a new political valence: here the taking-place of

politics, the 'political space' itself and the life of the human it is said to define and contain is

understood as the site of an undecidability between interior and exterior, between a universal

law and the individual life it subsumes.

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[60] We can perhaps recall at this point Lacan's definition of the torus and related spaces such as the Möbius strip as surfaces in which the 'peripheral exteriority and its central exteriority constitute only one single surface.' Jacques Lacan, 'The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian unconscious,' in Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Routledge: New York, 2001, p. 315

At the same time, there is a more concrete problematic that emerges 'on the ground' so to speak, and this concerns both the question of the material limits and borders of a given territory (a camp, a city, a nation), but also and more generally the very structure and processes through which something like the materialisation or actualisation of certain formations of power can occur in the first place. Against the philosophical and juridical-political tradition which understands power (and indeed the nature of any 'capacity') only in terms of its actualisation, that is, in terms of a determinate actualisation of a given set of possibilities or potentialities, Agamben situates his analysis within this process itself in order to ask: what is power, such that it always involves this process or passage from potential to act, which presupposes the priority of an actuality that surpasses and negates potentiality in the process of its own realisation? In his controversial discussion of the camp, for example, Agamben will focus in detail on the material reality of the camp as a distinct (and 'extreme') spatio-temporal actuality, but will seek on the basis of this site-specificity to consider the logical and formal *structures of possibility* within which such an ensemble of power relations can be produced in the first place. The (still pertinent) question of why political power has chosen to represent itself territorially and topographically thus forms part of a deeper genealogy of the ontological basis of contemporary power. When Agamben suggests that 'as the absolute space of exception, the camp is topologically different from a simple space of confinement,' (*HS*, 28) he points to a fundamental transformation in the relation between life and territory which can, he will argue, be grasped and analysed in terms of the dialectic between potency and act that underwrites the effective relation between the idea of power and the forms of its actualisation. We can see already that in arguing for a conception of political space as a 'topological zone of indistinction' Agamben will question the processes of materialisation of a series of abstract conceptions of life, community, territory, and political representation, in order to suggest that the mutational parameters and capacities of power have undergone a decisive transformation in modernity, one whose conditions of possibility have in fact long been a visible secret.

The other figure referred to by Agamben in this passage is the Leyden jar (precursor to the electrostatic condenser or capacitor). Though this is not a device directly related to or

studied within topology I would follow Peter Fenves's intuition and suggest that in turning to this figure Agamben has in mind the related figure of the Klein bottle.[61] First constructed by Felix Klein during his inquiries into Bernhard Riemann's theory of algebraic functions, the Klein bottle can be made by superimposing one onto another two Möbius strips which have been twisted in opposing directions (one left-oriented, the other right-oriented). Alternatively, one can imagine passing a torus in a looping action back through itself. Though the bottle shares with the Möbius strip the same one-sidedness it in fact introduces another dimension, which causes fundamental problems from a certain philosophical and mathematical perspective with which we should by now be becoming more familiar. According to this perspective it is not possible to actually produce a model of the Klein bottle in physical space without tearing its surfaces. Perhaps most interestingly from the perspective of the present line of inquiry is the fact that in three-dimensional space as it is traditionally conceived no object can penetrate itself without cutting a hole in its surface, as such cutting or tearing renders it 'topologically imperfect'. The bottle can only exist virtually, that is to say as a possibility or *potentiality*. Not only do we have here a figure which poses problems of containment, porosity, and spatial organisation, but also one which introduces the question of the *structure of the possible*; that is, a space not of actualities or fixed and determinable qualities and functions, but rather a space of *potentialities*. What will need to be considered in the chapters that follow and as indicated in the previous paragraph, is in just what sense this structure of potentiality can be said to define the political space of modernity.

Whilst Fenves's passing observation is certainly heading in the right direction I would suggest it is possible that in turning to the Leyden Jar Agamben intends to evoke not only the Klein bottle – after all he could, as will be seen below, simply have used this example – but more specifically to illustrate the tensile nature of the topological process he is describing. Just as the Leyden jar serves to contain an electronic charge which is released only when the inner

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[61] Peter Fenves, 'Wither Topology: On Structure and Order in *Homo Sacer*.' Available online at: http://stanfordpress.typepad.com/blog/2016/07/-whither-topology.html.

and outer layers are momentarily connected by the conductor, so the spark which reveals the paradoxical logic of the exception only emerges when the 'two sides' of the operation enter into a zone of indistinction; what I have described above as a place of intimate estrangement. The Leyden jar provides a figure for the momentary interrelation of two opposed terms (interior-exterior, nature-culture, bare life-sovereign power) producing a charge in which a *third* takes place. Agamben has turned to a related figure from the field of physics in order to elaborate this threshold in *The Signature of All Things*: 'The…third here is attested to above all through the disidentification and neutralization of the first two, which now become indiscernible. The third is this indiscernibility, and if one tries to grasp it by means of bivalent caesurae, one necessarily runs up against an undecidable. …As in a magnetic field, we are dealing not with extensive and scalable magnitudes but vectorial intensities.' (*ST*, 20) Here we can recognise, at a distance of some thirty years, the same interest in spatial configuration that was laid out as the principle of Agamben's philosophical topology in *Stanzas*: 'Only a philosophical topology, analogous to what in mathematics is defined as an *analysis situs* (analysis of site) in opposition to *analysis magnitudinis* (analysis of magnitude) would be adequate.'

In the essay 'Beyond Human Rights' published in the collection *Means Without End* (1997) (written in the years Agamben was researching and writing *Homo Sacer I*), we do in fact find a substitution of the Klein Bottle for the Leyden Jar in a passage which returns to the problematic surface of the political space. Here however Agamben envisages a different kind of political space to the 'catastrophic' one mapped out in *Homo Sacer I*:

This space would coincide neither with any of the homogeneous national territories nor with their topographical sum, but would rather act on them by articulating and perforating them topologically as in the Klein bottle or in the Mobius strip, where exterior and interior in-determine each other. In this new space, European cities would rediscover their ancient vocation of cities of the world by entering into a relation of reciprocal extraterritoriality. (*MWE*, 24)

Agamben makes use of the topological figures here to open up the boundaries and borders of the city (*polis*); he proposes, it would seem, a kind of formal-logical indetermination of the spatial notions of interior and exterior, in which the political concept of the structure and containing capacities of territory and of place more generally become porous; 'a world,' he concludes, 'in which the spaces of states have been thus perforated and topologically deformed'. (*MWE*, 25)

In *State of Exception*, the sequel to *Homo Sacer I* published in 2003, Agamben returns to the question of spatial organisation and the indistinction of interior and exterior that defines the modern state:

The sovereign exception is the fundamental localization (*Ortung*), which does not limit itself to distinguishing what is inside from what is outside but instead traces a threshold (the state of exception) between the two, on the basis of which outside and inside, the normal situation and chaos, enter into those complex topological relations that make the validity of the juridical order possible.

Agamben here re-iterates that the topological process of the exception must be understood as a certain spatialisation of power and, in a passage which points to the connection between Agamben's use of topology and his paradigmatic method (which I shall discuss in more detail in the next chapter), he provides a formula for this complex process of localization-by-exclusion which defines not only the political but also the ontological and linguistic place of life in its relation to power: '*Being-outside, and yet belonging*: this is the topological structure of the state of exception.' (*SE*, 35) The significant advance in this text is the one made upon the suggestion in *Homo Sacer I* regarding 'connection between localisation and order.' (*HS*, 19) What we are confronted by is a situation in which the link between localisation and order, and the effective relation between the law and its applicability (or potency and act) which previously 'constituted' the operative ground of sovereign power, has 'definitively broken'. A topological approach is required to analyse the 'crisis of the old "*nomos* of the earth"' (*HS*, 11) and the deformation of the now-broken topographical logic informing the 'originary spatialisation that governs and makes possible every localisation and every territorialisation". (*HS*, 111) Faced

with this crisis of the localization of power Agamben does not respond with pessimism but rather sees an opening, a clearing of space and an opportunity for a different relation between life and its *topoi*, or rather, its *forms*.

At this point we come upon something of a hiatus in the frequency of topological references in Agamben's work. It is thirteen years until another direct reference to topology appears, in the final volume of the Homo Sacer series, *The Use of Bodies* (2015). The reference is brief but suggestive, and in a sense brings this short survey full circle as it concerns the relation of the living being to language, a relation whose complex topology Agamben first began to explore in *Stanzas*. In the relevant passage Agamben is discussing Emile Benveniste's concept of the 'middle voice', which is an attempt in its own way to locate language and to find the 'peculiar situation of the subject' (*UB*, 27) in the taking-place of discourse, the moment of its *use* of language. 'On the one hand,' Agamben writes

the subject who achieves the action, by the very fact of achieving it, does not act transitively on an object but first of all implies and affects himself in the process; on the other hand, precisely for this reason, the process presupposes a singular topology, in which the subject does not stand over the action but is himself the place of its occurring. (*UB*, 27)

The interest for Agamben here lies in understanding the position of the subject in relation to the event of speech: does the subject exist in some way prior to and so 'stand over' its use of language in a position of authority and command, or rather, is the subject's very place and 'surface' put into question in the occurrence of speech? In these pages in *The Use of Bodies* Agamben is developing the ethical implications of his early and abiding interest in the location of language as part of an immanent theory of the self which is elaborated in the work, and which constitutes a culmination of the entire Homo Sacer project. I will return to these questions and to Agamben's reception of Benveniste's theory of enunciation in particular in the fourth chapter, but for now we can take a moment to consider what we have learned so far about the topological in Agamben.

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In providing an initial and very condensed itinerary of Agamben's use of topological figures I have had necessarily to summarise a series of complex ideas which are worked out in texts that comprise a dense weave of historical, philosophical, philological, theological, political, and literary sources. One of the defining traits of Agamben's work which I intend to emphasise here is the almost obsessive persistence with which he pursues a series of guiding questions. I intend to do so not by isolating certain key concepts or figures (though I will obviously treat of a number of these) but rather to consider the methodological frame within which Agamben approaches and develops his theories. My claim is that a topological approach is central to this methodology, and that foregrounding the topological orientation of Agamben's thinking allows us to address some of the more contentious and difficult aspects of his project and its methodology. These last revolve around a driving tension within Agamben's work between an interest in the transcendental and structural conditions by which certain formations (of life, subjectivities, power) can occur and become intelligible. This tension can also be described in Heideggerian terms as that between the *ontological* and *ontic* levels of analysis.[62] The most prominent example of this polar tension animating Agamben's thought is his politicisation of ontology in the Homo Sacer series. Robert Sinnerbrink has described Agamben's widely criticised attempts therein to 'explicat[e] the relationship between the ontological aspects of biopower as the ground of politics in modernity, and the ontic dimension of specific social practices and collective political action within historically specific biopower regimes.'[63] In one of his last interviews Foucault calls attention to this tension as it operates in his own work:

My field is the history of thought. Man is a thinking being. The way he thinks is related to society, politics, economics, and is also related to very general and universal categories and formal structures. But thought is something other than societal relations. The way people really think is not adequately analysed

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[62] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, p.32
[63] Robert Sinnerbrink, 'From Machenschaft to Biopolitics: A Genealogical Critique of Biopower'. *Critical Horizons: A Journal of Philosophy and Social Theory*, 6:1 2005, p.258

by the universal categories of logic. Between social history and formal analyses of thought there is a path, a lane – maybe very narrow – which is the path of the historian of thought.[64]

Whilst not wishing to elide the projects of Foucault and Agamben crudely here (this relationship is explored in more detail in the third chapter), Foucault's remarks do seem to me an eloquent and concise description – not to mention a spatial-historical one – of the polarity animating Agamben's own attempt to map the historical 'field' of thought. Some of the sharpest criticism Agamben's work has received has centred on his own use of what Foucault describes as 'general and universal categories and formal structures' and the lack of historical specificity these provide. The claim I develop here is that Agamben's approach to the seemingly intractable division between history and structure evoked by Foucault must be understood in topological terms as an attempt to problematize the very presupposition of such an opposition between 'social history and formal analysis,' an opposition that many readers of his work uncritically reproduce. Here is Agamben describing his own interest in this complex topological field of the history of thought:

When you take a classical distinction of the political-philosophical tradition such as public/private, then I find it much less interesting to insist on the distinction and to bemoan the diminution of one of the terms, than to question the interweaving. I want to understand how the system operates. And the system is always double; it works always by means of opposition. Not only as private/public, but also the house and the city, the exception and the rule, to reign and to govern, etc. But in order to understand what is really at stake here, we must learn to see these oppositions not as "di-chotomies" but as "di-polarities," not substantial, but tensional. I mean that we need a logic of the field, as in physics, where it is impossible to draw a line clearly and separate two different substances. The polarity is present and acts at each point of the field. Then you may suddenly have zones of indecidability or indifference.[65]

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[64] Foucault, *Technologies of the Self,* p.10
[65] Giorgio Agamben, 'Interview with Giorgio Agamben', p.612

In this sense Agamben's work can be seen as comprising a radical and sustained elaboration of Foucault's attempt to subvert a 'canonical' mode of thinking which specifically eschews the analysis of *how* institutions work in favour of the question of defining *what* constitutes sovereign power.[66] This, in my view, is an important point to emphasise, and will be drawn out in a number of contexts in the pages that follow. It is not possible to work productively with Agamben's texts if his blurring to the point of indistinction of the 'what' (ontological) and the 'how' (ontic) as distinct levels of analysis is not properly grasped as a methodological imperative.[67] The two-dimensional characterisation which, for instance, pits Agamben's 'epochal' Heideggarianism against his inability or unwillingness to perform the kind of 'concrete' analysis associated with Foucault only reinforces the strict separation of the two modalities of study. But the reading of these two figures which Agamben embarks upon is, I would suggest, exemplary of a topological approach that marks his thinking. Rather than insist on the distinction we should attend to the 'interweaving,' as the entire Homo Sacer project can be read as a force field in which it is impossible to 'draw a line clearly and separate the two.'[68] Indeed, taking the attempt to explore the tensional polarity between the thought of Heidegger and Foucault in the biopolitical studies as paradigmatic of his methodology more generally, we could formulate the question animating all of Agamben's work as 'What is the how…?'[69] What is the how of life? What is the how of power? What is the how of the self? William Watkin has captured this tension brilliantly in his work on the relation between ontology and epistemology in Agamben's thought. It is productive, Watkin suggests, of an 'ontology of epistemology…wherein all being is defined as the intelligible, communicable, operativity of

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[66] Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon. Harvester Wheatsheaf: London, 1980, p.95.

[67] The most sustained and eloquent defence of Agamben's 'political ontology' is Matthew Abbott's study *The Figure of this World*. There he writes that political ontology 'insists on the intertwining of ontology and politics, claiming theirs is a relation of mutual determination'. Matthew Abbott, *The Figure of this World: Agamben and the Question of Political Ontology*. Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2014, p.4

[68] Miguel Vatter has drawn attention to Agamben's complex interweaving of Heidegger and Foucault in *The Republic of the Living*. The other figure to mention in this regard would of course be Benjamin, who is placed in an equally tensile polarity with Heidegger in Agamben's work.

[69] Agamben's attempt to answer the question posed by my own somewhat awkward formulation is most fully developed in the section 'An Archeaology of Ontology' in *The Use of Bodies*, in which he confronts Heidegger's analysis of Dasein as a 'the being that is only its ways of Being'. Developing a genealogy of the theory of the 'modes' of being Agamben infuses Heidegger's insight with Spinoza's concept of a 'modal ontology' in order to arrive at his own immanent ontology (see esp. pp.146-175). I consider Agamben's reading of Heidegger in more detail in Chapter Four of the present study.

knowledges.' There is plenty to be unpacked in this dense formulation for sure, but for now it is enough to stress the centrality (following the studies of Watkin and Zartaloudis in particular), of this tension driving Agamben's work: between 'the empirical and temporal nature of a historical enquiry versus the reasoned ahistorical nature of philosophical thought.'[70]

This emphasis on the *how* of things – not *what* they are but *how* they are what they are – lies behind Agamben's attempt to formulate, at the point of indistinction between the 'two levels' which have defined critical thinking, a positive and graspable figure for human thought and praxis as 'form-of-life'. Agamben defines this figure as '[a] life that cannot be separated from its form…a life for which, in its mode of life, its very living is at stake, and in its living, what is at stake is first of all its mode life.' (*UB*, 207) The essence of Agamben's affirmationist gesture can be found in this collapsing or 'letting fall together' of the ontic and the ontological, of an indistinction between life and its forms. In this view 'Being does not pre-exist the modes but constitutes itself in being modified, is nothing other than its own modifications.' (*UB*, 170) A life that is only its 'modes' or ways of being can also be understood as a radical and unceasing process of formal experimentation; life here has no determinate form, essence, or identity, but is rather something that is always in the process of being formed and deformed.[71]

The difficulties in approaching Agamben's work – and the difficult affirmative possibilities he envisages – are produced by its presentation of life as a constant oscillation between formal-ontological structures and the situated specificity of the ontic and historical. Another, and in my view intimately related point, is that the singularity of Agamben's work does not arise from the originality of his concepts but rather the particular manner of presentation of a series of philosophical, aesthetic, historical, juridico-political, and theological contexts and figures. This emphasis on presentation is one he derives early on from Walter Benjamin,[72] and the methodological prioritisation situates Agamben firmly in the lineage of an

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[70] Watkin, *Agamben and Indifference*, p.21/30
[71] Hence Agamben will seek to develop what he calls an 'ontology of style' in the chapter on 'Form-of-Life' in *The Use of Bodies*, pp.224-231.
[72] The introduction to *Stanzas* makes clear Agamben's methodological debt to Benjamin and to his 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* in particular. The prologue opens with the famous remark, 'It is characteristic of philosophical writing that it must continually confront the question of representation.' See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama.* Verso: London, 1998, p.27

approach to critical thinking which works from the basis of an intense and unwavering attention to formal-logical questions. Agamben describes the necessity of attending to the form of the content in an early essay entitled 'The Idea of Language':

Philosophy considers not merely what is revealed through language, but also the revelation of language itself. A philosophical presentation is thus one that, regardless of what it speaks about, must also take into account the fact that it speaks of it. (*P*, 43)

What is significant and has yet to receive a sustained analysis is that the overriding presentational tendency in Agamben's work is *topological*. That is to say that Agamben's topological method is itself developed in order to deal with the tension between the two levels of his analysis; in order to account for the fact that he speaks about this tension between the ontological and ontic, between formal structure and social history, and between the objective and subjective levels of life, Agamben has to *show* or 'expose' (*ST*, 23) this tension at work. This is where topology enters the frame. And in order to develop our understanding of this topological method of presentation – and notwithstanding the variety of figures, concepts, and contexts already introduced in this brief survey – we should focus at this stage less on the specificity of *content* introduced so far (much of which will be discussed in more detail as we move forward) and more so on the nature of the *structural logics* and analytical patterns that provide the recurrent frame of presentation. In taking such an approach I of course do not intend in any way to disregard the content of Agamben's studies but rather to argue for the priority of a formal, structural, and logical frame within which the various figures and contexts are approached and, as Agamben puts it, 'topologically deformed'.

Agamben's Topologies

Having provided a somewhat hasty overview of the topological references in Agamben's work my aim now is to begin to isolate some of the recurrent formal-structural orientations which

shape this approach. If we summarise the topologies already discussed, we already have a number of important pointers as to what this place might look like:

First, it is a *place of negativity*. In the years in which Agamben composes *Stanzas* the influence of his attendance at Heidegger's seminars at Le Thor remains strong,[73] and in many ways Agamben's indebtedness to Heidegger – and his willingness to seek out his former teacher's 'limit' – is already clear in this early work. If the guiding topological problem of the text is what it means to maintain a relation to something that is lacking, to be in relation to a privation, we must understand these 'enquiries into the void' (*S*, xvii) in the first-philosophical terms that Agamben inherits from Heidegger as bearing on the 'gigantomachia concerning a void' (or *topos outopos*): the 'battle of giants concerning being' which 'defines western metaphysics.' (*SE*, 59) The various *topoi* or 'rooms' explored in *Stanzas* must all be understood, in the last instance, as places in which metaphysics' positing of the negative ground of existence is explored. According to this conception pure Being, the 'ultimate metaphysical stake' (ibid.), serves as the 'empty space' which must remain 'devoid of any determination or real predicate' (*SE*, 60) so that it function as the foundation for all individual beings. As David Kishik writes,

The ultimate task of western metaphysics since the time of the Greeks has been to comprehend the single essence behind the multitude of concrete beings, to distil from the term "being" (which, Aristotle observes, is "said in many ways") a sort of "pure Being" (*on haplōs*).[74]

Indeed, for Agamben the *locus classicus* of this 'fracture' between universal and particular is Aristotelian ontology:

This apparatus…divides and at the same time articulates being and is, in the last instance, at the origin of every ontological difference. [In the *Categories*] Aristotle distinguishes an *ousia*, an entity or essence,

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[73] *Stanzas* is dedicated to the memory of Agamben's former teacher. For Agamben's own recollections of his meeting with Heidegger in Le Thor see 'Intermezzo II' in *The Use of Bodies*, pp.187-88. For the text of the Le Thor seminars see, Martin Heidegger, *Four Seminars,* trans. Andrew Mitchell and François Raffoul. Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2003.

[74] David Kishik, *The Power of Life*: *Agamben and the Coming Politics*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 2012, p.73

"which is said most strictly, primarily, and first of all," from the secondary essences. …Whatever may be the terms in which the division is articulated in the course of its history (primary essence/secondary essence, existence/essence [or] being/beings), what is decisive is that in the tradition of western philosophy, being, like life, is always interrogated beginning with the division that traverses it. (*UB*, 115)

Nearly forty years after his first critical confrontation with this tradition, in *The Use of Bodies* Agamben is still trying to look beyond Heidegger's groundbreaking (but for Agamben ultimately flawed) re-appraisal of the ontological difference, asking 'why, in our philosophical tradition, does not only consciousness but the very Dasein, the very being-there of the human being, need to presuppose a false beginning, that must be abandoned and removed to give place to the true and the most proper?' (*UB*, 45) Seeking to counter the articulation of life in which beings have their being by virtue of their relation to the place of a lack and a privation, which individual beings must always in some sense fill-up or assume, Agamben will consistently reject what we might term the insubstantial foundationalism of this ontological tradition. Be it the ontological difference between essence and existence, the presuppositional structure of signification, the 'sacrificial mythologeme,' the dialectic between law and applicability, or the impotent transcendence of God versus the earthly power of governance, Agamben seeks out the insubstantial ground of all such dichotomies in order to analyse their structural and operative conditions of possibility. This interest in how both the ontological and ontic levels of life are in some way always determined through their relation to an apparently 'empty,' 'insubstantial' and 'purely negative space,' is perhaps the kind of gesture that, in its apparent abstraction and obscurity, has led many to claim that Agamben's work – his 'heroism of the negative'[75] as Antonio Negri puts it – ultimately has nothing positive or tangible to offer as an analysis of political formations of power. Whilst I shall be arguing throughout that a fundamental misunderstanding of Agamben's interest in being as the 'place' of a relation to negativity has

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[75] Antonio Negri, 'Giorgio Agamben: The Discreet Taste of the Dialectic,' in *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, p.124

come to obscure the affirmative dimension of his philosophical project, there is certainly no denying that the first and perhaps defining characteristic of the Agambenian topology is that it is intimately concerned with an experience of negativity and privation.

Agamben's insistence on the need for a different kind of philosophical approach to the limits of ontological and juridical-political foundationalism that would constitute a 'philosophical topology' precedes the so-called biopolitical turn by some twenty years, but there is certainly a case to be made for a continuity of topological concern at work here. Indeed, we can perhaps glimpse the germ of the controversial mapping of metaphysical nihilism onto the terrain of biopolitics in *Homo Sacer I*, in the passages already quoted from *Stanzas* which relate the original fracture of presence that defines metaphysics as the place where 'all that comes to presence comes there as to the place of an exclusion.' (*S*, 136) The philosophical attempt to isolate pure Being, what Agamben describes as 'the metaphysical task *par excellence*', produces a division within the human which Agamben identifies as early as his second work in the form of an exclusion and an exception. This division-by-exception that 'defines' the metaphysical form of life is also, according to Agamben, the structural principle 'par excellence' of political existence as biopolitics. Once again, he finds the *locus classicus* of this negative structuration in Aristotelian ontology: the politicisation of life is achieved, Agamben contends, by way of an *exclusion* of natural life (*zoē*). This exclusion of *zoē* and subsequent production of bare life as the 'substrate' of politically qualified life provides the systematic connection between classical ontology and modern and contemporary biopolitics. But it suffices to recall the image of the Möbius strip to guess that we are not dealing here with a simple exclusion of natural life but rather with its exclusive-inclusion. According to Agamben Aristotle's onto-political division of life has recourse to a *negative structure of the exception*, and a topology becomes necessary because a certain logical *inconsistency* inhabits this system. Agamben illustrates this by turning to the logic of the ban: '[T]he relation of exception is a relation of ban. He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather abandoned by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside,

become indistinguishable.' (*HS*, 28) A philosophical topology – a *topology of abandon* – is required to account for the paradoxical logic of this system.

The second feature that characterises Agamben's topologies is thus the discovery of a *structural principle of exception*. Agamben's topological studies will seek to provide an account of the ways philosophy, politics, theology, and aesthetics have conceived of the place of the exception through a certain negative, onto-linguistic logic of spatial structuration and containment. Gunnar Olsson has suggested that at the philosophical heart of this logic lies the 'dual question of scale and orientation.' Simply put, what this involves is the spatial determination of individual beings through their relations with the world in which they exist: 'the position of being,' Olsson concludes, 'is consequently nothing but a place in the mindscape of reason, a privileged standpoint in the mapping of human thought-and-action.'[76] Following Heidegger, Agamben wants to address the nature (or the forgetting of the nature) of this 'privileged standpoint': where is Being located in the 'mindscape of reason,' what is its structure, such that it has the privileged status of what Olsson calls the 'taken-for-granted'.[77] We have seen already the way in which this presuppositional structure functions as an exception: the philosophical privileging of the place of pure Being and the inclusive exclusion of *zoē* that founds the political form of life operate 'by dividing the factical experience and pushing down to the origin – that is, excluding – one half of it in order then to rearticulate it to the other by including it as foundation.' (*UB*, 265) If this fixed and determinate structure of presupposition serves to install an inaccessible and transcendental foundation such that everything that comes to individual beings 'comes there as to the place of an exception,' the task Agamben sets himself is to think a presuppositionless modality of being: a form of life in which 'it is never possible to isolate and keep distinct something like a bare life.' (*UB*, 207)

The exception comes to comprise something like an *idée mère* for Agamben's thinking. From his earliest works to his most recent and pursuing a vast range of subject matter the structural-logical refrain of the *exceptio* recurs throughout, upon which theme the intricate

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[76] Gunnar Olsson, 'Towards a Critique of Cartographic Reason'. *Ethics, Place and Environment*, Vol. I, No. 2, 1998, p.148
[77] Ibid, p.150

historico-textual detail of Agamben's various investigations comprise so many variations. Agamben suggests that in the course of his studies this structure has 'been revealed to constitute in every sphere the structure of the *arché*, in the juridico-political tradition as much as in ontology.' (*UB*, 264) 'One cannot understand [this] dialectic of foundation,' he claims, 'if one does not understand that it functions as an exception' (ibid.). In his treatment of sovereign power and biopolitics in *Homo Sacer I*, the limits of the juridico-political order in *State of Exception*, and on into the study of the anthropological machine in *The Open* and the analysis of the relation between rule and governance in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, the same topological structure is mapped out:

In all of these figures the same mechanism is at work: the *arché* is constituted by dividing the factical experience and pushing down to the origin – that is, excluding – one half of it in order then to rearticulate it to the other by including it as foundation. Thus, the city is founded on the division of life into bare life and politically qualified life, the human is defined by the exclusion-inclusion of the animal [and] the law by the *exceptio* of anomie. (*UB*, 265)

And in the negative place of language, which is the first and perhaps decisive paradigm of the topology of the exception that Agamben pursues, the same structure holds: '[I]n happening, language excludes and separates from itself the non-linguistic, and in the same gesture, its includes and captures it as that with which it is always already in relation.' (*UB*, 264) What we need to foreground is that this first-philosophical gestation of the concept of exception is crucial to Agamben's later turn to the juridico-political sphere. The politicisation of ontology is the source of much of the controversy surrounding Agamben's work and following the topological thread which runs through it allows us to discern more clearly the centrality and persistence of a particular formal-structural approach that attempts to problematise the dichotomous logic which keeps the ontological and the ontic separate. Having isolated early on the logic of the exception, Agamben's topological approach to the negative structural presuppositions of metaphysics will come increasingly to focus on the broader socio-political implications of this division of factical

experience into a kind of geometrical-hierarchical caesura: between a privileged yet inaccessible position of foundation and the singular forms of life it serves to determine and orientate. Agamben turns to topology in order to problematise or 'dialectically leaven' (*S*, 7) the ways in which the onto-linguistic presuppositional structuration of the *exceptio* consigns the individual being to a *negative relation* to that which is other than itself. In so doing he will seek to situate life in a radically intimate and affirmative relation to its possible forms.

What this comes down to ultimately for Agamben – and what constitutes the third key aspect of the topologies – is the problem of *the relation between the universal and the particular*. The philosophical configuration of this relation (but also, Agamben will argue, its juridico-political and theological variants) implies a structural model of presupposition which determines the localisation of a 'principle of foundation' (*P*, 108). The relation between the particular and the universal so conceived is an attempt to solve the problem of how to reconcile singular elements within a general set or totality. From a philosophical perspective, this serves to 'set the standard by which particular concepts of experience are recognised as having some general character.'[78] But this foundational logic – which is revealed to operate according to a logic of the exception – is also understood by Agamben to be determinative of juridico-political principles of foundation. Working against the grain of millennia-long philosophical presumption Agamben contends that there is a dialectical misunderstanding at the core of the metaphysical conception of life, which is given exemplary expression in the Aristotelian interpretation of the relation between potentiality and actuality. Lorenzo Chiesa and Frank Ruda summarise neatly:

If any actuality is simply read as a particular realisation of a more universal potentiality, then the series of all individual acts, the totalised unity of all particular actualities, would be nothing but the fully realised universal potentiality which logically preceded them and from which they originated.[79]

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[78] Olsson, 'Cartographical Reason', p. 147
[79] Lorenzo Chiesa and Frank Ruda, 'The Event of Language as Force of Life: Giorgio Agamben's Linguistic Vitalism'. *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*. Volume 16, Number 3, September 2011, p 165

There is a disjunction here, between an act and that which is supposed to guarantee and in some sense *authorise* its condition of possibility. And in a formulation which renders explicit the topological continuity Agamben discerns between the philosophical and juridico-political instrumentalisation of this dialectic we read that 'Potentiality is that through which Being founds itself *sovereignly*, which is to say, without anything preceding or determining it.' (*HS*, 46) Once again we can see a peculiarly insubstantial foundationalism at work here, a determination of life through its relation to that which must remain in a certain sense non-relational (transcendent, indeterminate, 'pure'). According to Agamben it is this negative structure of the exception – its foundation in an empty, insubstantial, de-potentiated space – which lies at the heart of modern and contemporary configurations of power. This is the essence of Agamben's politicisation of ontology: it seeks to demonstrate that the negative philosophical logic of the exception informs the operations of political power. For Agamben, a politics which can respond to the 'ontological root of every power' (*HS*, 48) must confront the problem of knowing how one conceives of this presupposed, indeterminate, *empty* space.

Contrary to the logic which seeks to maintain the individual-universal relation in terms of a fixed and rigid geometry upholding the logic of the foundation-exception, topology provides the means for considering forms of relation that are more structurally diverse and which, in its interest in abstraction and the limits of determinate configurations of space is capable of providing an image of that which is, precisely, indeterminate. The point for Agamben – the necessity of a 'philosophical topology' – is that the life of the individual living being is not reducible to the negative form of relation; it always *exceeds its containment* within this totalising structure. Chiesa and Ruda once again: 'the presupposition that there is a dialectical relationship between the individual or particular and the universal misses the fact that the particular is always more particular than any particular embodiment of the universal, that is, it exists as a singularity.'[80] This is what Agamben describes in *The Coming Community* as the topological 'substitutability' of the individual; the subject that *exceeds its containment*. And we

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[80] Ibid, p.165

see this exceeding of structural containment again and again: in the relation between Being and beings; between the subject and language; between political community and the non-political 'outside'. In order to re-think the totalising logic of subsumption Agamben turns to topology in order to trace the spatial materialisations of this *excess*; the exceeding of a series of abstract-philosophical conceptions of community, territory, and political representation. Thus, central to Agamben's politicisation of ontology and the fourth significant feature of his topological approach is the attempt to isolate the *spaces of deformation and 'perforation' of closed totalities*.

Françoise Debrix provides a concise account of the ways topology can reveal the deformation and exceeding of the limits of a given system:

Topology points to the potential that spatial inscriptions or territorial markings have to extend meaning beyond their material or referential boundaries…Topology reveals such markings not as essentially given, but rather as geographical interventions that impose limits to spatiality by privileging certain positions between subjects and objects in both time and space. Topology points to relations between objects and subjects that do take place in space and time, but whose particular placing is often a forced or arbitrary (topographical) ascription to a modality of representational power.[81]

Here, in the most abstract way, we move into the controversial area of Agamben's use of historically specific examples in his work, which I consider in more detail across the second and third chapters. The next feature of the Agambenian topology is a correlate of the previous one, that is, Agamben's growing interest in the Homo Sacer series in the spaces where abstract and universalising concepts of the closure of totalising systems become concretised. We can formulate this as the problem of *the relation between power and its actualisation*. As I have already suggested, the most controversial problematization of the notion of this relation comes in the analysis of the space of the camp in *Homo Sacer I*. Agamben's claim that the camp constitutes the 'nomos' or 'hidden matrix' of modernity has been widely discredited and, I

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[81] François Debrix, 'Topologies of vulnerability', p.444

would suggest, also widely misunderstood. This is the result, I will argue, of an unwillingness to properly attend to the topological nature of Agamben's analysis. The critiques remain, that is to say, within a strictly topographical register. Debrix distils the difference in approach at issue here: '[u]nlike topography that relies on fixity, placement, grounding, and mapping, topology approaches space as a matter of relationality, redistribution, layering, transformation, or virtuality.'[82] In Agamben's approach we are dealing with something more than an apparently controversial reading of a given historical event (not an insignificant point as will be seen). What is at issue is a distinction that goes to the heart of Agamben's philosophical project and concerns what might be described as the determined and spatialized structure of historico-philosophical presupposition itself. From the topological-methodological perspective I am adopting here it becomes clear that, whilst it certainly does concern 'objects and subjects that do take place in space and time,' Agamben's treatment of the camp also and equally seeks to demonstrate the ontological presuppositions at work in the 'particular placing' and the 'forced…ascription to a modality of representational power'.[83] Perhaps the most contentious example of this tendency, Agamben's discussion of the problematic borders and limits of the camp is not limited to a topographical study of the delimitation of a certain (historical) space but rather with the ways in which the (ongoing) formation of concepts such as internal and external, political and non-political zones take place, and with what is involved in the very possibility of defining something like demarcated boundaries in the first place. What becomes clear is that a topographical approach which seeks to map a series of fixed and determinate border-limits (interior and exterior to the individual subject) is not adequate to respond to the series of 'mobile borders' which are 'playing out in different and often unexpected ways at a multiplicity of sites in contemporary political life.'[84]

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We can summarise the key features of Agamben's philosophical topology as follows:

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[82] Ibid, p.444
[83] Ibid. p.443
[84] Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'The generalised bio-political border?', p.730

1. It is a place of negativity that

2. reveals a structural principle of the exception and

3. concerns the relation between the universal and the particular.

4. It thus seeks to deform and make porous all closed and totalising structures or systems and

5. problematises the relation between power and its actualisation.

6. Finally, it attempts to provide an account of the structure of possibilities that condition any process of actualisation: topology is thus a tool for re-thinking the very nature of potentiality.

In the chapters that follow I will provide a reading of a series of Agamben's topologies in order to draw out and re-frame an approach to the more affirmative dimension they seek to open for critical thought. I have chosen to describe these as topologies of abandon, as in Agamben's use of this term a number of significant aspects of his singularly affirmative philosophical articulation of life are captured. Whilst it is clearly a figure of negation and exceptionalism, in Agamben the formal texture of abandonment undergoes significant topological deformation, and comes to play a crucial function in 'dialectically leavening' the relation to privation that, in Agamben's view, is determinate of the personal and impersonal articulations of life. At the same time, the logic of the ban and its complex configuration of space points both to the centrality of conceptions of place, localization, and situatedness to Agamben's thinking, and the *limits* of given determinations of these categories as they function in these articulations of life. Ultimately, the topologies of abandon which I examine here all describe a potential for re-imagining the way in which life and form articulate one another.

Chapter Two

Topology of the Paradigm: Dislocating the Historical Present

'Historical method is philological method, a method that has its foundation in the book of life. 'To read what was never written,' is what Hofmannsthal calls it. The reader referred to here is the true historian.'[85]

'From this vantage one can speak of a topology of the unreal.'[86]

Introduction

Perhaps the most common accusation levelled at Agamben's studies is that in his account of the structural 'interweaving' of biopolitics and sovereign power he misuses historical and political sources in an attempt to provide theoretical weight to a philosophical diagnosis of the present, which is itself based on a problematically generalising and unifying set of ontological arguments. With the success of *Homo Sacer I* this tendency of Agamben's writings to cover a disparate array of sources and rely on an extensive line of interlocutors to develop a philosophy of 'origins' came in for widespread criticism.[87] In particular, Agamben's seeming willingness to universalise the historical trajectory of 'the West' – an account deeply informed by a Heideggerian commitment to confronting the epochal 'end' of metaphysics – and his deployment of an 'omniscient methodological plateau'[88] in laying out such a historical account – in terms of a series of 'reductive explanatory principle[s]'[89] such as sovereignty and potentiality – appeared to go against the grain of recent (post-Foucaultian) theoretical demands

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[85] Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History,' quoted in Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Ed. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2000, p.13

[86] Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*. Minnesota: Minneapolis Press, 1994, p.xvii

[87] Of the critical works already referred to see in particular in this regard *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life,* and *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer*.

[88] Kalliopi Nikolopoulou, 'Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (review),' in *SubStance*, Issue 93, Volume 29. No. 3. University of Wisconsin Press, 2000, p.125

[89] Alison Ross, 'Agamben's Political Paradigm of the Camp: Its Features and Reasons'. Constellations Volume 19, No 3, 2012, p.421

for particularity, and an attendant concern to critically examine the issue of historicity itself.[90]

Agamben's jarring montages of historical and theoretical topics seem to develop a problematically transcendental, de-historicised, and universalist account of the emergence of modernity and its biopolitical origins. As one critic put it: 'In this pessimistic view, the prevailing forms of dominance are not a historically contingent phenomenon, but are rather deeply rooted in humanity's distant past. Agamben's genealogy, while seductively erudite and revealing [has] the effect of impressing upon the reader the idea that humanity's past gives us no precedent for successful resistance, much less the destruction of sovereign power.'[91] But as I shall argue such a reading fundamentally misunderstands the intentions and the practice of this philosophical project, and is in fact based on a set of historical-philosophical presuppositions that Agamben's work is seeking precisely to deconstruct and unwork. In developing this argument, the focus of this chapter will be on Agamben's method and his controversial mode of historical analysis. In this sense my emphasis in this chapter will largely be on 'how' Agamben's work proceeds. This is, as I have already suggested, a necessary emphasis when approaching a thinker like Agamben, for whom the 'mode,' 'form,' and we might even say 'style' in which an idea is presented does not precede and determine its exposition but is rather immanent to its conditions of intelligibility. To approach *what* Agamben presents in his studies, we have simultaneously to consider *how* he presents it.

Topology of the Paradigm

While there have been detailed engagements with Agamben's paradigmatic methodology[92] and attempts to consider his work in light of this theory are in the ascendancy, there has as yet been

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[90] Anton Schütz has discussed Agamben's selective inheritance of Foucault with great clarity: 'It is, in fact, not easy to see what people really mean when they find that something is wrong about the fact that, while Foucault uses the notion of biopolitics in a particular way, related to one group of archives and documents, to one landscape of events or situations, Agamben uses it in another way, and in relation to an at least partly different, and historically much more extensive, substrate. The idea that of two people who make claims about a particular object – the one maintaining that it has only existed a short time, the other for a much longer time – one of them at least 'must be wrong' seems to be based, at most, on some commonsensical conviction and, in addition, on the idea that the meaning of a word is subject to a sovereign decision, an idea best portrayed in Lewis Carroll's caterpillar.' 'The Fading Memory of Homo Non Sacer', in *The Work of Giorgio Agamben: Law, Literature, Life*, eds. Justin Clemens, Nicholas Heron and Alex Murray. Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2008, p. 120

[91] Simon Behrman, 'Giorgio Agamben in Perspective'. *International Socialism: Journal for Socialist Theory*, Issue 140, 2013. Available online at: http://isj.org.uk/giorgio-agamben-in-perspective/

[92] See William Watkin, *Agamben and Indifference: A Critical Overview*. Rowman and Littlefield: London, 2013; Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction*. Stanford Uniersity Press: Stanford, California, 2009; Chiesa and Ruda, 'The Event of Language as Force of Life'.

no attempt to connect Agamben's use of the paradigm with his interest in topology. Such an analysis is, I would suggest, a necessary part of the wider attempt to work through the affirmative possibilities Agamben's work proposes. Given that Agamben's lengthy exposition of his own paradigmatic method in *The Signature of All Things* was written in response to the largely hostile reception of the early works in the Homo Sacer series (*Homo Sacer I*, *State of Exception*, *Remnants of Auschwitz*), consideration of this philosophical-historical approach necessarily touches on some of the more controversial aspects of Agamben's project and the criticisms these have generated. As he writes at the opening of the essay 'What is a Paradigm':

In the course of my research, I have written on certain figures such as *homo sacer*, the *Muselmann*, the state of exception, and the concentration camp. While these are all actual historical phenomena, I nonetheless treated them as paradigms whose role was to constitute and make intelligible a broader historical-problematic context. Because this approach has generated a few misunderstandings, especially for those who thought, in more or less good faith, that my intention was to offer merely historiographical theses or reconstructions, I must pause here and reflect on the meaning and function of paradigms in philosophy and the human sciences. (*ST*, 9)

If Agamben thus insists that an understanding of the project undertaken in the Homo Sacer series necessitates a grasp of his use of paradigms, I will argue further that this approach must be understood in relation to the use of topological figures that (as we have already seen) have a crucial methodological function in his re-appraisal of modern and contemporary biopolitics. In order to critically gauge the affirmative potential of Agamben's work we need first to provide an account of the gestation of its methodological principles. I have already touched on the philosophical significance of the primacy of methodology in Agamben's work, and in this chapter I want to develop this claim by making the case for a topological approach to the paradigm.

As Agamben makes clear, one of the signal characteristics of the paradigm is its function in the process of composition and 'philosophical presentation'. It is 'generative' of a

certain mode of reading and thinking, and works by '"placing alongside," "conjoining together," and above all by "showing" and 'exposing"' (*ST*, 23) seemingly heterogeneous material, in order to foreground what we might describe as the *conditions of intelligibility* of a given system or discourse. This presentational (we might even say curatorial) emphasis Agamben places on his use of the paradigm is not simply a philosophical variant of a modernist fascination with montage and the formalistic production of form. Rather, it is central to his paradigmatic methodology and his use of topological figures, which are deployed (as the preceding chapter sought to show) to 'expose' the formal-logical paradoxes and deformations that haunt the processes of 'placing alongside' and 'conjoining together' that 'come into play every time the very sense of the belonging and commonality of individuals is to be defined.' (*HS*, 22) Where Agamben suggests that an unwillingness to read his works paradigmatically has, as he benignly puts it, 'generated a few misunderstandings,' (*ST*, 9) I would suggest it is also the case that a lack of appreciation of the topological dimension of these works has served equally to obscure their deepest intentions.

Before going any further, we need then to develop a (topological) response to the question: What is a Paradigm? As Agamben writes in the essay of the same name, a paradigm is 'a singular object that, standing equally for all others of the same class, defines the intelligibility of the group of which it is a part and which, at the same time, constitutes.' (*ST*, 15) Agamben relates the paradigm to the apparently simple act of giving an example. In becoming exemplary of the group of which it is a part, an object performs a function and moves into a location that is difficult to describe:

What the example shows is its belonging to a class, but for this very reason the example steps out of its class in the very moment in which it exhibits and delimits it (in the case of a linguistic syntagm, the example thus shows its own signifying and, in this way, suspends its own meaning). If one now asks if the rule applies to the example, the answer is not easy, since the rule applies to the example only as to a normal case and obviously not as to an example. (*HS*, 16)

As such the place of the example is 'neither particular nor universal,' rather the example 'is a singular object that *presents itself* as such, that *shows* its singularity.' And it is in this sense of a presentation and a showing that Agamben points to 'the pregnancy of the Greek term, for example: *para-deigma*, that which is shown alongside (like the German *Bei-spiel*, that which plays alongside).' (*CC*, 10) In its 'undecidable' position between the universal and particular the paradigm is a figure which appears to put into play and *expose* those 'complex topological relations' already alluded to: 'in every logical system, just as in every social system, the relation [that the paradigm exposes] between outside and inside, strangeness and intimacy, is this complicated.' (*HS*, 17)

Following the studies of American epistemologist Thomas Kuhn and Foucault's deployment of the concept, Agamben approaches the 'singularity' of the paradigm in terms of its ability to 'make intelligible a broader historical-problematic context.' Whilst the essay as a whole bears essentially on how to study social-historical phenomena and what type of knowledge such study might produce, what Agamben is tussling with here, once again, is the relationship between a universal law and the particular forms which are determined by their relation to this rule. In order to consider this relation critically it is necessary first to attend to the logic or conditions of the applicability of a rule to a particular case. Unpicking the seemingly compatible use of the paradigm by Kuhn and Foucault to confront this question as it bears on historical-empirical research, Agamben shows that, to a point, there are certainly similarities: both Kuhn and Foucault take up the concept as a means of determining discrete patterns of behaviour, as opposed to defining a fixed set of rules which determine the normal conduct of behaviour:

Just as Kuhn set aside the identification and examination of the rules constituting a normal science in order to focus on the paradigms that determine scientists' behaviour, Foucault questioned the traditional primacy of the juridical models of the theory of power in order to bring to the fore the multiple disciplines and political techniques through which the state integrates the care of the life of individuals within its confines. (*ST*, 12)

Moving away from 'universal categories' such as law, the state, and sovereignty, Foucault

developed his understanding of the paradigm as a theoretical tool through which he could 'focus

instead on the concrete mechanisms through which power penetrates the very bodies of

subjects.' (*ST*, 14) Agamben describes this shift as one from 'epistemology to politics, [a] shift

onto the plane of a politics of statements and discursive regimes.' (ibid.) As Foucault remarks in

the famous 1977 interview 'Truth and Power': 'At this level, it's not so much a matter of

knowing what external power imposes itself on science as of what effects of power circulate

among scientific statements, what constitutes, as it were, their internal regime of power.'[93] And

as Agamben suggests: 'Unlike Kuhn's paradigm, the *episteme* does not define what is knowable

in a given period, but what is implicit in the fact that a given discourse or epistemological figure

exists at all.' (*ST*, 15) Here Agamben shifts attention away from the *content* of what exists as

knowledge, in favour of the simple fact that it exists and the formal-structural conditions by

which it *can* exist (that is, from *what* to *how*). William Watkin has described this acutely as 'an

ontology of epistemology.'[94] Where Foucault seeks to differentiate his own approach to the

paradigm from that of Kuhn can in fact be described in terms of the relation between form and

content: whereas Kuhn is interested to determine what criteria organises and regulates a specific

set of discursive and behavioural *contents*, Foucault seeks rather to trace the *formal conditions*

within which such an organisation of content becomes possible in the first place. Thus, Foucault

and Agamben's paradigms 'do not determine *what* power is, but *how* it organises and controls'

(my emphasis).[95]

The consequences of adopting such an approach to the study of historical phenomena

took time to develop in Foucault's work, and Agamben's commentary makes clear that Foucault

'grappled' with the concept of the paradigm over many years. After a number of variations upon

the paradigmatic theme ('positivity,' 'discursive formation,' 'apparatus') in Foucault, the

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[93] Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Power', in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, vol.3, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley. New Press: New York, 2000, p.114
[94] William Watkin, *Agamben and Indifference*, p.1
[95] William Watkin, 'The Signature of All Things: Agamben's Philosophical Archaeology,' in MLN: Volume 129, Number 1, January 2014 (Italian Issue), p.145

method ultimately develops into a form of analysis which, as will be seen, is in its own way topological. Indeed, if we consider once more the distinction between topography and topology it will help to shed some light on what is at stake in these different approaches to the paradigm. Topography, we can recall, is a static geometry that seeks to establish a set of fixed and determinate features of a given region or spatial configuration. The onus is on placement, grounding, and mapping. The ability to map discrete locations or particular objects involves a set of criteriological assumptions about territorial, cartographical, and representational arrangements whose epistemic significance exceeds the geometrical purview of topography as a mathematical and geographical discipline. This topographical impulse to provide the spatio-temporal coordinates within which discrete subjects encounter equally discrete objects goes to the core of the historical-philosophical tradition of the west, and we should keep in mind that in Agamben's work (as in Foucault's) we are never far from a will to problematize the cartographic pretensions of epistemology and metaphysics. Agamben turns regularly to topological figures in order to upset the demarcations and delimitations imposed by topographical approaches to spatial orientation – orientation in any kind of space, be it geographical space, signifying space, physical or relational space. This is because topology, in direct correlation to the Foucauldian paradigm, is less interested in the maintenance of certain demarcations and boundaries within space than with *the structural possibilities and systematic properties that allow for the formation of any kind of space at all*. As such, thinking topologically (that is, paradigmatically) means appreciating space – discursive, relational, geographical, and *historical* – not as 'fixity, placement, or grounding, but as a matter of relationality, connectivity, distribution, assemblage, transformation, and supplementation.'[96] In terms of the form of knowledge produced by the study of social-historical phenomena that is the crux of Agamben's 'Paradigm' essay, a topographical approach corresponds to a Kuhnian model of analysis in which the attempt is to 'draw up a list of what, from that moment, had been demonstrated to be true and had assumed the status of definitively acquired knowledge'.[97]

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[96] Debrix, 'Topologies of Vulnerability', p.444
[97] Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith. Pantheon Books: New York, 1972, p.191

Foucault describes this interest in the determinations of 'systematicity and theoretical form' from which his own paradigmatic approach sought to escape, by 'diverting attention away from the criteria that permit the constitution' of a given "list" or map of 'definitively acquired knowledge' in order to focus on 'what is implicit in the fact that a given discourse or epistemological figure exists at all: "In the enigma of scientific discourse, what the analysis of the [paradigm] questions is not its right to be a science, but the fact that it exists."[98] The difference between the two treatments of the paradigm can thus be understood as one between a *topographical* approach to social-historical phenomena which seeks to establish a determinate and fixed criteria of knowledge at a given time, and a *topological* strategy which seeks instead to trace the conditions or structures of possibility within which the emergence of any given discourse or epistemological figure becomes possible. There is a form of knowledge being produced here then, but one which does not proceed from a 'preexisting generality' (*ST*, 21) or rule to the acquisition of 'definitively acquired knowledge.'

Agamben turns to Foucault's use of Bentham's 'dream building', the panopticon, in order to illustrate the 'peculiar epistemological model' the paradigm introduces. As Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish*:

We know the principle on which it was based: at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres.[99]

After quoting this passage Agamben concludes that:

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[98] Ibid, p.192
[99] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan. Vintage Books: New York, 1977, p.200

[F]or Foucault the panopticon is both a "generalizeable model of functioning," namely "panopticism," that is to say, the principle of an "ensemble," and the "panoptic modality of power." As such, it is a figure of political technology that may and must be "detached from any specific use"; it is "not merely a dream building," but the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form."' (*ST*, 16)

Here we can see how the paradigm serves Foucault's intention to follow a 'path' between 'formal analysis and social history'. The paradigm is simultaneously a 'generalizable' figure and a particular 'modality'; it is, Agamben writes, 'not only an exemplar and model' which imposes the constitution of a norm or rule, but 'also and above all [that] which allows statements and discursive practices to be gathered into a new intelligible ensemble and in a new problematic way'. (*ST,* 18) By 'neutralizing the dichotomy between the general and the particular,' the paradigmatic figure steps to one side of the 'drastic alternative' between the ontological and ontic levels of analysis, allowing for a consideration of the way in which these levels of life cross over and intersect with one another:

In short, the panopticon functions as a paradigm in the strict sense: it is a singular object that, standing equally for all others of the same class, defines the intelligibility of the group of which it is a part and which, at the same time, it constitutes. …[T]he panopticon [thus] serves a decisive function for the understanding of the disciplinary modality of power, but also how it becomes something like the epistemological figure that, in defining the disciplinary universe of modernity, also marks the threshold over which it passes into the societies of control. (*ST, 17*)

The last point in the passage is important to emphasise. For Agamben (as for Foucault before him) what is perhaps decisive about the paradigm – and what constitutes the 'new intelligibility' and 'broader historical-problematic context' it produces – is the way in which it reveals not only a given 'epistemological universe' (disciplinary power) but also, by virtue of its particular mode of exposition, the processes of *deformation* of that universe; the 'threshold' at which a given

ensemble of discursive practices begins to transform and mutate into another modality of intelligibility (societies of control). I will return to the significance of this dimension of the paradigm in my discussion of Agamben's reception of Foucault in the next chapter. But for now, what are we to make of the suggestion that it is in the nature of the paradigm that is 'must be detached from any specific use'? We can recall once more the definition Agamben provides early on: a paradigm is 'a singular object that, standing equally for all others of the same class, defines the intelligibility of the group of which it is a part and which, at the same time, constitutes.' It would appear, on the basis of Agamben's remarks on the panopticon, that this singularity of the paradigmatic figure emerges as a result of its *removal* or *deactivation* from a certain context of epistemological efficacy. It is this suggestion in the passage quoted above that occupies Agamben for much of the rest of his essay, and it is noteworthy that Agamben moves the discussion away from Foucault at this point. As I shall be arguing in a later chapter, it is on the question of the negative capability of the paradigm that Agamben's method will, if not completely differ, then certainly depart from Foucault's.

Let's attend to this negativity of the paradigm that so interests Agamben. For the paradigm to become a singular object it must be removed or 'de-activated' from its ordinary usage and context within a given group, so that it thus becomes exemplary of that group and can constitute the 'rule' of its normal use and context. As William Watkin formulates the peculiar functionality at issue here: 'The paradigm negates its facticity so that it can generate the condition of its facticity.'[100] The paradigm is thus tied to an experience of negativity; it *is* constituting insofar as it has the ability *not to* constitute. In this way, it also reveals that any rule, in order to apply, must pass through and so be touched by its capacity not to apply. In considering this negative capability of the paradigm, we touch on one of the most important conceptual problems that Agamben has sought to address: the status and function of potentiality. Agamben is indebted for this conceptualisation to Heidegger, in particular to the latter's reading of a passage in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* regarding the relation that exists between

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[100] Watkin, *Agamben and Indifference*, p.17

'potentiality' and 'actuality'.[101] In an essay entitled 'On What We Can Not Do,' Agamben provides a concise account of what is at stake in his own, idiosyncratic reception of this difficult moment in the thought of both Aristotle and Heidegger:

That every potentiality is always an impotentiality, that every ability to do is always already an ability to not do, is the decisive point of the theory of potentiality developed by Aristotle in the ninth book of the *Metaphysics*: "Impotentiality (*adynamis*)," he writes, "is a privation contrary to potentiality (*dynamis*). Every potentiality is impotentiality of the same [potentiality] and with respect to the same [potentiality]." "Impotentiality" does not mean here only absence of potentiality, but also and above all "being able to not do," being able to not exercise one's own potentiality. And, indeed, it is precisely this specific ambivalence of potentiality – being able to be and not be, to do and not do – that defines, in fact, human potentiality. (*N*, 43-4)

Thus, in the essay 'On Potentiality', Agamben will claim that: '[I]n its originary structure *dynamis*, potentiality, maintains itself in relation to its own privation, its own *stērisis*, its own non-Being. …To be potential means: to be one's own lack, to be in relation to one's own incapacity.' (*P*, 16) This understanding of being, actuality, and thus of all potentiality (*potenza*) as existing in intimate to relation to its own *sterēsis* or privation is decisive in Agamben's theories of language, power, history, and of the subject. As such I will return to it in a number of different contexts in what follows, but for now we can focus on the way in which the paradigm maintains a relation to its 'own incapacity'. For Agamben the exposure and showing of the paradigm's negative capability – a peculiar capacity for incapacity inscribed in the logic of applicability and so in the process of actualisation of any act or rule – is what is most significant and, indeed, potentially affirmative about the figure; because this being-by-not-being of the paradigm sets it apart, so to speak, from the traditional logical operations through which the

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[101] Heidegger provides a commentary on the passage from the *Metaphysics* quoted above, writing that 'here it is stated: In addition to force there is unforce, 'im-potentia' non-force. Yet this non- and un- are not merely negations, but mean rather having withdrawn, '*being in a state of withdrawal*' – [*sterisis*]. For Agamben a form of relation to an incapacity is at the centre of the logic of potentiality and this privative structure will orient his own attempt to elaborate on 'the way the living being has its vital practice'. I will return to this notion of being in relation to one's own incapacity at the close of this chapter and in more detail in the discussion of the subject in the fourth chapter. For Heidegger's reading of these passages in Aristotle see: Martin Heidegger, *Aristotle's Metaphysics 1-3: On the Essence of Actuality and Force*, trans Walter Brogan and Peter Warnek. Bloomington: Indiana, 1995.

relation between a rule and its application (between potential and act) is established. The paradigm opens a space (or *stanze*) within which the dialectic of universal and particular is problematized, and appears to exist in a place that is in some way removed from or exterior to the totalising grasp of this dichotomous logic, whilst – and this is decisive – nonetheless still maintaining a relation to it. For Agamben precisely the location (or *lack of* determinate location) of the paradigmatic figure, its capacity to reflect the logical relations of the formation it is removed from and simultaneously 'constitutes,' is its most salient characteristic. The form of relation that is produced by the paradigm is thus radically different from the usual understanding of an example as simply 'articulating together' a rule and its application.

Agamben has turned on a number of occasions to the grammatical example to illustrate this peculiar operation as it functions within language (indeed it is in his earlier studies on the experience of language that something like a paradigmatic localization first emerges in Agamben's work). As we have seen, the paradox in giving an example is that 'a single utterance in no way distinguished from others of its kind is isolated from them precisely insofar as it belongs to them.' (*HS*, 22) In the example the normal denotative function of a term is deactivated in the act of becoming exemplary of all other 'effective' instances of the term:

Through its paradigmatic exhibition…the normal use as well as the denotative character of the term…is suspended. The term thus makes possible the constitution and intelligibility of the group…of which it is both a member and a paradigm. What is essential here is the suspension of reference and normal use [because] it is precisely by virtue of this non-functioning and suspension that it can show how the syntagma works and can allow the rule be stated. (*ST*, 24)

Once again, we can see the close interconnection between impotential and potential: the paradigm functions, we might say, by virtue of its capacity not-to function. As will be seen this peculiar negative capability will frame (among many other examples) Agamben's theory of the state of exception, of the logic of the sovereign 'ban', and of the 'inoperative centre' of both human potentiality and the theological-political apparatus of power (*potenza*). In order to

illustrate the 'specific ambivalence' of this inoperativity – its negating force but also its affirmative potential – Agamben regularly turns to the poem:

A model of this operation that consists in making all human and divine works inoperative is the poem. Because poetry is precisely that linguistic operation that renders language inoperative...[it is] the point at which language…deactivates its communicative and informative functions. (*KG*, 251)[102]

What is most important to consider in the present context are the implications for historical knowledge of approaching objects and events on the basis of their decisive *abstraction* from the sphere of their everyday use and so, in effect, from the sphere of 'social history'. Contrary to the criticism already mentioned, it is clear that in this abstraction and deactivation Agamben has no intention of analysing the historically and epistemologically deactivated paradigm in terms of its place within a static and 'meta-historical atemporal structure.' (*ST*, 92). The capacity for abstraction and what me might term the *material deactivation* that characterises the place and function of the paradigm can be better understood if we situate it in relation to the register of topology. To say it once more: topology is not a cartographic science, it does not seek to fix and determine the spatio-temporal configuration of a given space, rather, it engages with the structure of possibilities which allow for the formation and deformation of any given space. To return to the figure of the panopticon, from a topological perspective it is not that Foucault's conception of social control finds its most appropriate manifestation in the *material reality* of the panopticon, but rather that the abstracted figure of the panopticon, as a paradigm, articulates the conditions of possibility for the new mode of social control that is panopticism.[103] In exactly the same way, in Agamben's treatment of the camp, 'the materialization of the camp in a particular place cannot completely identify, represent, or explain what the camp is and does.' The historical specificity of this

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[102] In early essay on the German critic Max Kommerell, Agamben describes this dimension of inoperative, deactivated figures as 'linguistic gesture' or *Sprachgebärde*, 'a forceful [*potenza*] presence in language itself, one that is older and more originary than conceptual expression.' (*P*, 77)

[103] Emmet Stintson, 'The Work of Art as Paradigm: Giorgio Agamben and the Relationship between Knowledge and the Creative Arts,' in *New Scholar: An International Journal of the Humanities, Creative Arts and Social Sciences*, Volume 2 Number 1, 2013, p.5

materialization matters, of course. But Agamben's contention is that the materialization of the camp as an event in space and time does not 'saturate the camp's field of virtual force,'[104] that is, its *structure of possibility*. As such, the difficult position Agamben will propose to defend is that when approached as a 'topological matrix' or paradigm, the camp (and indeed any historical figure or event) is not an image that is meant to represent a reality. It is in this sense that Agamben will suggest that the *dimension of possibility* that the paradigm opens 'is not an object endowed with real properties'. (*ST*, 32)[105] It is not an 'absolute reality' but nor for that reason does it deny or seek to escape from it. The paradigm is intimately concerned with reality and yet stands, so to speak, to one side of it. It is 'the manifesting beside itself of each thing (*paradeigma*). It is in this sense that we must understand the 'paradoxical empiricism evoked by Thanos Zartaloudis when he suggests that such the paradigmatic approach does not 'posit [philosophical thought] as opposite to empirical reality, but [tries] to explain its peculiar and paradoxical empiricism.'[106] But this showing beside itself is a limit – or rather, it is 'the unravelling, the indetermination of a limit.' (*CC*, 10-11) When critics have sought to gauge whether Agamben's use of extreme, paradigmatic figures points to an 'absolutely realistic' situation or historical event, or are in fact no more than the ciphers of a 'blank,' utopian political escapism, their 'drastic alternatives' do not appreciate this dimension of the paradigm: its opening of a sphere of potential that accompanies all processes of actualisation; the limit it must pass through in order that it *can* be. This is the singular intensity of the paradigm; it is simultaneously 'inscribed within a determinate historiographical constellation' and yet *at the same time* expositive of its 'a priori condition' of possibility. (*ST*, 94) But, the question remains, if historical events and figures should not be understood as representing a reality, what exactly do they represent?

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[104] Debrix, 'Topologies of Vulnerability,' p.448

[105] Thus, only if an object is abstracted – or de-activated – from its topographical location within the spatio-temporal panorama of historical knowledge can the 'broader historical-problematic context,' opened by the conditions of possibility that allow for its 'sheer existence,' be analysed. It is in this sense that two of Agamben's most gnomic statements (both courtesy of Hofmannsthal) regarding his historical-philosophical method must be understood: 'To read what was never written,' it is necessary to develop a 'topology of the unreal'.

[106] Zartaloudis, *Power, Law, and the Uses of Criticism*, p.6

This interest in the unreality of the abstract topology of the paradigm is perhaps the preeminent cause for those 'misunderstandings' produced by Agamben's historical method in the early Homo Sacer studies. Clearly, this is not a mode of 'doing' history that can provide a fixed and determinate historiographic knowledge. Below, I will consider in more detail the break Agamben attempts to make with the 'epistemological models…commonly accepted in historical research.' (*ST*, 16) But how does the thesis that there is a confluence between paradigmaticity and topology in Agamben's thinking stand at this stage? The ambivalent negativity of the paradigmatic *topos* derives from its taking-a-place outside that in some way remains related to the inside of a group or set. The structural inconsistency and undecidability of position of the paradigm thus reveals a certain *deficiency* or *deformation* in the logic of subsumption which 'conjoins together' and 'places alongside' such that 'the sense of belonging' becomes possible. This logic, as we saw in the previous chapter, can only posit the individual as a particular embodiment of the universal, or conceive of the universal as being present in individual embodiments,[107] and so the function of the particular within this logic is simply to be the place, to take the place of a continual re-inscription of the general rule. But the paradigm, Agamben suggests, 'constitutes a peculiar form of knowledge that does not proceed by articulating together the universal and the particular.' (*ST*, 19) The paradigm-example thus reveals the central paradox of the universal-particular relation: in order to constitute itself as a totality, a system or group must situate a particular part outside of the whole which at the same time maintains a structural link with its deepest interior. And through this very relation the totality becomes 'unclosed, perforated, open [and] doesn't hold together'.[108] Structurally equivalent to the example – standing for all cases and yet simultaneously removed from them – the paradigm produces a different form of relation between individual and universal however: it is a singular element within a group that in its singular *location* calls into question and 'expose[s]' (*CC*, 66) the onto-political logic of commonality. And, perhaps most significantly of all, the paradigm's 'peculiar' function is a result of the relation it maintains to its own

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[107] Chiesa and Ruda, 'The Event of Language', p 165

[108] Livingston, *Politics of Logic*, p. 82

incapacity; that it functions as a result of its non-functioning. It is helpful to compare the characteristics of the paradigm detailed so far with the summary of the Agambenian topology provided at the close of the previous chapter:

1. the paradigm involves a singular relation to the negative, and

2. as a result of its negative capability, is also irreducible to the dichotomy of general-particular.

3. The paradigm is an exemplary case or figure, and as such reveals the necessity of a flawed and porous logic of exceptionalism within this dichotomous logic.

4. In exposing the brush with incapacity and impotential that every application and actualisation of a rule or action undergoes, the paradigm reveals an alternative structure of possibility.

As the opening remarks to the 'Paradigm' essay quoted at the outset of this chapter make clear, Agamben disavows all intention of providing anything like a historical explanation in his work and appears to challenge the very notion of something like historical knowledge. I would like to pursue the question of the 'explanatory' force of Agamben's work in order to develop this discussion of the topology of the paradigm and introduce the related methodological figures Agamben makes use of in developing his particular form of historical analysis: the 'signature' and 'archaeology'. But first we need to consider just what kind of approach to historical study we are dealing with here, that has no intention to provide historical cause or explanation of its subject matter. And ask, how does approaching historical figures 'as paradigms' shape such an approach?

Philosophy at the Border

The most obvious thing to observe is that we appear to be dealing with an approach to historical phenomena which radically departs from the methods 'commonly accepted in historical research.' As well as claiming that his studies do not develop 'mere' historiographic theses or

reconstructions, Agamben also insists in the 'Paradigm' essay that his discussion of figures such as the camp, *homo sacer*, and the state of exception, should not be read as an attempt to provide 'something like a cause or historical origin' which would 'explain modernity'. If the Homo Sacer studies do not seek to reconstruct a particular historical event, nor provide any explanatory or causal thesis on the basis of its analysis of a given historical context, what exactly are they doing? There is something *perverse*[109] in Agamben's remarks it would seem, given the historical weight of the subject matter he takes on in these studies. As one critic points out the 'striking feature of Agamben's approach to politics is that his reasoning typically proceeds from extreme cases or threshold states.'[110] Here Agamben appears to generalise Benjamin's literary-philosophical dictum that those elements which is it is the task of the critic to 'elicit from phenomena are most clearly evident at the extremes'.[111] Indeed, if we turn to the earliest methodological statement in Agamben's corpus in *Stanzas* we read that whilst 'it is common to expect results of a work of criticism, or at least arguable positions and, as they say, working hypothesis…when the term 'criticism' enters the vocabulary of Western philosophy, it signifies rather inquiry at the limits of knowledge about precisely that which can be neither posed nor grasped.' (*S*, xv) The reference (in this most Benjaminian programmatic statement) is to the critical project of Kant, and it is worth emphasising here that Agamben's interest in extreme or limit-cases is not, as many critics assume, simply part of an artificially rhetorical or hyperbolic tendency.[112] Nor, as I shall come to argue in more detail, is the 'extreme' or 'exceptional' situation foregrounded as a means to establish (as in Schmitt, for instance) generalising principles or to utilise their singularity for historical and politically normative ends. Rather, Agamben's interest in the *Grenzbegriff* or borderline-concept emerges from a complex philosophical backdrop that is crucial to an understanding of his thinking. Working at the limits

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[109] Justin Clemens and Lorenzo Chiesa and Frank Ruda have drawn attention to the significance of the figure of the pervert and perversion to Agamben's method. See Chiesa and Ruda, 'The Event of Language'; and Justin Clemens, *Psychoanalysis is an Anti-Philosophy*. Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2013.

[110] Ross, 'Agamben's Political Paradigm', p.421

[111] Walter Benjamin, 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p.35

[112] In making this claim Ross refers to the influence of Kierkegaard upon Agamben's thinking three times. Whilst there may be grounds for considering Agamben's interest in Kierkegaard he is certainly a marginal figure in Agamben's work and does little to bring out the complexities of Agamben's use of the 'threshold' and extreme case, other, of course, than to help support Ross's (reductive, in my opinion) reading. See Ross, 'Agamben's Political Paradigm', p.422. Agamben's reference to Kierkegaard (the only one in his work as far as I can tell) is in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, p.48

of what can be 'posed' and 'grasped,' Agamben proposes a form of philosophical history in

which, as Benjamin suggests in his own methodological treatise, 'the more precisely the

empirical is investigated as an extreme, the more profoundly it will be penetrated.' Such

investigation should therefore 'take its departure from the extreme.' What brings Agamben

close to figures such as Benjamin and (superficially at least) Schmitt (as well as Heidegger and

Foucault), is that a form of study pursued according to this imperative is 'necessarily dependent

upon a contact or an encounter with a singularity that exceeds or eludes the concept.'[113]

The 'concept' Agamben is interested in calling into question, and what many of the

critical responses to his work unproblematically rely on, is the construction of a 'determinate

mode of historical transmission.' (*P*, 60) Stephen D. DeCaroli neatly defines such an approach

as pertaining to 'the question of how one can be expected to acquire from the singular example

the components of truth without abolishing the singularity of the example by transforming it

into a general concept.'[114] From a philosophical perspective, the referential frame underwriting

this effective relay between historical events and figures and a generalising set of normative

principles 'not contingent on time or place'[115] is based on – that is, it presupposes – a 'one-to-

one correspondence between a concept and a real manifestation,'[116] thus ensuring, as Agamben

writes, a correspondence between 'truth and facts, between verification and comprehension.'

(*RA*, 11) History, in this view, is the reliquary not only of specific forms of knowledge

(pertaining to a given period, figure, or event) but rather, and at the same time, of knowledge as

such. Approaching historical figures as paradigms means disrupting the historical-philosophical

relay on which this assumption is based. Thus, Agamben can preface his discussion of the

extreme, threshold case of the camp in *Homo Sacer I* with the following, extraordinary

disclaimer:

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[113] Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's –abilities*. Harvard University Press: Massachusetts and London, 2008, p.179.
[114] Stephen D. DeCaroli, 'Visibility and History,' in *Philosophy Today*, September 2001, p.10
[115] Ibid, p.14. Loosing the referential anchor between 'historical fact and truth' does not, however, inevitably 'ascend' from the historical particularity of an event to a 'generalizing' mode of explanation. We will see that Foucault, who is often used as a foil to Agamben's generalising tendencies, himself moved in his later works to a mode of analysis that is methodologically proximate to Agamben's own paradigmatic topology.
[116] Debrix, Topologies of Vulnerability, p.448

Instead of deducing the definition of the camp from the events that took place there, we will ask: What is a camp? What is its juridico-political structure, that such events could take place there? This will lead us to regard the camp not as a historical fact and an anomaly belonging to the past (even if still verifiable) but in some way as the hidden matrix and nomos of the political space in which we are still living. (*HS*, 166)

What Agamben's analysis of the camp will reveal is that, when approached according to the paradigmatic method laid out in *The Signature of All Things*, its juridico-political structure, the processes of its formation and very modality of existence, is comprised of a topological field of forces in which the concpets of order, territory, power, weakness, life and death, enter into a state of 'polar intensity' and indistinction.[117] As well as proposing a fundamental reconceptualisation of the space of the camp, working against the grain of the traditional understanding of it as a topographically distinct and closed space, Agamben's reading also suggests that the 'threshold-state' of the camp, approached as a paradigm, 'calls into question the dichotomous opposition between the particular and the universal which we are used to seeing as inseparable from procedures of knowing.' (*ST*, 19) It is in this broader, epistemo-ontological sense, that the paradigm demonstrates that historical events are not reducible to a determinate relation between 'facts and verification', and so determinative of the 'properties' of a historical and present 'reality'. What Agamben is challenging, at least in part, by engaging such limit-cases is 'the normative capacity that deeply characterizes the historical appearance of exemplary objects, individuals and events.'[118] To put this simply, what is in question here is why and how we understand the sphere of history as comprised of a series of unique, particular events, which form a coherent, systematic, and universal body of knowledge. What the exceptional and extreme case signals is the sheer historical contingency of any given event, that what is occluded when a concept, political formation, or institution is understood as an 'historical fact' belonging to the past, is both the heterogeneity of the conditions and processes

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[117] The most detailed reading of Agamben's analysis of the topology of the camp is Giaccaria and Minca's 'Topographies/Topologies of the camp'.
[118] DeCaroli, 'Visibility and History,' p.14

involved in its formation and functioning (in the example of the camp, particular and historically contingent concepts of order and territory), and the continual transformation of its relation to the present. What the paradigmatic approach makes available for analysis are the contingencies of formation and operation, which resist the capacity of the universal or general concept to subsume, 'contain,' and 'normalize' the singularity of 'historical' events, thus revealing them 'in their proper dispersal'.

Notwithstanding the philosophical ground of Agamben's interest in extreme cases, it is understandable that his claim to not be offering any kind of historiographic thesis or causal explanation in his discussion of such extreme or threshold states has caused some bafflement to those who have read the volumes of the Homo Sacer series to which Agamben refers. All of these engage events, figures, and sites which are not only historically specific but, in their extremity comprise the nerve centres of the imaginary body of modernity: the 'exceptional' capacity of the juridico-political state to exclude certain forms of life and, ultimately, its power over that life insofar as it is 'killable'; the emergence of totalitarianism; the construction of the concentration camps and the events of the holocaust; how else is one to approach these if not to attempt to grasp their explanatory force? A number of critics have judged Agamben's early Homo Sacer studies on the basis of their flawed 'explanatory capacity'. But, as I have suggested, readings that approach Agamben's work in this way occlude the singular treatment given to the historical sources in the work and, in so doing, presuppose the methodological *problem* that Agamben is trying to bring into critical view. Approaching historical figures paradigmatically, Agamben is not seeking to deduce explanations or the causal origins of the contemporary from historical events, but is rather following the example of Benjamin once more in suggesting that what is most important is the need – and to find a way – to 'shrug off' the weight of a 'determinative mode of historical transmission' that has defined – and in Agamben's view profoundly limited – the cultural and political understanding not only of the 'enigmas' of the last century (*HS*, 11) but also the theological, philosophical, and juridical-political apparatuses within which we still form our lives. 'What is in question' in his studies then, 'is the epistemological paradigm of inquiry itself.' (*ST*, 89) This, I would suggest, is the

centrepiece of the 'broader historical-problematic context' which these studies at the borders of what can be posed and grasped intend to 'constitute and make intelligible,' a 'fundamental reconsideration of what constitutes the historical'.[119] And in order to understand Agamben's way of approaching his limit-cases, we have to understand the way he reads.

Historical Philology

In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, in one of the methodological asides which Agamben has come increasingly to frame his studies with,[120] he notes that '[w]hen we undertake archaeological research it is necessary to take into account that the genealogy of a political concept or institution may be found in a field that is different from the one in which we initially assumed we would find it (for instance, it may be found in theology and not in political science).' (*KG*, 112) Leaving aside for the moment the use of the term 'archaeology' to define his method of analysis, it is clear that this kind of movement between disciplinary fields has troubled some readers of Agamben's work. Alongside the benign but influential dismissals by Ernesto Laclau and Antonio Negri, a number of critics have found fault with Agamben's willingness to conflate apparently distinct areas of thought.[121] Contrary to those who have marginalised Agamben's work as a result of his border-crossings, I would suggest that this methodological tendency is in fact one of the more compelling aspects of his body of work. Considered from the perspective of political theory, Agamben's approach to the complexities of social organisation and the 'messy, layered, and complex' realities of biocultural life may appear to be somewhat aloof.[122] Considered sociologically, Agamben's work gives the distinct impression of a thinker paring his nails whilst the maelstrom of social interaction and institutional organisation continues. But my sense is that there is a false logic of argumentation being employed here, in which Agamben is being made to answer to a set of 'canonical' critical criteria which he has no intention of meeting. Admittedly, Agamben's *Homo Sacer I* provocatively analyses areas of life and thought

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[119] Watkin, *Agamben and Indifference*, p.5
[120] See for instance *The Sacrament of Language*, pp.11-13
[121] Ernesto Laclau, 'Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy?'; Antonio Negri, 'The Discreet Taste of the Dialectic,' both in *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*.
[122] William Connolly, 'The Complexities of Sovereignty,' in *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*

with which political theorists and sociologists are intimately engaged and it is reasonable that

they should want to respond to a work that has gained such widespread notoriety. The problem,

as a growing number of studies have attempted to show, is that much of the response focused

almost exclusively on the first three instalments of the series and demonstrated a lack of

appreciation of the gestation of Agamben's ideas and the wider ambitions of his project. At the

same time, however, in seeking to provide an alternative perspective and defence of Agamben's

work I would not go so far as to suggest that Agamben's statements on the 'ontic' reality of

political life are mere 'hyperbole,' and that as such his work has *nothing* to offer the political-

sociological fields of analysis.[123] To do so is to reproduce the kinds of disciplinary

territorialisation that his work seeks to overcome. It is clear that the question of this tension

inhabiting Agamben's work is the ground upon which productive readings must situate

themselves, and I am suggesting that it is by following the topological thread running through

Agamben's work that it becomes possible to resist the tendency to approach the problem in a

two-dimensional way. To properly consider the singularity of Agamben's approach and its

difficulty, it is necessary to work through the consistent attempt to *collapse* and 'topologically

deform' the distinction between the ontological and the ontic, between the 'fields' of philosophy

and politics. One of the aspects of Agamben's topological method that is essential to a more

complete understanding of how his work pursues this aim, but which has, to date, received little

sustained critical attention, is his idiosyncratic conception of philology.[124] Obviously, a detailed

analysis of this aspect of Agamben's work is not possible in the present context, but I want to

draw out some of the implications of this approach in order to further develop the argument for

a topological reading of Agamben, and perhaps do away with some of the false criteria that have

dominated reception of his work up to this point. To be clear, many of the critical responses to

Agamben's work have posed important questions of his analyses, and I am not suggesting that

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[123] This is the position Abbott ultimately takes – though not without thoughtful reflection. For a sensitive response to this question see Jessica Whyte's review of his study, available online at: http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/52792-the-figure-of-this-world-agamben-and-the-question-of-political-ontology. Another instance of such 'positive' disciplinary division is William Watkin's *The Literary Agamben*: *Adventures in Logopoiesis*. Continuum: London, 2010.

[124] Such a study would, fittingly, have to be purely text-based as there is at present little detailed biographical information available on Agamben's early studies. As is his wont no doubt, Agamben, 'like all philosophers, does not exist in reality' but only in his books.

politically and sociologically informed readings should be foregone. Rather, it seems to me that we don't get the most out of Agamben if we restrict ourselves to its 'adequacy' to the standards set by these critical criteria.[125]

In the vast majority[126] of his works, the reader is confronted with a kind of exploratory narration of Agamben's reading itinerary in and around his given subject, with texts often stating openly that 'in the course of the research undertaken' the initial plan was complicated, other avenues were explored, different problems emerged.[127] Agamben's body of work consists of a series of reading-diaries structured to reflect the steady, slow accretion of material that comes from hours of patient study. This material is eventually brought together to compose the finished (or 'abandoned'[128]) work. Agamben has remarked that he seriously considered pursuing philology as a discipline before turning to philosophy, and the range of texts and documents consulted in his works suggests this ambition never completely left him – the bibliographies of Agamben's books can perhaps be viewed as constellations or images which best capture his philosophical practice. What is clear from a cursory reading of any one of the books Agamben has published is that this is a reader who is enthralled by what Foucault described as the 'great, tender, and warm freemasonry of useless erudition'.[129] Agamben's particular method of bringing together the wealth of exegetical material his research produces is one of the most identifiable (and controversial) traits of his writing, a distinctly literary-philosophical practice, which consists in the careful arrangement of a series of textual encounters to form a composite whole; critical analysis as mosaic. It is in this sense, from a methodological point of view, that David Kishik has suggested Agamben's approach to composition can be understood as akin to that of the 'bricoleur' described by Levi-Strauss in *The Savage Mind*. There Levi-Straus writes

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[125] Alison Ross, 'Introduction,' in *The Agamben Effect*. Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2008.

[126] An exception might be *Idea of Prose*, which is the most formally experimental of Agamben's works. Though there is certainly a thematic coherence to the work, there is no 'thesis' or critical argument pursued. In this work Agamben is aiming at something which, from a compositional point of view, situates itself precisely at the crossroads between literary and philosophical form. The text is made up in the main of a series of readings or textual interventions and glosses, and as such I would suggest is still operating within the same methodological frame I am sketching here – a literary-philological reading of philosophical texts.

[127] See for example the preface to *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Office*, where Agamben writes: 'What had to be confronted was…'

[128] Agamben recently chose to describe the last and as yet untranslated volume of the Homo Sacer series, *L'uso dei Corpi ('The Use of Bodies')* in terms of an abandonment, no doubt following Leonardo da Vinci's dictum that 'Art works are never finished, only abandoned'. This sentiment is echoed by Paul Valery, who writes in 'Au Sujet de Cimetiere Marin' that 'a work is never truly *completed*…only abandoned'.

[129] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*. Allen Lane, The Penguin Press: London, 2003, p.5.

that the method of bricolage 'is to be defined only by its potential use or, putting this another way and in the language of the 'bricoleur' himself, because the elements are collected or retained on the principle that 'they may always come in handy.'[130] This process of mannered, textual bricolage is the result of the intensely literary mode of philosophical inquiry that shapes Agamben's 'confrontation with the past'.

In early works such as *Stanzas*, *Infancy and History*, and the essay 'Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science', Agamben was drawn to a form of critical-historical analysis indebted to this latter figure, but also to his reading of figures such as Benjamin, Dumézil, Benveniste, and Nietzsche. Agamben's encounter with Warburg's formal-historical approach to the study of images crucially informs his own philological approach to the study of texts, and borrowing one of the many names that Warburg hit upon to describe his own idiosyncratic project Agamben described this mode of analysis as pursuing a 'general science of the human.' To contemporary readers such an endeavour appears problematic no doubt, with its echoes of the emancipatory 'freedom' of man promulgated by the Marxist left in the middle of the century (and from which Foucault was to break so decisively). In a 'Postilla' added to the essay on Warburg eight years after its composition in 1975, Agamben himself suggests that while such a project 'strikes the author as one that is still valid,' it 'cannot be pursued in the same terms.' (*P*, 101) I would venture that this reappraisal is a result, at least in part, of the deepening scope of Agamben's reading of Foucault in the years separating the composition of the two texts. Confronted by that 'face drawn in the sand' evoked in *The Order of Things*, Agamben returns to this project and seeks to rid it of any humanist residue. But he does, clearly, still think something like a 'general science' has some promise for thinking.[131]

The aspect of Warburg's work which sparked Agamben's interest in a project that would free itself 'from the vagueness of interdisciplinarity' and which continues to interest him

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[130] Kishik, *The Power of Life*, pp.63-5; Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1962, p.11-12
[131] An alternative formulation that I will seek to justify in the pages that follow, and which brings the project into line with Agamben's subsequent work on biopolitics and his pursuit of a form-of-life, could claim that what is most interesting – and theoretically valuable – about Agamben is his attempt to develop a 'science of the becoming human of the human,' that is, a sustained reflection on the arts of anthropogenesis. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Routledge: New York and London, 2001, p.387

in his 'Postilla' is its working in the 'place of human cognitive activity in its vital confrontation with the past'. (*P*, 101) More specifically, Agamben draws much from Warburg's attempts to understand the work of art against the grain of the 'reductive logic of modern aesthetcs', which interprets individual works from a psychological point of view (that is, by making a link between an artist's supposed intentions and the formal elements of an image, text, or painting) and, concomitant with this psychologisation of form, seeks to create a coherent narrative of historical and thematic progression within which individual works of art each take their proper place. The formal-aesthetic autonomy of the individual art work, together with the theoretical integrity of its critical validation and inscription within this disciplinary tradition, is thus secured through a historiographical methodology with which we are by now familiar. As a model of historical inquiry, aesthetics operates according to the same process of constructing 'historiographical thesis and reconstructions', which ultimately produce a referential bind anchoring the subject to the historical 'things themselves' (in this instance, works of art). In terms of historical research, the 'cognitive relation' (*ST*, 32) established between subject and object (critic and art object) on this basis allows for the mutual determination of the historical phenomena in question in a given analysis, *and* 'the historical subject who is supposed to gain access to them.' (*ST*, 89) But, as Alex Murray suggests, in one of the earliest and most perceptive accounts of Agamben's indebtedness to Warburg's project:

Warburg wanted to explore the potential for uncovering an iconographic history of Western art that didn't pay attention to the auratic and isolated space of the aesthetic object, but instead saw these images as part of a much larger constellation.[132]

By seeking to 'dislocate and disrupt the empty and predictable narratives of art history', Warburg's project serves as a key methodological influence upon the development of Agamben's 'archaeological' method. As Murray argues, 'the history of art, like history more generally, is tied to reductive and linear forms of organisation: there is a narrative that details

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[132] Murray, *Giorgio Agamben*, p.85

how art changes and develops over different periods, and the role of the art historian is to order [these details].' As will be seen however, in his assesment Murray somewhat limits the scope and ambition of Agamben's own development of Warburg's practice, when he suggests that 'this form of creating a continuum limits the possibility of alternate voices being heard, of unusual links being made.'[133] Whilst there certainly is a case to be made for such an approach opening the way for 'alternative histories', Agamben has no intention of re-writing a history of the repressed. His intention is in a way more modest, and consists in an analysis of the specific discursive and epistemological paradigms through which a concept and way of 'doing' history that privileges one form (of life, of art, of political power) or element over another, can be organised and become effective in the first place. It is only when Warburg's singular attempt to 'dislocate' the narratives and organisational methods of 'history more generally' are considered in terms of Agamben's understanding and use of the paradigm, together with the more general practice of 'philosophical archaeology' of which the paradigm forms a part, that the full significance of the project for Agamben's thinking can be appreciated.

Between 1924 and 1929 Warburg worked on the *bilderatlas* or 'atlas of images' that came to be known as the *Mnemosyne* project.[134] The atlas consisted of a collection of plates or boards upon which were attached a variety of different images all in some way referring to a single theme or '*Pathosformel*' (pathos formula). Agamben describes this last as 'an indissoluble intertwining of an emotional charge and an iconographic formula in which it is impossible to distinguish between form and content.' (*P*, 90) Warburg's project, then, touches decisively on that division between social history and formal analysis animating the research of both Foucault and Agamben; what Agamben has described as a 'constitutive gap between facts and emotional consistency' (*RA*, 11); that is, *between life and its formalisation*. In particular, what draws Agamben to Warburg's mosaic-like compositions is his interest in this 'gap' as it conditions the process of historical transmission and the 'posthumous life' of forms. Confronting the 'formal world of pre-determined expressive values' was not for Warburg a

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[133] Ibid, p.85-6
[134] For an extensive but flawed biography of Warburg see Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg*: *An Intellectual Biography*. Phaidon: Oxford, 1986; on the flaws in Gombrich's approach see Edgar Wind, *The Eloquence of Symbols*. Clarendon: Oxford, 1993.

historical discipline or an 'art history', but rather involved the 'historical problem' of finding a 'dwelling between the old and the new,' that is to say, of finding one's 'orientation' in the present. As Agamben writes, Warburg's studies open a 'field' of historical tension that is 'not easily understood through oppositions such as diachrony/synchrony and history/structure.' (*P*, 102) As Watkin writes in his discussion of plate 46 of the atlas, that which is given over the to the theme of the nymph and to which Agamben has regularly returned,[135] 'it would be a mistake to see it as merely an iconographic repertoire of images in reference to a woman in movement, which one would arrange chronologically to trace back this theme to the original archetypal image or 'formula of pathos' from which all subsequent images emerge.' As Agamben decribes the peculiar historical life of these 'figures in movement':

> [They are] hybrids of archetype and phenomenon, first-timeness (*primavoltità*) and repetition…the nymph herself is neither archaic nor contemporary; she is undecideable in regards to diachrony and synchrony, unicity and multiplicity. This means that the nymph is the paradigm of which the individual nymphs are exemplars. (ST, 29)

It should come as no surprise then that Warburg's presentation of the afterlife of the 'Nymph' theme should occupy a crucial position in Agamben's 'Paradigm' essay. In the tension that Warburg's ensemble creates between the theme that gives its name to the whole ('figure of a woman in movement') and the individual images that make up the plate, Agamben suggests that it becomes impossible to decide between the general theme and the particular images which are 'somehow related' to it. Watkin – to whom we owe the first serious consideration of Warburg's arrangments in relation to Agamben's paradigmatic method – describes the nymph's status as existing 'in a perpetual, promiscuous exchange representing a certain categorial-hierarchical nymphomania.'[136]

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[135] As well as the essay and Postilla in *Potentialities* already cited, Agamben has devoted a slim volume, *Ninfe* (2007), to the theme, and, as will be seen, also makes crucial reference to the plate in the essay 'What is a Paradigm'.
[136] Watkin, *Agamben and Indifference*, p.38

Warburg himself described his practice – with a suggestive allusion to Freud not lost on Agamben – as an 'iconology of the intervals,'[137] or *Zwischenreich*, and based his juxtaposition of images on each panel not 'on the meaning of the figures' but 'on the interrelationships between the figures in their complex, autonomous arrangement.'[138] In other words, the individual images of the figures in movement are not reducible to a general theme 'from which they originate.' In this way, if we ask where is the nymph? (or indeed where is *homo sacer*? where is the camp?) the location of the figure becomes 'undecidable with regards to diachrony and synchrony, unicity and multiplicity'. (*ST*, 28-29) The nymph-paradigm is a figure which disrupts the 'mania' of categorical-hierarchical systems. Simply arranging the individual images in a chronological order 'by following the probable genetic relation that, binding one to the other, would eventually allow us to go back to the archetype, to the "formula of pathos" from which they all originate' and so grasp them at the level of their 'meaning,' (*ST*, 28) only serves to reproduce a determinate mode of formal-historical analysis which 'acquires from the singular example the components of truth…by transforming it into a general concept.' For Agamben on the other hand, approaching the nymph or indeed any historical 'theme' or figure as a paradigm involves a different operation, a different way of looking, reading, and 'conjoining together,' that neither follows a chronological descent into the past, nor 'articulates together' the universal and particular but instead displaces its figures onto what can be described as a topological plane of analysis, in which the 'orientation' of the study is fundamentally altered. To illustrate this alternative system of relationality Agamben has recourse to Goethe's concept of *Urphänomen*, which refers to a modality of 'placing alongside' and 'conjoining together' that rejects universal-particular (or genus-species) organisational systems, in favour of a form of analogy (or paradigmatic relation) in which each point stands in equal relation to all others in every direction. We can return to Jeff Malpas' description of the field of analysis opened up by a

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[137] In a letter to Wilhelm Fleiss on April 16, 1896, Freud suggested to his colleague: 'Our realm is that of the intervals [*Zwischenreich*].' Quoted in Phillippe Alain-Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*. trans. Sophie Hawkes. Zone Books: New York, 2007, p.251
[138] Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, p.252

topological approach in the present context, to get a sense of the affinities that exist between this mode of analysis and the one Agamben is developing in his comments of Waburg's *bilderatlas*:

> The idea of topology suggests that it is a mistake to look for simple, reductive accounts..., the point is always to look to a larger field of relations in which the matter at issue can be placed. This means…that it will seldom be possible to arrive at simple, univocal definitions. Significant terms will generally connect up with other terms in multiple ways and carry a range of connotations and meanings that cannot always be easily or precisely separated out.[139]

Or again, to return to Agamben's own description of the modality of study and analysis he is seeking to develop through a 'philosophical topology':

> [I]n order to understand what is really at stake here, we must learn to see these [categorical-hierarchical] oppositions not as "di-chotomies" but as "di-polarities," not substantial, but tensional. I mean that we need a logic of the field, as in physics, where it is impossible to draw a line clearly and separate two different substances. The polarity is present and acts at each point of the field. Then you may suddenly have zones of indecidability or indifference.[140]

Slightly transposing Benjamin's comments regarding the work of art, we can say that from this topological-paradigmatic perspective, '[t]he formal unity of the [historical figure] must be opened up and its elements virtually dispersed in the critical process if they are to communicate anything of interest'.[141]

Above all, what this approach to historical forms and figures entailed for Warburg was the creation, through the presentation of disparate materials, of a '"living" reciprocity between the act of knowing and the object of knowledge.'[142] The attempt to create a lived relation between the historical subject and the object of knowledge is one that deeply colours

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[139] Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World*., p.35
[140] Giorgio Agamben, 'Interview with Giorgio Agamben', p.612
[141] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,' in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, Fontana Modern Classics: London, 1992.
[142] Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion* p.18

Agamben's own confrontation with the past. Agamben's work, I would suggest, is 'in the first instance cultural and psychological, not epistemological in nature,'[143] and as such is interested in the subject of knowledge more than its object. As he writes in the essay 'Philosophical Archaeology' which concludes *The Signature of All Things* (and whose importance for Agamben's entire project I consider in more detail below), concerning the 'access' to the historical object of the inquirer: 'It is not possible to gain access in a new way…to [historical] sources without putting in question the very historical subject who is supposed to gain access to them.' In this way, the operation upon the 'image' of the past is at the same time 'an operation upon the subject.' (*ST*, 89) Agamben's (and Warburg's) is a controversial method insofar as it works against the grain of centuries of historical-philosophical reflection on what we might call the substantial orientation of the subject. By setting up a distinction between 'actual historical phenomena' and 'paradigms', Agamben hits on a tension within the epistemological model, underwriting both the practices of historical research and of much western philosophical reflection on the problem of historical knowledge. We can describe this model in simple terms as being grounded on a referential bind established between subject and object, between the 'mind of the inquirer,' and the 'things themselves'. (*ST*, 32) At its most basic what this relation ensures is that the subject enjoy that 'privileged standpoint in the mapping of human thought-and-action' which Olsson describes in his critique of 'cartographical reason'. In terms of historical research, the 'cognitive relation' (*ST*, 32) established between subject and object on this basis allows for the mutual determination of the historical phenomena in question in a given analysis and 'the historical subject who is supposed to gain access to them.' (*ST*, 89) Put simply, what this means is that, in the process of constructing 'historiographical thesis and reconstructions', historical research simultaneously produces a referential bind which anchors the subject to the historical 'things themselves'. Agamben's paradigmatic analyses put this historico-referential certainty into serious doubt. Thus, as he writes in the 'Paradigm' essay, concluding the discussion of the placeless place of the nymph: 'If one asks whether the

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[143] James I. Porter, *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2000, p.8

paradigmatic figure exists in the things themselves or in the mind of the inquirer, my response would be that it makes no sense.' This is because 'the intelligibility in question in the paradigm' is not epistemological, cannot be reduced to a determinate referential relation uniting the subject to history, but rather 'has an ontological character. It refers not to the cognitive relation between subject and object but to being.' (*ST*, 32) To consider the construction of the subject-history relation critically is not simply a question of challenging a certain approach to historical analysis, or – though this is a key part of the process – of deconstructing the epistemological paradigm upon which such historical approaches are based. Rather, Agamben's methodology ultimately concerns something much more fundamental in the grounding and orientation of the 'historical subject' itself. According to Agamben, what historiographical constructions conceal are both the structural-formal *and* lived conditions of possibility which allow for the 'topological game of putting together and articulating' – the *being* – of the subject itself. As we read in the 'Archaeology' essay, such a method

[c]annot take up the challenge of the tradition without deconstructing the paradigms, techniques and practices by means of which it regulates the forms of transmission, conditions the access to sources, and determines, in ultimate analysis, the status of the knowing subject. (*ST*, 79)

And as Zarataloudis suggests in a gloss of this passage, quoting Agamben in the same essay, to engage in this form of historical analysis "one must include the composition of the subject within one's 'plot of history, precisely in order to be able to dispense with it once and for all."'[144] Here, to anticipate somewhat, we can borrow Foucault's memorable image and suggest that for Agamben this topological game brings us to the 'lyrical core' of the historical subject, 'its visible secret, its invisible truth.'[145]

As well as influencing Agamben's understanding of the relation between the subject and history, and exerting a decisive impact on his method of textual composition, as I have

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[144] Zartaloudis, *Power, Law and the Uses of Criticism*, p.176

[145] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. Routledge: New York and London, 2003, p.172

already suggested, the philosophical-historical problematic that Warburg's project seeks to address also profoundly influences Agamben's singular approach to philology. Indeed, Agamben has adopted Warburg's methodological motto to describe his own approach to the study of texts: 'Der Gut Gotte steckt im Detail', *the good God hides himself in the detail*. In an interview, Agamben connects this incentive to a philological approach, describing his interest in 'philological attention to details, in which, as it has been said, the dear Lord likes to hide himself.' Leland de la Durantaye has pointed to the numerous instances of such attention to detail in Agamben's work, from his critique of the theories of indication in Hegel and Heidegger on the basis of the 'little words' *Da* and *Diese*; to a further essay on the two thinkers' difficult proximity (a recurrent theme in Agamben's engagement with other thinkers) which focuses on the Indo-European root **Se*; in the 'elements for a philosophy of punctuation' with which Agamben frames essays on Derrida and Deleuze, writing that 'even a simple punctuation mark can acquire a terminological character'; (*P*, 208) and in the culmination of *The Time that Remains*, in which Agamben's correction of an error in the transcription of one of Benjamin's texts serves to produce a 'vital confrontation' between contemporary theories of history and the Pauline text. Agamben is also fond of quoting other thinkers' penchant for such detailed pursuit of the good God: alongside the abiding influence of Warburg and Benjamin (who called for 'the most precise immersion into the individual details of a given subject'), Agamben has noted the studies of Karl Löwith on the use of hyphens in *Being and Time*, M. Puder's emphasis on the adverb *gleichwohl* in Kant's philosophy, (*P*, 208) and approvingly describes the work of the historian of philosophy Victor Goldschmidt, in which 'the examination of a marginal problem' is taken up in order to 'throw new light on the entirety of Plato's thought.' (*ST*, 22) An important, indeed central, qualification needs to be emphasised at this juncture, for discussion of philology brings us again to the matter of origins, 'first-timeness', or, to use Agamben's methodological vocabulary, 'philosophical archaeology'. While I shall discuss this aspect of Agamben's method in more detail below, it is vital to stress at this stage that in turning to a series of arcane etymologies, and in doing so drawing our attention to apparently historically obscure or 'fringe' moments in the composition of the institutions of law, religion, politics, and

indeed of language itself, Agamben is in no way after something we might traditionally understand as constituting an origin, nor in an attempt to 'reconfigure a proto-legal, natural or pre-religious state of things.'[146] Indeed, as Watkin suggests, in Agamben's work 'the tools of philology are turned against philological, historical and genealogical presuppositions.'[147] In the remaining sections of this chapter I will seek to elaborate on what exactly Agamben is seeking in pursuing a philosophical archaeology. We have already spent some time considering the paradigm's function within this system (and of the topological perspective informing it), and with a preliminary sense of the singular counter-historical method of historical-philological analysis Agamben presents us with, it is necessary now to move on and consider the other element of his methodological triad, the signature.

Agamben has been heavily criticised for the reductive nature of the philological gesture which opens *Homo Sacer I*.[148] Jacques Derrida, for one, begins the seminar in which he develops a critique of Agamben's thesis concerning the difference between these terms with the following caustic remarks, almost certainly aimed at Agamben: 'And isn't philology too poorly equipped, too unequal to the task, in spite of the grand airs that the lesson givers and the pseudo-experts in this domain sometimes take on?'[149] Laurent Dubreil, in a similarly hostile vein, suggests that Agamben's philology is simply 'for show'.[150] Such criticisms, though rigorously argued, certainly miss something central about Agamben's understanding of philology and his methodology more generally (not to mention, as in the case of Derrida, simply misreading the *detail* of his argument, as I shall argue in the next chapter). To get a better sense of the function of philology in Agamben we need to take into account his comments regarding the composition of *Stanzas* during a period of study at the Warburg institute in London: 'It was during these years that I came closest to working as a philologist in the strict sense of the term,

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[146] Zartaloudis, *Power, Law and the Uses of Criticism*, p.176
[147] Watkin, *Agamben and Indifference*, p.33
[148] Gordon Finlayson, '*"*Bare life" and politics and in Agamben's reading of Aristotle.' *Review of Politics*, 72 (1), 2010. pp. 97-126; Laurent Dubreuil, 'Leaving Politics: Bios, ZŌĒ, Life,' trans. Clarissa C. Eagle with the author. *Diacritics*, Volume 36, Number 2, Summer 2006, pp.83-98
[149] Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 2008, p.305
[150] Laurent Dubreil, 'Leaving Politics: Bios, Zōe, Life', trans. Clarrisa C. Eagle. *Diacritics*. Volume 36, Number 2, Summer 2006, pp. 83-98

but it was also the period in which I began to see the limits of such an approach.'[151] Once again, we are confronted by a limit, a *Grenzbegriff* or borderline at which the conceptual ground of a discipline 'exceeds or eludes' its own parameters. As Agamben goes on to suggest: 'The philologist who wishes to follow his discipline *to its limits* is in need of philosophy and, as Nietzsche's experience shows us, must at a certain point become a philosopher'[152] (my emphasis). And in the text of *Stanzas* Agamben refers once more to the interdisciplinary formation of Nietzsche's thinking and the limit he reached, suggesting that the young classicist became a philosopher so as not to 'succumb' to 'the insufficiency of philology'. (*S*, 152) Agamben, it would seem, shares Derrida's view on the poverty of philology as a critical practice. As such Agamben's *philosophical* approach to philology can be understood as departing precisely from a dissatisfaction with conventional philological practice. James I. Porter's description of this 'counterphilology' in his study *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future* could equally apply to Agamben's tendencies as a reader:

The aim…critically conceived, is not to substitute a more adequate picture of [the past] but to bring out the inadequacies of the one we have. The criteria of inadequacy are not objective, as they are in the case of conventional philology. Instead they are internal and symptomatic. Inconsistencies of argument, traces of projective reasoning, anachronistic touches, motives that are unexpressed and possibly not even understood – such are the telltale signs of an inauthentic and self-deceived image of the past.[153]

Agamben has suggested that a certain porosity (or indistinction) between the two disciplines is what his work seeks to produce: 'the degree to which linguistics will open a semiological perspective to the study of language will be conditioned by the extent to which it opens itself to a more ample ontological dimension'. What can it mean to 'open' philology to an ontological dimension? And in what way does this serve as a response to the limitations and insufficiencies of philology? What, indeed, are these limits? Answering this question means bringing together

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[151]"Un'idea di Giorgio Agamben." Interview with Adriano Sofri. Reporter, November 9-10, 1985, p.32-33
[152] Ibid, p.32-33
[153] Porter, *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future*, p.8

the two sides of Warburg's influence: the way in which, according to Agamben, a philological attention to detail produces a vital confrontation with the past.

Signs Without Content: Theory of Signatures

The criticisms levelled at Agamben's work presuppose a certain disciplinary criteria by which traditional philology operates. According to these the proper sphere of philology is the study of a given textual or manuscript tradition (e.g. early Christian literature) in which a term is traced back, through study of source material, to a determinate historical-textual 'origin' and so to a certain interpretative field. But, as one might guess, Agamben has no interest in such a method, indeed he works consciously against it. As early as the 1970's Agamben, together with Italo Calvino and Claudio Rugafiori, was planning a 'philological' review which would respond to the need for a certain confrontation with the past. In the short piece which closes *Infancy and History*, entitled 'Project for a Review,' Agamben suggests that 'the point of view which [the review] intends to adopt is so radically and originally historical that it can easily renounce any chronological perspective'. (*IH*, 159) And in words which anticipate the controversial use of 'extreme' and 'limit-cases' in presenting the dislocated chronology of the Homo Sacer studies, he suggests that 'the site it chooses to inhabit is neither a continuity nor a new beginning, but an interruption and a margin, and it is the experience of this margin as founding historical event which constitutes the very basis of its timeliness.' (Ibid.) The margin in question, Agamben writes, is 'one produced early in Western culture between cultural patrimony and historical transmission…between truth and its mode of transmission, between writing and authority.' (ibid.)[154]

In the 'Archaeology' essay, written thirty years after the 'Project for a Review,' Agamben once again explores this 'margin' in historical transmission in terms of the

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[154] Twenty years after writing the 'Project for a Review', in the 'Preface' to *Remnants of Auschwitz* (*Homo Sacer III*) Agamben explores the same problem of a disharmony inhabiting cultural transmissability. Of the 'problem of the historical, material, technical, bureaucratic, and legal circumstances in which the extermination of the Jews took place,' Agamben suggests that it has been 'sufficiently clarified' and that 'a general framework has already been established' within which the study of the events that took place can be undertaken. However, 'the same cannot be said for the ethical and political significance…or even a human understanding of what happened there.' (*RA*, 11) We can 'enumerate and describe each of these events, but they remain singularly opaque when we try to understand them.' (*RA*, 12) Once again, the stress is on a 'non-coincidence between facts and truth, between verification and comprehension.'

philological approach to literary history and textual criticism, emphasising the interweaving between the study of literature and history that defines his philosophical approach. Here we get to the crux of the interest in the 'margin', for what such a study of historical sources concerns is 'not just the ancient character of the past but above all the mode in which the past has been constructed into a tradition.' (*ST*, 87) In other words, the primary interest is not, for example, with legal history, with anthropology, or history, but with 'research as such'.[155] At issue in Agamben's counterphilology is thus that referential frame which ensures the effective relay between historical events and figures, and a generalising set of normative principles through which they are composed into a historiographic tradition. It is a rejection of an approach to history which attends only 'to "that which was always there," the "very same" of an image of a primordial truth fully adequate to its nature.' (*ST*, 83) Drawing on the work of the theologian Franz Overbeck, Agamben describes the gap between 'the thing to be transmitted and its mode of transmission' in terms of a process of 'canonization,' whereby 'access to historical sources is barred or controlled'. (*ST*, 88) Agamben turns to Heidegger's pages on the 'destruction of tradition' in *Being and Time* to emphasise the wider epistemological implications of this disciplinary canonization:

Tradition [writes Heidegger] takes what has come down to us and delivers it over to self-evidence; it blocks our access to those primordial "sources" from which the categories and concepts handed down to us have been in part genuinely drawn. (*ST* 89)

In a sense, and despite the rhetorical efforts of the language, it might well be argued that as a critique of historicism there is nothing particularly novel in this approach. Were Agamben a philologist 'in the strict sense', such a critique of the process of canonization and the historical sources on which a tradition is constructed might satisfy him. But Agamben, as we have seen, is after something else: the epistemological paradigm of inquiry itself. The distinction between

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[155] Zarataloudis, *Power, Law and the Uses of Criticism*, p.177

tradition and source material, between authority and writing, thus opens the sphere of that *dislocation* between 'truth and facts, between 'verification and comprehension,' in which not only a tradition but the historical subject itself are constituted. Where Agamben's work moves into more interesting and difficult territory is the way it suggests we confront such an 'inauthentic and self-deceived image of the past'.

In the essay on Warburg's 'Nameless Science' Agamben connects Warburg's methodology with Leo Spitzer's research into semantic history and suggests that 'from this perspective,' culture can be seen 'as a process of *Nachleben*, that is, transmission, reception, and polarization.'[156] Agamben gleaned this last notion from the writings of Warburg,[157] who in turn developed his own (Nietzsche-infused) conception of the term after coming across it in Goethe. Though it does not have the status of other, more prominent conceptual figures Agamben deploys (inoperativity, potentiality, the paradigm) polarization is, I hope to show, nonetheless a significant aspect of his methodology. In a 1983 essay which follows the deformations of the semantic sphere of the 'untranslatable' German term *stimmung* (and which does much to enhance our understanding of Agamben's own attempt to navigate the 'narrow path' between formal structure and social history), Agamben provides a pertinent reflection on his interest in the 'semantic inversion' (*S*, 112) or polarization which occurs in the process of cultural transmission:

It will be useful to reflect for a moment on this displacement, this change of place. The history of human culture is often nothing other than the history of such displacements or dislocations, and it is precisely because we pay no attention to them that the interpretation of the categories and concepts of the past often gives rise to so many misunderstandings. (*VV*, 90)

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[156] In a short text entitled 'Living Among Spectres' in *Nudities*, Agamben can be seen to follow Nietzsche and Massimo Cacciari in diagnosing an existence that is understood as a 'posthumous or complementary life that begins only when everything is finished.' What remains when 'everything is finished' is, Agamben suggests, a form of life that has 'the incomparable grace and astuteness of that which has been completed, the courtesy and precision of those who no longer have anything ahead of them.' As with Nietzsche before him however the form of life in question here is not simply a figure for a nostalgic or mournful recognition of the disenchantment of the world ushered in by the 'destructive intent' of modernity. Rather what this form of life gestures towards is a certain critical modality. Putting this simply, the point and promise of starting at the end of a certain way of organising and representing life is that *life goes on*.

[157] The intoxicating erudition of *Stanzas* is the result no doubt of long hours spent in the Warburg library in London where, at the invitation of Francis Yates, Agamben spent a year researching whilst writing *Stanzas*. The concept of polarization is a crucial and under-theorised part of Agamben's methodology, as is his reception of Warburg's work.

Paraphrasing Wittgenstein, Agamben suggests that 'philosophical problems become clearer if they are formulated as questions concerning the meaning of words,' and goes on to provide an example of the kind of 'displacements' he is interested in pursuing. In doing so he introduces certain key elements of his philological approach to the polarization of terms:

A simple example will clarify what I mean. We know that in Greek love is called *érôs*. And yet, for us, love is a feeling, that is, something which is not easy to define, but which nevertheless belongs without a doubt to the psychological sphere, the inner experience of a psychical and bodily individual. We know however that for the Greeks of the archaic era, *Érôs* was a god, that is, something which belonged not to human psychology but to theology. The transformation implicit in the movement from *érôs* to love does not pertain so much to the phenomenology of love, singularly constant, as to its migration from one sphere to another. In this migration, the pantheon of the Greeks, or later the 'trinitarity' of the Christian God, shifted into us: this dislocation of theology is what we call psychology. And it is to this *dislocation* that we should be attentive when we translate *érôs* by love, if we want to avoid misleading errors. (*VV*, 90-91)

The first thing to note is that in the description of a '*dislocation*' of theological terms and concepts, and what Agamben describes as their being 'shifted into us' (a phrase which, though certainly in keeping with the process of *interiorisation* at issue in the passage, one suspects may have lost some of its original limpidity in the translation), we are presented with a striking anticipation not only of the methodology but also the themes which come to comprise the central concern of Agamben's 'theological-political' suite of works in the Homo Sacer series. Agamben has noted that the Latin *terminus*, from which the modern sense of 'terminology' derives, means 'limit, border,' (*P*, 207) and it is clear that, as in the 'logic of the field,' we are dealing with the moment at which terms reach a limit and appear to *exceed* their containment within a given semantic configuration. On a thematic level, we can gauge the significance of Warburg's (and Nietzsche's) interest in the 'posthumous life' of forms for Agamben's thinking.

Increasingly, the 'migration' in question in Agamben's work pertains to the movement of terms and concepts from a religious sphere into the secular; the *nachleben* of theological forms within the social, cultural, and political body of modernity. There are numerous instances of this philological approach to 'historical semantics' in Agamben's work. For example, in the extraordinary, vertiginous pages that make up the 'Second Day' of *The Time the Remains*, in which Agamben follows the semantic deformation and correspondences of the Pauline term *klētos* from its original and 'purely religious' meaning as a divine calling, to the modern sense of the term as 'profession'; or the more recent studies of the 'correlations' that mark the semantic transmutations of the concept of the oath and of the duty into the fields of law and ethics in *The Sacrament of Language* and *Opus Dei*; finally, and perhaps most significantly, Agamben will analyse the shifting semantic relation between the concepts of rule and governance in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, tracing the 'political secularization of theological concepts' through the polarization of the onto-theological theory of the transcendence of God and the paradigm of sovereign government.

At this point we should consider again Agamben's call for a logic of the field:

I find it much less interesting to insist on the distinction [between two] terms, than to question the interweaving. I want to understand how the system operates. And the system is always double; it works always by means of opposition. But in order to understand what is really at stake here, we must learn to see these oppositions not as "di-chotomies" but as "di-polarities," not substantial, but tensional. I mean that we need a logic of the field…where it is impossible to draw a line clearly and separate two different substances. The polarity is present and acts at each point of the field. Then you may suddenly have zones of undecidability.

Agamben's polarizing strategy thus involves the analysis of two apparently distinct terms not on the level of their separation and subsequent hierarchical distribution within a given field knowledge, but rather seeks to question their interweaving such that the historical and epistemological 'system' or tradition within which their division and subsequent articulation can

occur in the first place. I have noted the way in which the paradigm's function is key to understanding the process of composition and 'philosophical presentation' Agamben pursues, generating the life of the work by '"placing alongside," "conjoining together," and above all by "showing" and 'exposing"' (*ST*, 23) the polar tensions which produce the *conditions of intelligibility* of a given system or discourse. The task, as we have seen, is to expose the formal-logical paradoxes and deformations that perforate the historical processes of 'placing alongside' and 'interweaving' itself. (*HS*, 22) In order to address the point at which two terms enter in a 'zone of undecidability' and so reveal the inconsistencies of the system of which they are paradigmatic, it is necessary to identify the 'strategic function' of a third element, that whilst not coinciding with either oppositional term nonetheless conditions their intelligibility as existing in an (apparently) dichotomous relation. What such a critical act (a *de*-activation) brings into question then is not the primacy or diminution of one of the terms in the distinction, but the function of the 'guarantor of the link between words and their references.' This 'third' (or we might say 'Other') presence is what Agamben calls a 'signature'.

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In one of his early essays on Benjamin, Agamben refers to a passage from Isidore of Seville's etymologies which introduces a decisive link between language and history: 'history pertains to grammar' (*haec disciplina [scil. Historia] ad grammaticam pertinet*). (*P*, 49) In order to understand Agamben's 'polarizing' approach to signatures, we have to appreciate what this interweaving of historical and linguistic categories entails. 'The historical condition of human beings is inseparable from their condition as speaking beings,' Agamben asserts, and as such 'is inscribed in the very mode of their access to language, which is originally marked by a fracture.' (*P*, 51) In this view language is polarized by the 'unbridgeable gap' between the semiotic and semantic spheres, that is, between the structure of language as a system and the discrete instances or 'events' of language which comprise the historical 'life' or being that language

'receive[s] from the sheer fact of existing and being used.' (*ST*, 64)[158] Perhaps the simplest way to understand this breach is as one between names and discourse: '*Discourse*,' Agamben writes, '*cannot say what is named by the name*.' Language can *say* everything, that is, except its own conditions of possibility; it cannot say the 'sheer fact' of its existence. There is thus a *contentless* element within the structure of language which, though it can not be 'said' and communicated in discourse, nonetheless appears in some way to play a crucial role in the articulation of the two spheres (name and discourse, system and use). In order to describe this non-linguistic force present in language, Agamben has recourse to Wittgenstein's thesis that '*we cannot express through language what expresses itself in* language,'[159] and, more significantly in the present context, to Heidegger's elegiac evocation of 'the word for the word' (*das Wort für das Wort*) which 'is to be found nowhere'.[160]

According to Agamben this *topos outopos* within language conditions the possibility of communicability in a fundamental way – that is, at the level of its 'simple existence' – and so in turn profoundly affects the process of historical transmission. What cannot be named by discourse and what must be presupposed in every act of speech is nothing other than the existence of language itself. In this intensely self-reflexive vein, Agamben will suggest that the 'fracture' in language between semiotic and semantic, between name and discourse, corresponds to and indeed *produces* 'an incurable division between the thing to be transmitted and the act of historical transmission'. And in the therapeutic register which runs throughout his work he will suggest that the task of philosophical history is a 'healing' (*IH*, 160) between these spheres which must proceed, precisely, from a recognition of their irreducibility.

A discourse which has forgotten or simply disregards its contentless conditions of possibility cannot access or confront the division and polarization that determines the historical life of language. In order to access and study the 'intervals' (*Zwisenreich*) and 'interweavings' in which such semantic transformations take place, it is necessary to perform a deactivation of

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[158] Colebrook and Maxwell, *Agamben*, pp.35-36. I will come back to the 'empty and indeterminate' place of the signature later in the argument. In particular the place of the 'non-equivalence' between signifier and signified evoked here is essential to Agamben's understanding of the relation between the subject and language, which I explore in the fourth chapter.
[159] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Routledge: New York and London, 2001, prop. 4.121, p.33
[160] Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz. Harper and Row: New York, 1976, p.81

the communicative capacity which ensures the uninterrupted course of historical transmission. This is a complex operation which seeks to 'read' the historical life of terminology at 'the level of [its] simple existence,' (*ST*, 63) that is, to recall Foucault's remarks on the *topos* of life, in the 'crossing' or 'interweaving' between its formal structure and social history. The dimension of language at issue here is thus 'in no way what we, according to a more common conception, understand as language – that is, as meaningful speech as the means of a communication that transmits a message from one subject to another.' (*P*, 51) To develop this point Agamben refers to the 'Task of the Translator,' in which Benjamin describes an 'expressionless word' which 'no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages'.[161] The 'expressionless word' here names nothing other than the capacity for incapacity that characterises the paradigmatic event of language already touched on; that which is 'meant in all languages' is (*pace* Benjamin's theologico-poetic presentation) nothing more than its own formal-logical conditions of possibility: *how* language *is*. To clarify Benjamin's oxymoronic formulation, we can recall how the paradigm and the example, in their suspension of (historically orientable) meaning, open the *topos* of an 'expressionless' language. Just as the paradigm disarticulates the relation between the structure and history of language and makes their existential conditions 'intelligible in a new way,' so too the referential relay between historical event and a generalising set of historically normative principles is dislocated so that the spatio-temporal *topoi* of history can be read and studied in a different way. Following Benjamin's description of the practice of the 'true historian,' Agamben will develop a philological method which does not seek to establish an epistemological relation between a historical object and a determinate mode of transmission, but rather seeks to 'read what was never written' in the historical 'book of life'.

Between the formal structure of language and the historical life of its use there can then, it would seem, be no contact; 'between them there remains a gap'. But it is, somewhat surprisingly, precisely within this gap that 'knowledge is produced'. The medium (*medio*)

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[161] Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator,' in *Illuminations*, p.113

within which the articulation between semiotic and semantic (and so between the historical

object and its transmission) becomes possible is what Agamben calls a signature: 'something

that in a sign or concept marks and *exceeds* such a sign or concept,' and in doing so allows for

the 'efficacy' of certain discursive practices. (*ST*, 63, my emphasis) Enzo Melandri describes the

signature thus: 'a signature is a sort of sign within the sign; it is the index that in the context of a

given [semiotic system] univocally makes reference to a given interpretation [i.e. a certain

use].'[162] Drawing on Levi-Strauss's work on the function of this 'something' within language

that enables the formation of discourse, Agamben suggests that 'there is a moment in the life of

concepts when they lose their immediate intelligibility and can then, like all empty terms, be

overburdened with contradictory meanings.' (*HS*, 80) Terms such as '*sacer*,' '*mana*,' and, as

Agamben argues in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 'secularization,' are exemplary – paradigmatic

– of a deeper structural reliance on an 'indeterminate and empty' place within the process of

'putting together and articulating' – what we call discourse. Signatures, as contentless, empty

and meaningless, are, we might say, names for the historical life of language itself. In Levi-

Strauss's memorable passage we read that:

[A]lways and everywhere, these types of notions, somewhat like algebraic symbols, occur to represent an

indeterminate value or signification, in itself devoid of meaning and thus susceptible of receiving any

meaning at all: their sole function is to fill a gap between the signifier and the signified, or, more exactly,

to signal the fact that in such and such a circumstance, on such an occasion, or in such a one of their

manifestations, a relationship of non-equivalence becomes established between signifier and signified.[163]

This empty place is the sphere of signatures, a sphere, we might say, of non-specific mediality

or, in Watkin's acute formulation, of 'indistinct generality'.[164] They do not designate something

like a given 'substance' or 'social sentiments' regarding the 'direction to which [a term] refers'

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[162] Enzo Melandri, 'Michel Foucault: L'epistemologia delle scienze umane,' *Lingua e stile*, 2.1, 1967, p.147

[163] And, as Agamben points out glossing this passage, in order to highlight the methodological stakes involved Levi-Strauss, somewhat goadingly, will suggest that if there is a place in which such concepts acquire a 'mysterious or secret' power, it is 'above all in the thought of the scholars.' (*SL*, 15) Claude Levi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*. Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1987, p.55-56

[164] Watkin, *Agamben and Indifference*, p.26, n.3. Watkin's discussion of the signature is by far the most philosophically sophisticated and probing engagement we have. See *Agamben and Indifference*, pp.18-25

(i.e. its *content*), but rather 'a void of sense or an indeterminate value of signification' (*SL*, 14-15) which refer back to the dimension in which their (*formal*) *conditions of significance* are given in the first place. At any given time, that is to say, in the treatment of a given historical figure or object there is a complex articulation at work which 'predetermines its interpretation and determines its use and efficacy according to rules, practices, and precepts that it is our task to recognize.' (*ST*, 64) In a passage which consciously invokes Warburg's method as well as that of Benjamin (for whom 'history is the proper sphere of signatures'), Agamben writes that '[t]he historical object is never given neutrally; rather it is always accompanied by an index or signature that constitutes it as image and temporarily determines and conditions its legibility.' (*ST*, 72-73)

Consider the polarization of the term 'secularization' itself, discussed in the opening pages of *The Kingdom and the Glory*. I will quote at length to allow the presentation to develop at its own pace:

It is perfectly well known that this concept has performed a strategic function in modern culture – that it is, in this sense, a concept of the "politics of ideas," something that "in the realm of ideas has always already found an enemy with whom to fight for dominance."…This is equally valid for secularization in a strictly juridical sense – which recovering the term (*saecularisatio*) that designated the return of the religious man into the world, became a nineteenth-century rallying cry of the conflict between state and church over the expropriation of ecclesiastic goods – and its metaphoric use in the history of ideas. When Max Weber formulates his famous thesis about the secularization of Puritan asceticism in the capitalist ethics of work, the apparent neutrality of his diagnosis cannot hide its function in the battle he was fighting against fanatics and false prophets for the disenchantment of the world. Similar considerations could be made for Troeltsch. …Schmitt's strategy is, in a certain sense, the opposite of Weber's. While, for Weber, secularization was an aspect of the growing process of disenchantment and detheologization of the modern world, for Schmitt it shows on the contrary that, in modernity, theology continues to be present and active in an eminent way. This does not necessarily imply an identity of substance between theology and modernity, or a perfect identity of meaning between theological concepts; rather it concerns

a particular strategic relation that marks political concepts and refers them back to their theological origin. (*KG*, 3-4)

Once more we can leave aside the contents of the theses discussed here and attend to the 'strategic function' that is being described as determinative of a certain mode of historical transmission. Indeed, such a, so to speak, purely formal approach to the content or 'properties' of the conflicts that motivate the 'politics of ideas' outlined in this passage is what Agamben appears to advocate. What interests him, in the first instance, are not the differences in 'substance' between the positions of Weber and Schmitt, but rather the 'strategic device' that allows them to conduct their conceptual work upon the single surface of the term 'secularization' in the first place. As such, Agamben will describe secularization as a 'signature' (KG, 4) whose semantic strategy is one which 'leaves intact the forces it deals with by simply moving them from one place to another'. At work again here is that dislocation of the referential bond which ties a given term or figure to a formal-historical 'world of predetermined values'. In order to concentrate on the methodological problematic endemic to the process of 'referring [a term] back to a determinate interpretation or field' (*KG*, 4) and that will locate it within a determinate historical-epistemological field, Agamben situates his analysis at the 'modest' level of the 'how'; on the fact that a given discourse (on 'secularization' in this instance) exists *at all*. That is to say, to paraphrase Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, the task is to question the historical term 'not in the direction to which it refers' – 'de-theologization' (Weber) or theological re-enchantment (Schmitt) – but rather in 'the dimension that gives it,' that is, in terms of its 'conditions of possibility': 'At what moment, by virtue of what operation, what interplay between them, what conditions, do these concepts form *discourse*?'[165] In order to analyse historical phenomena at this level it is necessary to abstract and *dislocate* the term from its denotative functioning within a given, historically determinate epistemic configuration. As a means for tracing such displacements, and in its relation to the mode of historical inquiry that

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[165] Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 111

Agamben is putting into question through this approach, I would suggest that a preliminary definition of the signature can be established on the basis of its functioning as a topological figure. Just as the surface and appearance of a spatial configuration can undergo significant transformation without its properties being altered,[166] so too the 'rubber figure' of the signature, in its capacity to 'move and displace concepts and signs from one field to another…without redefining them semantically' (*KG*, 4) (just as political theology *displaces* the heavenly monarchy onto an earthly monarchy but '*leaves its power intact*') this art of 'recognizing and articulating' (*ST*, 32) the signatures which effectuate different epistemological paradigms serves as a topological tool 'that provides leverage in describing forms of correlation that can be observed across many cases.'[167]

We can perhaps begin to see more clearly how method and presentation are immanent to the critical-historical and philosophical questions Agamben explores. The 'historical semantics' Agamben pursues do not seek to return a concept or term to its 'proper' context within a 'determinate interpretation or field'. Nor does the paradigm-signature relation provide a 'normative' cipher under which heterogeneous materials and 'contradictory meanings' can be enclosed within a hermeneutic model of historical-formal unity. Rather, in its attention to the semantic deformations through which certain terms are able to 'move into another domain [and appear] in a new network of pragmatic and hermeneutic relations' (*ST*, 40) and thus constitute an 'epistemological paradigm,' Agamben's strategy is, I would suggest, eminently topological in the sense I am developing. That is, opposed to a mode of analysis which determines the placement, grounding, and linear-causal map of the historical object (in which, for instance, the secular stands for the movement forward and the religious for the legacy of the past)[168] Agamben's topologies approach the historical space of phenomena as a matter of relationality,

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[166] To use the famous example, from a topological perspective a coffee cup and a donut have the same properties.
[167] I will develop the significance of this topological approach in terms of Agamben's reception of Foucault in the next chapter. Stephen J. Collier, 'Topologies of Power: Foucault's Analysis of Political Government beyond 'Governmentality''. *Theory, Culture & Society*, SAGE: Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, and Singapore.
Vol. 26(6), 2009, pp.78–108
[168] Anton Schutz, 'Homo non Sacer', p.125

connectivity, distribution, assemblage, transformation, and supplementation. Most importantly, Agamben redirects our attention away from the capacity of a unique historical event to contribute to the Penelope-work of historical transmission and towards the structural conditions of possibility within which it emerges in the first place. Perhaps the best known and most controversial example of such an analysis is the philological pursuit of the 'ambivalence of the sacred,' which I shall explore in more detail in the next chapter. In the case of the 'strategic device' of secularization, Agamben will claim that it 'operates in the conceptual system of modernity as a signature that refers it back to theology.' We might be given pause here, however, by Agamben's intention to refer us 'back' to theology. In the passage quoted above he appears to re-iterate this point, when he describes the object of his study in *The Kingdom and the Glory* as the 'relation that marks political concepts and refers them back to their theological origin.' (*KG*, 4) Given the decisive rejection of historicism and of any attempt to 'provide a causal' origin that we have been tracing in Agamben's work, what kind of 'origin' can we be heading towards?

Archē: Reactualization of the Past

In a passage from 'Philosophical Archaeology,' which is taken almost verbatim from the 'Project' formulated in the pages of *Infancy of History* some thirty years previously, Agamben describes this method:

[Philosophical archaeology] is a search for the *archē*, which in Greek means 'beginning' and 'commandment'. In our tradition, the beginning is both that which gives birth to something and that which commands its history. But this origin cannot be dated or chronologically situated: it is a force that continues to act in the present, just as infancy, according to psychoanalysis, determines the mental activity of the adult, or like how the big bang, which, according to astrophysicists, gave birth to the Universe, continues expanding even today. The example typifying this method would be the transformation of the animal into the human (anthropogenesis), that is, an event that we imagine necessarily must have taken place, but has not finished once and for all: man is always becoming human, and thus also remains inhuman, animal. Philosophy is not an academic discipline, but a way of measuring

oneself up to this event that never stops taking place and which determines the humanity and inhumanity of mankind. (*ST*, 86)

As will be seen, Agamben's strategy in approaching what he calls the 'fringe' or 'zone' of pre-history involves an approach which does not seek to establish the 'inviolable identity at the origin' of the 'historical beginning of things,' but rather seeks to ground its analysis in the 'moment of arising' of certain conceptual and textual conditions of possibility – defined as 'the intelligible, communicable operativity of knowledges' – within which the relation between the simple existence of a 'thing' and its historical transmission can become effective, that is, become historically *communicable*, in the first place.

Taking up the concept of 'prehistory' Agamben suggests that the complex *interrelation* between incommunicabilty and transmissibility (and *not* their strict separation) produces a peculiar temporal structure, in which pre-history and history irrevocably separate from one another at a certain point but remain, nonetheless, intimately related. 'Pre-history' here refers to a dimension *within* the things 'that have a life and historical efficacy,' to that which, in Overbeck's phrase, '*lays out the foundation* of their historical efficacy' (*ST* 83, my emphasis). This efficacy, which is the very dimension or medium *produced* by the split between pre-history and history, is what comes to *constitute* and *found* a tradition, and it involves (perhaps simply *is*) a work of suppression, occlusion, blockage, and closure. The aim of such a confrontation with the emergence – or 'becoming' – of historical phenomena is stated clearly by Agamben: to study the 'modalities, circumstances, and moments in which the split, by means of repression, constituted itself as origin' (*ST*, 103). We can understand this process then as another instance of the logic of the exception, which operates 'by dividing the factical experience and pushing down to the origin – that is, excluding – one half of it *in order then to rearticulate it to the other by including it as foundation*.' (*UB*, 265, my emphasis) The logic of the *exceptio*, what Agamben has described elsewhere as 'the practical and political mystery of separation' (*O*, 105), thus extends to the constitution of the field of knowledge we call history. Only by maintaining a relation of inclusive-exclusion to the heterogeneity and singularity of the event

which gives rise to it can something like a tradition and a historiographic frame of reference 'emerge' and become historically *effective*.

Faced with the solidification of tradition, the task of critical thinking is to return to that which has taken place its potentiality, and so produce 'a retroactive production of the possibility of that which is presented to us in its immutable givenness.'[169] That is, to 'attest to the very *existence* of potentiality' and so try and 'say what seems impossible to say, that is: that something *is* otherwise than it is. This is the sense in which Agamben understands the 'conditions of possibility' revealed by the paradigm and the signature, that is, their critical *exigency*, which 'consists in a relation between what is or has been, and its possibility'' (*TTR*, 39). A correct understanding of the way in which the figures Agamben refers to as *archē* continue to 'take place' is vital to understanding his thinking generally, and in particular the historical-philosophical ambitions of the Homo Sacer project. Those who see Agamben as in some way turning his back on the 'complexity' of the present, 'meta-historicising' discrete events in order to suggest that the roots of contemporaneous formations of power are to be found in 'some unknowable and unlocalizable point in the past,'[170] whilst simultaneously claiming that this past 'gives us no precedent for successful resistance' are, in my view, misguided. Though it is certainly true that Agamben turns to pre-Capitalist institutions and formations of power in his work, his approach to these, as is perhaps becoming clearer, cannot be understood in terms of 'traditional historical research'. The *archē* which Agamben discovers in the figure of *homo sacer*, the Trinitarian *oikonomia*, the camp, the liturgical practices of the Franciscans, 'cannot be localized within chronology, in a remote past' (*ST*, 92) as 'historical fact' (*HS*, 166). But nor, for that reason, 'can [they] be localized beyond this within a meta-historical atemporal structure.' (*ST*, 92) Rather these figures 'represent a present and operative tendency…which conditions and makes intelligible their development in time. …[The] *archē*, as for Foucault and Nietzsche, is not pushed diachronically into the past, but assures the

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[169] Jelica šumič, 'Agamben's Godless Saints', in *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*. Volume 16 number 3 September 2011, p.140
[170] Timothy Campbell, *Improper Life: Technology and Biopolitics from Heidgger to Agamben*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis and London, 2011, p.46

synchronic comprehensibility and coherence of the system.' (ibid.) Watkin captures this well: 'The moment of arising is the identifiable point when it became possible for a set of discursive formations to be operative. This concerns the regulation and transmission of concepts and ideas but also practices and methods vie the construction of subjective enunciative position or set of positions, which constitute through their perspective, being and behaviour he objective world around them.'[171] What Agamben is describing here is an attempt to trace the shifts and mutations in the 'place' or 'localization' of a certain 'originary structure'. As I have pointed out, much of the criticism levelled at Agamben's work focuses on his use of apparently 'transhistorical structure[s],' but as is clear from his description of the 'place' of the *archē*, he decisively rejects such an approach. In order to understand the 'originary' structures Agamben pursues, we have to see them as functioning, not according to any meta- or trans-historical principles, but rather as a series of operative tendencies and correspondences within a system which can undergo surface deformations and 'develop in time' without, however, losing their *properties of effectivity*. That is to say, Agamben's interest in the figure of the *archē* is founded in his grasp of the *topological* nature of its *structure*.

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[171] Watkin, *Agamben and Indifference*, p.33

Chapter Three

The *Topos* of Biopower: Deforming *Homo Sacer*, Affirming Bare Life

Introduction

In an interview Agamben has explained his abiding interest in the figure of *homo sacer*:

I was always fascinated by the Latin formula that describes the homo sacer. I found this definition many, many years ago and for long years since always carried it around with me like a package, like a riddle, until I thought, now I must finally grasp [*begreifen*] it.[172]

Here we can refine the image, alluded to earlier, of Agamben as a kind of textual bricoleur. If, following the cascading lines of enquiry pursued in *Homo Sacer I*, the reader has the sense (as many have) that Agamben is simply synthesising heterogenous materials and seeking to pit different theorists against one another, consideration of the strategic function of the figure *homo sacer* does much to correct this view. Contrary to the perception that Agamben is merely derivative of the thinkers he studies, and weakly derivative at that – leading one critic to suggest that 'Agamben does not speak for himself, but is an imitator of voices [*ein Stimmenimitator*]'[173] – I will argue that, if we attend to the topological field within which the figure *homo sacer* is deployed, we can get a clearer image of the singularity of Agamben's approach. What is most significant about Agamben's project are not his 'corrections' or 'completions' of his interlocutors' theories, but the topological orientation underwriting his critical reading practice. It is in those years in which he 'carried' the figure around that the topology of abandon exposed

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[172] 'Das unheilige Leben: Ein Gesprach mit dem italienischen Philosophen Giorgio Agamben.' Interview with Hannah Leitgeb and Cornelia Vismann. *Literaturen*, 2 (1): Berlin, 2001, p.16-21
[173] Jurgen Kaube, "Der mit den Duftstoffen tanzt." *Frankforter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2005, June 20, p.41

by the *homo sacer* comes increasingly to occupy Agamben's attention. And it is as such that the *homo sacer* establishes the topological articulatory nexus which allows for the interlacing of the theories of Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt on the state of exception, together with Foucault's studies on biopolitical governmentality in *Homo Sacer I*. To borrow an image of Benjamin's, the pattern on the reverse of Agamben's weave of law, politics, ontology, and linguistics in *Homo Sacer I* traces the gestation of his topological reading practice. We cannot properly grasp the 'political ontology' for which Agamben has become (in)famous, that is to say, if we do not follow the topological lineaments of its development. I have already provided a sense of the continuity of interest in topology which shapes Agamben's thinking in the preceding chapters, and would like now to pursue the second part of the thesis put forward at the beginning of the last chapter, that such a topological approach can help to grasp the affirmative potential of Agamben's thinking. Perhaps the most notorious example of a paradigmatic figure in Agamben's work is the *homo sacer*, a figure that has almost exclusively been associated with – and put forward as evidence for the inadequacy of – Agamben's apparently negative and pessimistic vision of contemporary politics. My sense is that in order to properly understand the paradigmatic significance of this figure as part of the *affirmative* possibilities introduced by Agamben's ensemble in the Homo Sacer series, we need to focus less on the threat of violence it is subjected to – or the apparent incapacity for resistance to power it embodies (though these are of course aspects Agamben emphasises in the course of his argument) – and more on the peculiar symmetry of the topological form of relationality it reveals. My focus in discussing the 'miserable double' of sovereign power will thus be on further elaborating Agamben's theorisation of privation (*stērisis*), introduced in my discussion of the paradigm in the previous chapter.

The 'specific ambivalence' of the power (*potenza*) of life, according to Agamben, lies in its relation to its own incapacity, its own capacity to not-be, and as such there is an animating and intimate interweaving of negation and affirmation in Agamben's studies that has often been passed over. This is surprising, given the attention that Agamben's formulation of the 'logic of the ban' has received. Conceived to illustrate precisely the topological ambivalence of the

negative relation the *homo sacer* is subject to as a result of the sovereign decision, the ban describes a topological field in which potency and impotence, presence and privation, and life and its formalisation enter into a zone of undecidability. To be and to not be, to do and to not do, are not dichotomous operations but rather describe the field of potentiality though which the power of life – in the image of the sovereign and of the *homo sacer* alike – must pass unceasingly. In this way, we should be wary of simply identifying something like 'the negative' in Agamben. Here we come upon a difficulty touched on in the introduction, the troubling proximity (or, indeed, *indistinction*) that appears to exist between the figures of negation and abjection and the figures of an affirmative potential in Agamben's work. Often the reader is left in that 'purely negative and insubstantial space of a process of…reciprocal negation-affirmation' (*S*, 148) which, somehow, might produce a 'leavening of privation'. But a number of readers have complained that there is little sense of where the distinction between the two is to be found, and have found in this apparent obscurity the seeds of suspicion that Agamben's vision is conservatively utopian. Agamben is of course not the first to pursue such a critical strategy. Heidegger, Adorno, and Derrida, all (in very different ways) explore this limit or threshold whose ambivalent promise for an emancipatory *ethos* was formulated by Friedrich Hölderlin in *Patmos*: 'where danger threatens/That which saves from it also grows'. Adorno describes the reversibility and indistinction at issue here in the concluding piece of *Minima Moralia*, writing that 'consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror image of its opposite.'[174] As Eve Geulen has remarked, Agamben's affirmative figures 'undoubtedly belong to this tradition precisely because they are ambiguously tied to what they want to get rid of.'[175] In terms that are particularly pertinent to the present study, Thomas Khurana has picked up on a similar ambivalence infusing the emancipatory potential we find Agamben's project, asking how convincing this can ultimately be when the 'promising paradigms' are 'so intimately interlaced with the structural characteristics of the status quo under attack'.[176] In what follows I

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[174] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott. Verso: London, 1996, p.247
[175] Eve Geulen, 'The function of Ambivalence,' pp.23-24
[176]Thomas Khurana, 'Desaster und Versprechen. Eine irritierende Nähe im Werk Giorgio Agambens.' *Die gouvernementale Maschine. Zur politischen Philosophie Giorgio Agambens*. Ed. Janine Bockelmann and Frank Meier. Unrast: Munster, 2007, p.43

will begin to explore the affirmative possibilities put forth in Agamben's work by concentrating on the 'structural-analogy' he uncovers between the *homo sacer* and the sovereign. My reading of the *homo sacer* and the 'sacrificial function' of which he is paradigmatic will thus follow Agamben's call for a topology of the field, seeking out not the 'di-chotomies' to which the figure is subject, but rather the 'tensional' 'di-polarities' and 'thresholds of indistinction' it exposes.

This discussion will serve two purposes. One of the polemical aims of this study is to challenge the negative view of Agamben's historical method as consisting in a 'history of decline (*Verfallsgeschichte*)' that in its pessimism and 'political nihilism'[177] is incapable of escaping a conservative-Romantic view of modernity, derivative in large part from the thought of Heidegger.[178] A topological return to the role and function of the 'enigmatic figure' (*HS*, 71) *homo sacer* allows for further consideration of this matter. In particular, in concentrating on the 'ambivalent' function of the sacred – which for Agamben reveals the 'fiction' underwriting a 'supposedly originary, forgotten, repressed, or otherwise latently present religiosity'[179] – we can consider further Agamben's concept of the *archē* introduced in the previous chapter, and elaborate the claim that this figure is 'not locatable in a chronology' but is rather an operative force within history. Furthermore, on the basis of this approach it becomes possible to address a crucial differentiation between the *homo sacer* and the 'protagonist' of the Homo Sacer project, bare life. The mistaken elision of these two figures – not helped by Agamben's own lack of clarity concerning their distinction – has led to a lack of proper appreciation of the affirmative possibilities of bare life. These derive, in large part, from Agamben's often oblique but persistent interest in the emancipatory potential of a space of 'reciprocal negation-affirmation.' In turning to the 'archaic' figure of *homo sacer* and seeking to revitalise the concept of bare life, Agamben wants to explore the particular form and structure of relation the figures maintain with privation: *how* they come to be *what* they are through their own incapacity and impotential. In

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[177] Ernesto Laclau, 'Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy?,' in *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*.
[178] Eve Geulen, 'The Function of Ambivalence,' p.19
[179] Ibid, p.28

revisiting the apparently negative image *homo sacer* I shall thus clarify my own topological understanding of the affirmative place of bare life in Agamben's work.

Approaching bare life as the cipher for a topological process of *locating* life, I suggest that the figure not be seen as correlative to *zoē* but, rather, as paradigmatic of the articulatory nexus which produces a certain, determinative relation between life and form. I argue that Agamben's approach to this figure is a key part of his critique of the presupposition of a 'biological substrate' of life which underwrites biopower (and its critiques), and that he develops a topological strategy in order to trace the modulations in the structures of effectivity within which life is given form. On the basis of this discussion I move on to consider Agamben's engagement with the work of Foucault in more detail. Focusing on the apparently 'impossible' dialogue Agamben conducts with Foucault over the relation between sovereignty and biopolitics, I suggest that Agamben departs from Foucault's account in considering the topological *interrelation* of sovereignty and biopolitics which marks the emergence of governmentality as the place of a transformation in the articulatory structure of power. In order to develop the notion of a difficult proximity between affirmation and negation in Agamben's work, and to point towards the concerns of the next chapter, I argue that the intervention of Agamben in this regard is to situate an affirmative theory of the subject *within* the negative articulation of life and form that is produced by the governmental 'machine'. In this way I suggest the strength of Agamben's topological inversion of the relation between life and power is its functioning as an *internal critique*, one that pursues the paradoxical implications of the articulatory logic which produces this relation not from an external 'critical' position, but *as this logic is reflected back into itself* through its own forms of expression or effectivity.[180] I conclude by considering the possibility that there might in fact be a topological affinity between Foucault and Agamben which has thus far been overlooked.

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[180] Livingston, *Politics of Logic*, p.172

The Shadow of Sovereignty

To recall, the *homo sacer* comes to the attention of Roman legal theorists due to a certain ambivalence regarding the specific nature of its legal status.

The revocation of a citizen's rights by sovereign decree produce[s] the threshold figure of *homo sacer*, the sacred man who can be killed by anyone (he has no rights) but not sacrificed because the act of sacrifice is only representable within the legal context of the city – the very city from which *homo sacer* has been banished. He is an outlawed citizen, the exception to the law, and yet he is still subject to the penalty of death and therefore still included, in the very act of exclusion, within the law.[181]

If the paradigm 'constitutes a peculiar form of knowledge that does not proceed by articulating together the universal and the particular', I would argue it is the figure's singular capacity to disarticulate this logic that drives Agamben's interest in the 'riddle' of *homo sacer*. Agamben describes the paradoxical condition of a 'life that cannot be sacrificed and yet may be killed' as existing in a 'relation of abandon' with the community from which it has been banished. He describes the paradoxical form of relationality implied by this logic of the ban as follows:

He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather abandoned by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable. It is literally not possible to say whether the one who has been banned is outside or inside the juridical order. (*HS*, 21)

The 'archaic figure' of Roman law is one marked by privation. But in this state of abandon it does however seem to put the law in an awkward position. It would appear that in banishing the *homo sacer* the law decisively *withdraws* itself from him and places him outside of its jurisdiction. This is the nature of his punishment – the *homo sacer* is no longer entitled to the rights that result from his membership of the polity. And yet he carries a trace or remainder of

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[181] Anthony Downey, "Zones of Indistinction: Giorgio Agamben's 'Bare Life' and the Politics of Aesthetics", *Third Text*, Vol. 23, Issue 2, March, 2009, p. 111

the law with him – exposure to the penalty of death. Agamben will suggest that this remnant of the law which the *homo sacer* carries to the threshold of juridical applicability presents a structural flaw within the law's functioning, but also and more troublingly serves as a crystallisation of the potential for violence upon which this functioning of the law is based. At its most extreme, that is to say, at this threshold at which it confronts the *limit* of its internal conditions of possibility – that its authority be *effective* – the law is reduced to its 'pure form' in the sovereign decision over the life of the *homo sacer*. The *persistence* of the law's power resides in a person or a place from which it has *withdrawn*, and to which it no longer applies; and it relies for this peculiar persistence in withdrawal and non-applicability on a constitutive relation to a *potential* exercise – the sacred man *can* be killed – of violent force. In seeking to understand this modulating juridical *topos* Agamben directly relates the paradoxical operations of the law to Aristotle's theory of potentiality, describing

[T]his potentiality (in the proper sense of the Aristotelian dynamis, which is always also *dynamis mē energein*, the potentiality *not to* pass into actuality) of the law to maintain itself in its own privation, to apply in no longer applying. (*HS*, 28)

According to this paradoxical logic the law appears to persist – and find its authority for that persistence – through a peculiar relation to *its own* privation.

With this introduction of the term 'potentiality' – in every way essential to Agamben's thinking – in the current context it is worth taking a moment to attend to certain questions of translation which are pertinent to my discussion, and which will help to explain the wider implications for Agamben's work of what might appear,at first glance, to be an abstract first-philosophical problematic. As Kalpana Seshardi has pointed out, the translation of *la potenza* and *l'atto* into 'potentiality' and 'actuality' risks obscuring 'the horizon of thought' within which Agamben's theory develops in the Homo Sacer project, namely 'the historicity of

power'.[182] Given the tendency of critics to reject Agamben's turn to an ontological and theological register in order to address 'contemporary' political formations, he has not perhaps been helped in this regard by his translators. For whilst the translation of Agamben's *potenza* as 'potentiality' has the undeniable benefit of situating it within the tradition of the theological and metaphysical (more specifically medieval) reception of Aristotle's work, which is a key point of departure for Agamben's theory, it is also the case that by occluding the more quotidian sense of *potenza* as one of the Italian terms for 'power' (the other being 'potere') there is a risk that we are 'narrowing the dimensions of *potenza* as a concept.'[183] In the first instance, this obscures the abiding dialogue Agamben engages in with other modern thinkers of the historicity of power, including Gilles Deleuze's concept of *puissance*, and, most significantly, Foucault's *pouvoir*. Here we should be alert to the significance of 'historical semantics' for Agamben, and so not forego the way in which Agamben's use of *potenza* forms part of a wider semantic strategy to address the polarization of the different terms for 'power' that exist in the Romance languages: *potenza* and *potere*, *puissance* and *pouvoir*. The point to stress is that there is at work here a familiar attempt to deconstruct the supposed dichotomies that determine the understanding of a given semantic sphere. By rendering 'power' as *potenza* Agamben is not simply referring us back to a distant scholastic agon, but rather emphasising the 'di-polarities' inhabiting our understanding of the term 'power'. Thus, a further consequence of approaching *potenza* as 'potentiality' is to set it immediately *against* power, as the *opposite* and resistant force to power understood in the proper sense. But if we read Agamben's *potenza* in a more quotidian way, what emerges is perhaps the guiding thesis of his reflections on power: that it cannot be separated from impotence, that the capacity of power to act and be effective exists in a relation of indistinction with its incapacity and 'inoperativity' (*inoperosità*). This insight is lost if we do not recognize the tensile polarity introduced into the term by Agamben's approach. In this sense, as I shall discuss in more detail in the second half of this chapter, Agamben's use of

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[182] Kalpani Seshardi., 'Agamben, the Thought of *Sterisis*: An Introduction to Two Essays'. Critical Inquiry, Winter 2014, Volume 40: Number 2, p. 473
[183] Ibid, p.473

potenza is in complex dialogue with Foucault's assertion that 'power functions.'[184] With these terminological considerations in mind, in what follows I will be keen to stress the tensions Agamben exploits between the difference and *indifference* of the terms.

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Let's return to the relation of privation introduced by the sovereign's banishment of the *homo sacer*. What this relation reveals is both the capacity of the law 'to maintain itself in its own privation, to apply in no longer applying,' and its reliance on a threat of force to achieve this. In this way, it 'holds life in its ban by abandoning it.' (*HS*, 29) Power is functioning here then but – as the queries of the Roman jurists' attest – it is doing so in problematic ways. Agamben reviews this situation:

The originary relation of law to life is not application but Abandonment. The matchless potentiality of the *nomos*, its "*originary force of law*," is that it holds life in its ban by abandoning it. This is the structure of the ban that we shall try to understand here, so that we can eventually call it into question. …The ban is a form of relation. But precisely what kind of relation is at issue here, when the ban has no positive content and the terms of the relation seem to exclude (and, at the same time, to include) each other? What is the form of law that expresses itself in the ban? The ban is the pure form of reference to something in general, which is to say, the simple positing of relation with the nonrelational. In this sense, the ban is identical with the limit form of relation. (*HS*, 29)

In order to understand the 'structure' of the ban Agamben will turn to the register of topology, and suggest that 'the topological structure drawn here' by the act of abandon not only marks out a figure of political exclusion and subjection to power, but also reveals a *structural* connection between the *homo sacer* and the sovereign. In the first pages of the book we read a familiar

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[184] Foucault, "Society Must be Defended," p.29

description of a *topos outopos*, but here the placeless place is one occupied by sovereign power itself.

The paradox of sovereignty consists in the fact the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order. …[Schmitt's] specification that the sovereign is "*at the same time* outside and inside the juridical order" (emphasis added) is not insignificant: the sovereign, having the legal power to suspend the validity of the law, legally places himself outside the law. …The topology implicit in the paradox is worth reflecting upon, since the degree to which sovereignty marks the limit (in the double sense of end and principle) of the juridical order will become clear only once the structure of the paradox is grasped. (*HS*, 15)

The ability to suspend the law defines the 'exceptional' status of the sovereign: it can, precisely, decide on what is an exception to the law or norm, and as such must of necessity be able in a certain way to operate outside of the law's jurisdiction. The exercise of power is thus closely linked to location, or rather, with an ability to alter one's location arbitrarily. What Schmitt's work, and Agamben's readings of Schmitt, seek to explore through this paradoxical localization is a profound crisis in the grounds of legitimacy upon which the authority of sovereign rule is based. Sovereign power *is* its ground, its representative modality is *territorial*, and as such it founds its authority on a logical nexus between power (order) and its organisation of space (localization). And it is through analysis of an apparent symmetry between the sovereign and the *homo sacer* that Agamben will attempt to describe the nature of this crisis in the process of power's application.

Let me emphasise this point at the outset: the *homo sacer* is not simply cast as an abject figure stripped of all rights and exposed to the possibility of death at the hands of a despotic sovereign; it also and more decisively serves a strategic – that is, a structural-topological – purpose in the argument, insofar as the paradoxical relation the figure maintains with the juridical-political sphere (and by extension with the authority of sovereign rule) problematizes the top-down schematic of power relations. As a paradigm, *homo sacer* is thus *both* tied to a

determinate historical constellation *and* a heuristic device for addressing the conditions of possibility within which such a constellation can occur. For Agamben, the abandonment of the *homo sacer* exposes the paradoxical nature of a certain territorial representation of juridical-political power. In this account structure and history are not distinguishable. Furthermore, the significance of this for 'the present situation' is that during the last two hundred years this modality of sovereign power has undergone a decisive crisis, in which, as Agamben writes, the 'link between order and localization has broken'. Thus, returning to a figure who exposes and reveals the paradoxes and flaws in the structural conditions through which this model of power functions can do much to help follow subsequent transformations – or *deformations* – in these conditions of functioning. The point here is not to develop a linear narrative of progression from one model of power to the next (feudalism-absolutism-representative democracy), but rather to trace a series of mutations in the *topological properties* – geographical, signifying, physical or relational – within which the emergence of power formations becomes possible. It is a topological model of analysis, which, though it moves between them and in a sense has to do within nothing else, is not *reducible* to a historical or structural approach. And, what is most important in the present context, it is not simply diagnostic: '[i]t is,' Agamben writes, 'on the bases of these uncertain and nameless terrains, these difficult zones of indistinction that the ways and the forms of a new politics must be thought' (*HS*, 87).

If we consider the inclusive-exclusion and 'ban' of the *homo sacer* in topological terms, as Agamben encourages us to do, what we are confronted with is a figure whose function is to be the location of absolute lawlessness. And this localization constitutes the 'positive predicament of [the] 'ban'.' For although this place of lawlessness is logically speaking a 'perfectly negative determination,' what the topology of the ban shows is that 'the non-role which embodies lawlessness is *positively identifiable*, and so is the life that awaits its incumbent.'[185] Once again, Agamben is seeking to re-think the negative conditions which allow for the positive 'materialization of the ban'. Turning to the topographical vocabulary of Schmitt,

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[185] Schutz, 'Homo Non-Sacer,' p.126

Agamben suggests that sovereign power has been understood first and foremost as the '"ordering of space"' and so the act which is 'constitutive of the sovereign *nomos* is therefore not only a "taking of land" (*Landesnahme*) – the determination of a juridical and a territorial ordering (of an *Ordnung* and an *Ortung*) – but above all a "taking of the outside."' (*HS*, 14) The 'exceptional' sovereign decision on what exists inside and outside the law cannot, by its own internal logic, however, simply 'take' the outside, nor banish its *homo sacer*, this placeholder of 'the outside', but rather must *produce* a form of relation with that which is its exteriority – its negative image, or 'shadow' – in order to affirm its own authority. As such, what is at issue in this exceptional logic is 'not so much the control or neutralization of an excess as the *creation and definition* of the very space in which the juridico-political order can have validity.'[186] Insofar as it is grounded in and through a relation to its most radical negation, Agamben argues that there is in fact a structural necessity to create the space for such a figure in the process of the law instantiating itself: 'Law seems able to subsist only by capturing anomie'. (*SE*, 60) The logic of 'political exceptionalism' thus *creates* a space or 'hollow' within itself. But there is a flaw in the system: the *homo sacer* reveals that in the topological structure of the ban 'the taking [*Nehmen*] fails…to live up to its completion'. [187] The threshold-limit occupied by the *homo sacer* and the sovereign – precisely this ambivalent *localization* – serves to disrupt and 'perforate' the closed ontological and juridico-political system which, thus, becomes 'unclosed, perforated, open [and] doesn't hold together'.[188] The universal, totalising pretensions of sovereign power are in fact *constitutively rent by its lack and inadequacy to itself*.[189] And in this intimate relation to their own privation the *power* of the sovereign and the *impotence* of the *homo sacer* occupy symmetrical positions 'that have the same structure and are correlative' (*HS*, 84):

[186] Kevin Attell, *Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction*. Fordham University Press: New York, 2014, p.130
[187] Ibid, p.125-6
[188] Livingston, *Politics of Logic*, p. 82
[189] Livingston, *Politics of Logic*, p.84

The sovereign and the *homo sacer* are thus related through a structural analogy…joined in the figure of an action that, excepting itself from both human and divine law, from both *nomos* and *physis*, nonetheless delimits what is, in a certain sense, the first properly political space of the West. (*HS*, 84)

If what the interlocked figures of *homo sacer* and the sovereign represent is that the legal order 'maintains, at its centre, a fundamental ambiguity, an unlocalizable zone of indistinction or exception,' (*HS*, 20) what can it mean to suggest that this place is 'the first properly political space of the West'?

The good God lives in the detail, and the detail we have to pick up on in the last passage is the seemingly casual descriptive shift between 'indistinction' or 'exception'. Indistinction, as we can recall, points to a threshold where it becomes 'impossible to draw a line clearly and separate two different substances' (in this case, between law and lawlessness). It is a limit at which the apparently separate semantic spheres of two terms or figures begin to cross and become interlaced in such a way that the medium or condition of possibility for their distinction and subsequent articulation itself becomes intelligible. The exception, on the other hand, is the strategic function and structural medium *within which* this articulation becomes possible. The deceptively simple point here is that this process of articulation is in itself completely arbitrary: it is a 'topological game of putting together and articulating.' The strategic function of the exception is to create a 'purely fictitious and virtual nexus' in which the dominion of a valorized term (the sovereign, *bios*) is achieved on the condition that an inferior term (*homo sacer*, *zoē*) be subjected to the status of an abandonment.[190] If the 'originary political formulation of the sovereign bond' (*HS*, 85) in the form of the exceptionalism of the ban constitutes, according to Agamben, the 'ontological root of every political power,' (*HS*, 48) it is because the 'first properly political space of the West' is this 'purely fictitious' nexus in which the (ontological) determination of life and its (ontic) politicisation become indiscernible. The logic of the ban is thus a variation – a *topoi* – of the formal logic of the *exceptio*, and so is 'structurally analogous'

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[190] Attell, *Beyond the Threshold*, p.124

to the 'insubstantial foundationalism' of ontological exceptionalism which Aristotle bequeaths to the philosophical and political tradition of the west. The logic of the exception can thus be understood as the instrumentalisation of a 'specific ambivalence'. The particular *efficacy* of this fictive, arbitrary nexus is produced through the internalisation and instrumentalisation of the obscurity of its own formation.

In a sense, we can describe Agamben's deeper project (his political ontology, if you like) as a history of philosophical determinations. As such, it is fitting that much of the debate surrounding Agamben's thought centres on his re-conceptualisation of the Aristotelian articulation of life. What Aristotle confronts is in every sense 'first' philosophy, in so far as it tries to understand and – through a certain articulatory strategy – determine the most evident and yet indeterminate 'thing': life itself. Aristotle here inaugurates (among many other things) a certain understanding of the relation between factical existence and its ontological determination that, Agamben will suggest, functions according to an identifiable and enduring topo-logic: that of the *exceptio*:

In all of these figures the same mechanism is at work: the *arché* is constituted by dividing the factical experience and pushing down to the origin – that is, excluding – one half of it in order then to rearticulate it to the other by including it as foundation. Thus, the city is founded on the division of life into bare life and politically qualified life, the human is defined by the exclusion-inclusion of the animal [and] the law by the *exceptio* of anomie. (*UB*, 265)

Once again, we can see a peculiarly insubstantial foundationalism at work here, a determination of something through its relation to that which must remain in a certain sense non-relational to it (anomie, *zoē*). And according to Agamben it is this negative structure of the exception – the specific form of its relation to its own privation – which lies at the heart of modern and contemporary configurations of power [*potenza*]. In a crucial passage in *Homo Sacer I* Agamben unites politics and philosophy under the sign of *potenza*, a force field in which potency and act, power and impotence, negation and affirmation, exist in a state of tensile

polarization: 'Potentiality [power] is that through which Being founds itself *sovereignly*, which is to say, without anything preceding or determining it.' (*HS*, 46)

I want to move on now to consider these last words. I have addressed the politicisation of ontology that Agamben reveals – the interlacing of their 'histories of determination' – but the paradoxes and structural inconsistencies which emerge from the 'originary political formulation of the sovereign bond' direct us to another sphere: that of the sacred. The stumbling block for the Roman jurists consisted in the problematic indistinction the *homo sacer* produced between the religious and the juridico-political spheres. As the figure in whom the 'the category of sacredness is tied for the first time to a human life,' (*HS*, 71) the *homo sacer* represents a paradigmatic instance of determination through *indetermination*; at the threshold of indistinction between the religious and the juridical-political spheres stands the abandoned figure of the sacred man. The *homo sacer* is certainly an extreme figure, associated with sacrificial violence, abandonment, and a seemingly archaic past of the human community. But as with the other paradigmatic figures Agamben takes up, what the *homo sacer* serves above all to 'expose' and 'make intelligible' is a 'logico-formal' problematic. (*HS*, 109)

The Sacred Remainder

It is in the closing pages of *Language and Death* that Agamben first discusses the singular location of the *homo sacer* in strict correlation with the theme of abandonment. Here the structural-topological function of this figure within the process of constituting an insubstantial foundationalism, and its bearing on the cultural aporia of the 'sacrificial function' which is exemplary of this ontological localisation, begins to emerge:

At the centre of the sacrifice is simply a determinate action that, as such, is separated and marked by exclusion; in this way it becomes *sacer* and is invested with a series of prohibitions and ritual prescriptives. Forbidden action, marked by sacredness, is not, however, simply excluded; rather it is now only accessible for certain people and according to determinate rules. In this way, it furnishes society and its ungrounded legislation with the fiction of a beginning: that which is excluded from the community is,

in reality, that on which the entire life of the community is founded. [T]he sacred is necessarily an ambiguous and circular concept. (In Latin *sacer* means vile, ignorninious, and also august, reserved for the gods; both the law and he who violates it are sacred: *qui legem violavit, sacer esto*.) He who has violated the law, in particular by homicide, is excluded from the community, exiled, and abandoned to himself, so that killing him would not be a crime: *homo sacer* is *est quem populus iudicavit ob rnaleficium; neque fas est cum irnmolari, sed qui occidil paricidi non damnatur*. (*LD*, 104-5)

The Latin formula Agamben comes across places a 'sacred' seed within the foundational logic of the juridical-political order which will, he insists, 'cause it to explode.' (*P*, 90) At the centre of Agamben's critique of the sacrificial function is thus the 'strategic device' of the concept of the 'sacred' in producing a certain 'image of the past'. More specifically, through the figure of the *homo sacer*, in which 'the category of sacredness is tied for the first time to a human life,' Agamben wants to follow the *nachleben* of the concept of the sacred within modern cultural and political formations by focusing on those 'internal and symptomatic' ambivalences that emerge 'when this category loses its significance and comes to assume contradictory meanings'. (*HS*, 80) That is to say, referring back to the discussion of the function of the signature in the previous chapter, in approaching the term *sacer* in this context – at the threshold of its juridification in the figure of the *homo sacer* – we are confronted by 'a void of sense or an indeterminate value of signification' (*SL*, 14-15) in which the *conditions of significance* of a given term can undergo semantic deformation and the borders between apparently distinct spheres of human experience become porous and enter into a spatio-temporal 'zone of indistinction'.

In the sections in *Homo Sacer I* which introduce this 'enigmatic' figure Agamben traces its presence in debates among Roman scholars of law and develops a philological critique of the term in its modern interpretation within the human sciences. As the references begin to mount up and the textual fabric becomes more densely woven, we can sense that Agamben is following the dictum of Benjamin (analogous to Wittgenstein's imperative alluded to in the previous chapter) according to which 'terminology is the proper element of thought.' (*P*, 207)

Agamben is here pursuing that form of philological study through semantic 'polarization' which, as we have seen, first emerges in the pages of *Stanzas* and is later developed in the related concepts of the paradigm and the signature. In the central sections of the book Agamben 'places alongside' and 'conjoins together' his philological *denkbilder*, two 'singular' variations on the 'theme' of the sacred: the 'perplexity of the *antique auctores*' of Roman law, and 'the divergent interpretations of modern scholars' on the place and function of the sacred. (*HS*, 72) Just as Warburg devoted himself to the study of the posthumous life of Classical forms and gestures in Renaissance art as a means of orientation in the present, so Agamben turns to the encounter with the afterlife of the ancient concept of the sacred 'between the end of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth' in order to confront the 'bloody mystification of a new planetary order.' (*HS*, 12) What Agamben wants to critically address is the construction of a 'scientific mythologeme' which has the strategic function of 'displacing' and secularizing the concept of the sacred at a 'moment in which a society that had already lost every connection to its religious tradition began to express its unease.' (*HS*, 75) Placing the modern meaning alongside the Roman scholars' attempt to account for the ambiguous position of the *homo sacer* reveals an 'ambiguity inherent in the vocabulary of the sacred as such': the adjective *sacer* (as remarked upon by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*) means 'both "august, consecrated to the gods," and… "cursed, excluded from the community".' The 'ambivalence' at issue here is not, Agamben suggests, simply the result of a 'misunderstanding' but rather is 'constitutive' of a certain 'operation' (*PR*, 77) which finds its paradigmatic expression in the ban placed on the *homo sacer*. Insofar as the operative logic of the ban refers to a figure who must in some sense *pass between* the two spheres (holy and cursed, sacred and profane, law and lawlessness), it remains, as such, caught in a double-bind. The *homo sacer* is thus a 'liminal' figure whose position renders the distinction between the two *topoi* (religion and politics) unclear. Geulen summarises the difficulties confronting modern scholarly attempts to define the 'ambiguous and circular' concept:

Everyone could kill the homo sacer without committing murder; but the one who sacrificed him to the gods was guilty of sacrilege. These two attributes (the impossibility of sacrifice and the possibility of unpunishable murder) render the description of such a man as sacred rather puzzling. Because sacralisation (*consecratio*) usually denotes the passage from the profane to the divine order of law, the ban on sacrifice appears to be inexplicable. But if one assumes…that the *homo sacer* was sacred in the sense that he belonged to the gods of the underworld, then it remains inexplicable why anyone could kill him without committing a sacrilege.[191]

The solution to this dual-meaning of the term provided by modern scholars was, in Agamben's view, entirely unsatisfactory in two respects. First, in relating the indetermination of the banned figure to the ethnographic notion of the taboo (by connecting the term *sacer* to *mana*), the scientific mythologeme relied on a secularization or 'psycholigization' of the theologically infused concept of an originary and irreducible ambivalence characterizing all that is sacred. Such an approach, Agamben contends, simply 'displaces' the circularity of the concept into a different sphere whilst doing nothing to explain the formal-logical problematic produced by the dual-meaning and the historical-philosophical implications of the operation it exposes. (Agamben details how the theoretical weakness of this thesis is compounded – whilst its influence deepens – in its subsequent manifestations in the realms of linguistics and anthropology. (*HS*, 77-80)) In an act of 'pushing to the bottom' and creating a 'fiction of beginning' with which we are now familiar, the concept of the sacred thus comes to 'completely coincide with the concept of the obscure and impenetrable.' (*HS*, 78) Second, this recourse to a kind of *a priori* ambivalence of the sacred implies a schematic historiographic model which, as we have seen, Agamben decisively rejects: 'the idea that the sphere of sacredness and religion…coincides with the most archaic moment that historical research in the human sciences can prudently attempt to recover…is an *arbitrary presupposition*.' (*SL*, 15-16, my emphasis) Here we come once again to the 'fringe of ultra-history' encountered in the previous chapter:

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[191] Eve Geulen, 'The Ambivalence of the Sacred', p.27

It is as if the passage to what Overbeck called *Urgeschichte* and Dumézil called "fringe of ultra-history" necessarily implied a blind leap into the magico-religious element., which is very often nothing but the name the scholar gives…to the *terra incognito* that lies beyond the area that the patient labour of the historian is able to define. Taking the sphere of law as an example, it may be the distinction between the religious sphere and the profane sphere, whose distinctive characteristics appear to us…to be in some measure defined. If he reaches in this area a more archaic stage, the scholar has the impression that the boundaries become blurred, so he is led to hypothesize a preceding stage, in which the religious sphere and the profane…are not yet distinct. (*SL*, 16)

If Agamben can describe the semantic 'migration' of the 'archaic' term that he is tracing in terms of a 'psycholigization of religious experience,' (*HS*, 78) (in a phrase which directly echoes the early remarks on the 'dislocation' of theological concepts in the *stimmung* essay) this turn to psychology and 'feeling' becomes *possible* due to the pre-historical localization which serves to underwrite the 'assumed ambivalence of the sacred'. (*HS*, 80) The 'obscurity' and 'impenetrability' of a 'sacred power or substance that is as terrible as it is ambivalent, vague, and indeterminate' can thus only be approached through analysis of the *historical semantics* which constitute its conditions of possibility. We can recall here Isidore of Seville's etymological proposition that Agamben quotes, suggesting that 'history pertains to grammar'. For we appear in the term *sacer* to have an exemplary illustration of the structural reliance on an 'indeterminate and empty' place that serves as the presupposition of the historical life of terminology, and the periodisations and 'images' of the past (and so of the present and future) to which it provides (or productively obscures) access. Indeed, Agamben will turn to the passages from Levi-Strauss already discussed in order to emphasise that the term *sacer* does not designate 'something like a sacred substance or social sentiments related to religion' but rather a 'void of sense.' Here the intense formalism of Agamben's historical method comes into stark and (in my view) compelling relief:

[W]hat stands before religion as we know it historically is not only a more primitive [and thus obscure] religion (*mana*); it would, in fact, be advisable to bypass the very terms *religion* and *law* and try to imagine an *x*. To find the definition of this *x*, we must put forward every possible precaution, practising a sort of archaeological epoché that suspends, at least provisionally, the attribution of predicates with which we are used to defining religion and law. (*SL*, 17)

Here we can see how, by focusing on the 'fringe' or 'zone' of indistinction that exists before or beyond the articulation of two terms through their division, Agamben maps the philosophical co-ordinates of onto-linguistic localization onto the procedures of critical-historical methodologies, in order to expose the 'blind leap' they both take into the insubstantial sphere of an obscure and impenetrable foundation. In this sense, we can recapitulate Agamben's suggestion in the 'Archaeology' essay, that what is essential is not to uncritically project onto the supposed 'primordial indistinction' between two terms (sacred and profane, religion and law, *zoe* and *bios*) the characteristics that are known to us and which are precisely produced by the process of articulatory-division *itself*. This is an important point of distinction between Agamben and other, seemingly proximate thinkers of an originary and aporetic differential structure and its capacities, and I will come back to this point in more detail below.

The essential point for Agamben is that this obscure zone is the very place in which power seeks to situate itself. As Aaron Hillyer writes:

For Agamben, this is the danger of the sacred: its isolation in the population of the nation, in individual beings that are wholly consigned to it by the law, beyond the law, enables the situation whereby those same beings are subject to any possible treatment. Thus, an ontological schema that posits a belonging to the sacred merely highlights the problem of sovereignty, without moving beyond it.[192]

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[192]Aaron Hillyer, *The Disappearance of Literature*. Bloomsbury: New York and London, 2013, p.23. Agamben's critique of the maintenance of the sacred in the form of an impenetrable and in some way irrecoverable dimension of existence also underpins the distance he creates between his thinking and that of Georges Bataille on this question. Whilst it is beyond the scope of the present study to engage with Agamben's somewhat indirect but nonetheless sustained engagement with Baitaille's theory of the sacred, it does point to an important distinction between Agamben and a tradition of thought which is deeply involved with the concept and experience of negativity. Such a study would need to begin by considering Agamben's related reading of Alexander Kojevé's concept of post-historical man, and his critique of Maurice Blanchot's reception of Baitaille's writings on the sacred. A comprehensive review of this critical encounter would have to consider Agamben's persistent references to this constellation of post-Hegelian thinkers throughout the Homo Sacer studies. A starting point – or 'hidden intersection' – for entering into this dialogue could be the figure of the *voyou desoeuvré*, or lazy rascal, whose contours Raymond Queneau developed in his novels and

In his intervention into the debate over the place of the sacred, Agamben is developing a suggestion by Benjamin in his essay 'Critique of Violence'. The relevant passage reads as follows: 'It might be well worth while to investigate the origin of the dogma of the sacredness of life. Perhaps, indeed probably, it is very recent, the last mistaken attempt of the weakened western tradition to seek the saint it has lost in cosmological impenetrability.'[193] Pursuing the origin of this dogma Agamben clears away the interpretative mist that descends between the term and its historical life in such 'ambivalent' approaches as he details, to locate instead its 'originary juridico-political dimension [in] the *homo sacer*.' (*HS*, 80) The critique of the logic of insubstantial foundationalism (a logic which migrates from ontological speculation, into the sphere of Roman law, through the theological canon, and on into the diverse disciplines of the human sciences) is here put to work in order to concentrate on the strategic function the concept of the sacred plays in the processual deformations of the ban-structure, through which the state and the legal order establish and maintain their relation to life:

This symmetry between *sacratio* and sovereignty sheds new light on the category of the sacred, whose ambivalence has so tenaciously oriented not only modern studies on the phenomenology of religion but also the most recent inquiries into sovereignty. The proximity between the sphere of sovereignty and the sphere of the sacred, which has often been observed and explained in a variety of ways, is not simply the secularized residue of the originary religious character of every political power, nor merely the attempt to grant the latter a theological foundation. And this proximity is just as little the consequence of the "sacred" – that is, august and accursed – character that inexplicably belongs to life as such. If our hypothesis is correct, sacredness is instead the originary form of the inclusion of bare life in the juridical order, and the syntagm *homo sacer* names something like the originary "political" relation, which is to

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to whom Kojevé devoted an essay. This figure – representative of the concept of *desouvrement* – emerges as a key point of differentiation between the way Agamben thinks the negative capability of privation and the approaches of Bataille and Blanchot to the negative. For a general discussion of some of the themes raised by Agamben's engagement with these figures see Stefano Franchi, 'Passive Politics,' in *Contretemps* 5, December 2004; for an insightful attempt to work through the implications of this area of thinking as it permeates contemporary literary practice see the chapters on the relation between Agamben, Blanchot, and Bataille in Hillyer's study, esp. pp. 19-37. For a critical reading of Agamben's grasp of the Hegelian critique at work in Bataille's own conception of sacrifice, see Paul Hegarty, 'Supposing the Impossibility of Silence, and of Sound, Of Voice,' in *Politics, Metaphysics and Death*.

[193] Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', in *One Way Street and Other Writings*. Verso: London, p.202

say, bare life insofar as it operates in an inclusive exclusion as the referent of the sovereign decision. (*HS*, 84-85)

Hence the project-defining question: 'why Western politics first constitutes itself through an exclusion (which is simultaneously an inclusion) of bare life.' (*HS*, 7) And hence the significance of the *homo sacer*, in whom the interweaving of the religious and juridico-political orders takes place in a singular way. The task, as Agamben states it, is to dissolve the ambivalence surrounding this figure so as to focus 'not [on] the originary ambivalence of the sacredness that is assumed to belong to him, but rather both the particular character of the double exclusion into which he is taken and the violence to which he finds himself exposed.' (*HS*, 82)

As Agamben suggests in an important passage in *Language and Death* which anticipates many of the objections raised in response to his later, more detailed study of these questions:

The fact that, in sacrifice as we know it, this action is generally a murder and that sacrifice is violent, is certainly not casual or insignificant; and yet in itself this violence *explains nothing*; rather, *it requires an explanation.* (*LD*, 105, my emphasis)

By dislocating the concept of the sacred from the religious sphere and displacing it into its proper legal context Agamben hits on a figure who in its 'irreparable exposure in a relation of abandonment' (*HS*, 83) serves to 'expose' and 'show' the flawed totalising claims of sovereign power; its 'ontological root' in the impenetrable ground of the sacred. Despite the emotive language, it is important to emphasise that what Agamben will term the 'relation of abandon' (*HS*, 28) is to be understood in the first instance as a formal-logical, that is a *topological relation*. If we follow Kant's suggestion that the proper definition of being is position, then we might say that the abandoned being occupies the place of the outside, the exposed and threatened position at the limit of the juridico-political sphere: 'What emerges in this limit

figure is the radical crisis of every possibility of clearly distinguishing between membership and inclusion, between what is outside and what is inside.' (*HS*, 25)[194] Given – that is, if we accept – that 'that which is excluded from the community is, in reality, that on which the entire life of the community is founded,' then something is amiss, it would seem, within the logical processes of putting together and articulating the political space of a community. Indeed, according to Agamben it is this flaw in its own *process of formation* – this is the creative 'violence' at its origin – which sovereign power can no longer hide. Thanos Zartaloudis describes the function of the 'mythologemes' that serve to obscure the formative processes of socio-political practices and intituitions as follows:

The mythological presupposition of the existence of such a transcendental righteousness or power is grounded through the violence of the so-called foundations or sources of law or power, which rely, in turn, upon the presupposition of distinction between a pre-political, pre-legal or pre-historical human nature (bare life) and a legally qualified, social, or political culture (citizenship), removing each time from the archival memory of institutions the fact of such transcendental foundations being 'a product of man', an *action*.[195]

We can adapt the words of the poet Paul Celan in order to describe the revelation of these profane, demystified processes of formation, and suggest that, in this view, law and power, tradition, and the apparently foundational social institutions, no longer *impose* themselves; rather, they *expose* themselves.[196]

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[194] Agamben isolates this paradox by hitting on a form of 'semantic ambiguity' in the Romance languages, in which the term 'banned' 'originally meant both "at the mercy of" and "out of free will, freely," both "excluded, banned" and "open to all, free".

[195] Zartaloudis, *Power, Law and the Uses of Criticism*, p.x

[196] In the original Celan's aphorism reads: 'Poetry no longer imposes itself; it exposes itself.' The crisis of applicability that animates the two spheres are, of course, directly correlated in Agamben's view. Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Beda Allemmann and Stefan Reichard with Rolf Bücher. Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 1983, 3: 181. Agamben quotes Celan's remark in the essay 'Tradition of the Immemorial'.

'Privation is like a face, a form.'

The legal historian Anton Schütz has aptly described Agamben's paradigmatic figures as 'express[ing],' before anything else, 'the notion of an inconsistent universal law'.[197] What the 'symmetry' between the sacred sphere and the sphere of sovereignty reveals is that the 'sacred' refers neither to the 'residue of the originary religious character of every political power,' nor to the myth of the sacredness of life but rather to the topological operation of the exception and the ban: 'If our hypothesis is correct, sacredness is instead the originary form of the inclusion of bare life in the juridical order, and the syntagma *homo sacer* names something like the originary "political" relation.' (*HS*, 85) If, as Jessica Whyte suggests, the *homo sacer* can be understood as 'the definitive figure of the topological relation [Agamben] terms "inclusive exclusion,"'[198] this is clearly not due to its 'prehistoric' relation to some kind of mythico-religious realm of the sacred that constitutes the primal scene of modern political relations, but rather – as Whyte's reference to topology signals – to the fact that its relational *position* in some way reflects and deforms the totalising structure within which a determinative modality of power operates. The sovereign and the *homo sacer* are thus related through a '*structural analogy*…joined in the figure of an action that, excepting itself from both human and divine law, from both *nomos* and *physis*, nonetheless delimits what is, in a certain sense, the first properly political space of the West.' (*HS*, 84, my emphasis) The historical sweep of the last sentence is the kind of formulation that has led many critics to call attention to what appears as a problematic epochal determinism marring Agamben's work.[199] But I would argue that such a reading misses what is most significant in this account, namely the structural *topos* that is being described here as a 'political space'. This is an important point to stress, as many of Agamben's detractors have pointed to the lack of historical differentiation produced by this weakness for 'universal history,' a view that has only been exacerbated by Agamben's increasing interest in theological paradigms of governance and modalities of existence. Schütz is eloquent on this matter: 'To the gods Agamben…assigns no other than a strictly institutional or structural standing,' and as such

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[197] Anton Schutz, 'Homo Non Sacer,' p.122
[198] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, p.30
[199] See also the essay 'In Praise of Profanation,' for a detailed discussion of the separation of the sacred and profane spheres.

has only 'a structural-functional attitude with respect to "religion".' At the same time, he suggests that 'the sacrificial horizon from which the *homo sacer* takes his name is likewise purely structural.'[200] Thus, in a passage that echoes Agamben's disclaimer as to the explanatory force of the sacred in *Language and Death*, and upon which many of the assumptions as to the negativity and epochal 'extremism' of the Homo Sacer project make shipwreck, Schütz will write that 'taken in itself, the sacrifice is of no importance, compared to the sacrificial institution's late, derailed, fermented manifestations.' [201] Zartaloudis, too, is keenly aware of Agamben's intense formalism, describing the plight of the *homo sacer* in terms of a 'structural depositioning.'[202] The task then is, in a certain sense, to even more radically *de-historicise* our reading of Agamben, in order to follow the 'displacements' of the topological structures he explores.

In order to describe the paradoxical form of relation which constitutes the decisive 'political-philosophical principle' and 'space' of the West, (*HS*, 56) Agamben returns to his original use of the topological movement of abandon in *Language and Death*. Here Agamben is advancing the possibility that a figure who is 'abandoned to itself' and thus through the logic of the exception 'becomes the foundation' of a community might have something significant – something potentially *affirmative* – to tell us about the nature and experience of privation itself. He relies in part here on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, who 'identifies [the] ontological structure' of the law as that of an abandonment and 'consequently attempts to conceive not only our time but the entire history of the West as the "time of abandonment."' (*HS*, 58) Agamben takes up Nancy's use of the term 'ban' in order to describe a figure that is not 'simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather *abandoned* by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable.' (*HS*, 28) But as the pages in *Language and Death* in which the theme of abandonment first emerges illustrate, the other and more significant influence at work here is Heidegger, and in particular his development of the notion of an 'Abandonment of being' in the *Beitrage zur*

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[200] Anton Schutz, 'Homo non Sacer,' p.124-5
[201] Ibid, p.125
[202] Zartaloudis, *Power, Law and the Uses of Criticism*, p.146

Philosophie. It is not possible in the present context to address in detail either the complexity of Heidegger's formulations on this theme nor the wider significance they have for Agamben's thinking. I will discuss Agamben's relation to Heidegger in more detail in the next chapter, and in part as a prelude to that discussion, but also in order to isolate what I take to be the most significant aspect of Heidegger's concept for the *topological* orientation of Agamben's work, I want to touch briefly here on the way Heidegger understands the privative movement of abandon in terms of a *withdrawal*.

Consider the dense passage from the *Beitrage* referred to at the close of the first section in *Homo Sacer I*, with which Agamben first sounds the depth-knell of his onto-political intentions:

What is abandoned by whom? The being by Being, which does and does not belong to it. …Then this is shown: that Being abandons the being means: Being dissimulates itself in the being-manifest of the being. And Being itself becomes essentially determined as this withdrawing self-dissimulation.[203] (*HS*, 59-60)

What Heidegger suggests here is that the place of Being as the universal, obscure, and yet determinative foundation of individual being has come to an end. Hence Heidegger will suggest that 'Abandonment of Being determines a singular and unique epoch in the history of be-ing.' What marks this 'epoch' is that 'thinking becomes concerned' with a 'dissimulation' in the 'history of formations of Being' that determine the metaphysical form of life. The dissimulation consists in the strategy (with which we are by now familiar) of the *exception*, by which the Being-foundation of the being-manifest consists in nothing other than the *withdrawal* of this Being-foundation. Being is thus the *insubstantial* foundation of being. But this withdrawal of Being from beings leaves its impression, so to speak. The difficult question Heidegger poses, and which Agamben takes up, is how, when faced with this dissimulation, to think and to *live* as individual beings without relation to the obscure and inaccessible foundation of their 'formation':

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[203] Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy: From Enowning*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1999.

What is at issue in this abandonment is not something (Being) that dismisses and discharges something else (the being). On the contrary: here Being is nothing other than the being being abandoned and remitted to itself; here Being is nothing other than the ban of the being. (HS, 52)

In being 'nothing other than the ban of the being,' individual beings, abandoned by the foundation of Being and so confronted by the 'groundlessness of every human action,' are understood here as *being* only in intimate relation to a *privation*, to a *withdrawal* of their foundation in Being. For Heidegger, being as being in a relation to a withdrawal means that 'for a thing to "be" essentially is for it to occur in such a way that there is simultaneously a self-concealment.'[204] A *self*-concealment; that is, a concealment of the conditions of its *own* formation. Agamben goes on to map this self-concealing *ungroundedness* (*P*, 136) of being onto the topological paradox of the law's applicability. Taking up Scholem's formulation in a letter to Benjamin, he describes the ontological and juridico-political fictive nexus as 'being in force without significance' (*Geltung ohne Bedeutung*) (HS, 47). The law here becomes the paradigm of an 'untenable compromise' between 'an exhausted *raison d'être*' (Being-law) and the 'spell'[205] which it continues to exert *in the form of its withdrawal*. It is in this sense that the withdrawal we are dealing with here 'cannot be identified with lack,' nor abandonment with a simple privation.[206] Agamben points to the Aristotelian origin of this peculiar form of negativity:

The philosophical foundation of these concepts lies in Aristotle's theory of "privation" (*sterēsis*)…Indeed, according to Aristotle, privation is distinguished from simple "absence" (*apousia*) insofar as it still entails a referral to the form of which it is a privation, which is somehow attested through its own lack. (*ST*, 78)

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[204] Andrew Mitchell, 'Contamination, Essence, and Decomposition: Heidegger and Derrida', in *French Interpretations of Heidegger: An Exceptional Reception*, eds. David Pettigrew and François Raffoul. SUNY Press: New York, 2008, p.136
[205] Schutz, 'Homo non Sacer,' p.127
[206] Mitchell, 'Contamination, Essence,' p.136

Aristotle provides a profound image to illustrate this peculiar presence, which Agamben quotes in the essay 'On Potentiality': 'privation [*sterēsis*] is like a face, a form [*eidos*].' (*P*, 180) This withdrawal does not take anything away from being, but rather 'shows' and 'exposes' the self-concealment that guards the 'mystery of origins that humanity transmits as its proper and negative ground.' (*P*, 134)

Agamben is well aware of the difficult proximity to nihilism he is confronting here. But in describing the loss of foundation that characterises the end of the 'history of being' and the crisis of sovereign modalities of power, Agamben is quick to insist that simply 'recognizing the extreme and insuperable form of law as being in force without significance' is not his intention. ('To do so,' he writes, is 'to remain inside nihilism and not push the experience of abandonment to its extreme' (*HS*, 60); another limit, another *threshold*). The potentially emancipatory dimension opened here involves the 'total abandonment of the particular-general couple as the model of logical inference' (*ST*, 21) in order to 'think the Being of abandonment beyond every idea of law,' and so to 'move toward a politics freed from every ban' or insubstantial foundationalism. This is the project inaugurated in *Language and Death*, to critique all constructions of an ineffable or inaccessible 'outside', 'beyond', or 'before' in relation too which being is said to take on its proper form. It is, to put it somewhat crudely, to experience *for the first time*, that we have not already entered the law, are not already 'caught' within our relation to language, have not already taken on determinate form. If the foundation of a given relational nexus is indeed revealed to be a fiction, that is, if its process of formation – the very fact that it is *made* – is shown to be *historically contingent*, then it can be studied, analysed, and, potentially at least, subjected to formal experimentation and deformation. But there is another, critical-diagnostic consequence of attending to the 'truth' of this 'withdrawing self-dissimulation'. For if the continuing power of the law (which is undeniable) and the structures of political states it serves to underwrite consists precisely in its *withdrawal*, that is, if it continues to function by no longer functioning, then power would appear itself to be adept at formal experimentation and able to make a particular *use* of its own negativity; to instrumentalise its *own incapacity*. For Agamben, as I will argue below, it is thus through close

analysis of these valences of such *negative capabilities* that we have to understand the mutations and modulations in power first analysed by Foucault. As the reference to Aristotle's formulation of *sterēsis* above already indicates, we should recall in this context Agamben's re-conceptualisation of the theory of power (*potenza*):

'[I]n its originary structure *dynamis*, potentiality, maintains itself in relation to its own privation, its own *stērisis*, its own non-Being. …To be potential means: to be one's own lack, to be in relation to one's own incapacity.' (*P*, 16)

Ultimately, in his own analysis of the 'transition' from sovereign power to governmentality Agamben will argue that it is here, on the common ground of *potenza* (power) and *impotenza* (powerlessness) that 'the subjective aspect in the genesis of power' can be grasped; that this topology of abandon and withdrawal, and the 'reciprocal negation-affirmation' it is based on, constitutes the 'one place' for the 'organisation of State power and emancipation from it.' (*HS*, 9)

An Event that Never Stops Happening

In touching on Agamben's attempt to re-conceptualise Heidegger's deconstruction of the ontological difference, and his bid for an anti-foundational theory of being ('to think Being without regard to the being' (*HS*, 61)), we have still remained within the problematic of a *foundation*. As with his attempts to clear away the ambivalences of the concept of the sacred and to locate its juridical-political utilisation, so too in the 'epochal' confrontation with metaphysics we are confronted by that 'mystery of origins' which Agamben describes as the 'negative ground' of humanity. The topology of *sterēsis* and withdrawal call attention to a fundamental ambivalence surrounding these attempts to re-think, re-ground, and re-move the 'mystery of origins', and allow for an analysis of the processes which conceal 'the historicity of

the production of such foundations'.[207] Andrew Mitchell's description of the relation between withdrawal and abandonment hits on this ambivalence. Withdrawal, he suggests, is 'nothing negative,' and as such 'does not leave the being lacking anything.' A *form* of relation with the being from which Being withdraws thus *persists*, and so the withdrawal of Being described by Heidegger is in this way 'just as much an abandonment of being.' But, as Mitchell notes, 'to be abandoned, to be in an abandoned manner, is to have belonged once at an earlier point.'[208] As has been seen already, in my view there is a good deal at stake for our reading of Agamben in how he approaches the location of the 'earlier point' evoked by Mitchell in this passage. Perhaps the best way in to the matter is a passage in *The Use of Bodies*, in which Agamben provides a pellucid description of his approach to ontology as the study of origins, in particular, the 'becoming human of the human being':

First philosophy is not, in fact, an ensemble of conceptual formulations that, however complex and refined, do not escape the limits of a doctrine: it opens and defines each time the space of human acting and knowing, of what the human being can do and of what it can know and say. Ontology is laden with [a] historical destiny…not because an inexplicable and metahistorical magical power belongs to being but just the contrary, because ontology is the originary place of the historical articulation between language and the world, which preserves itself in the memory of anthropogenesis, of the moment when that articulation was produced. …Anthropogenesis, the becoming human of the human being, is not in fact an event that was completed once and for all in the past: rather, it is the event that never stops happening, a process still under way in which the human being is always in the act of becoming human and of remaining (or becoming) inhuman. (*UB*, 111)

For Agamben then, the 'earlier point' in which the articulation between language and the world takes place cannot be situated in a chronology. But nor, importantly, does the 'event' of this articulation (which 'never stops happening') entail a relation to a kind of undifferentiated, prior point of indistinction between language and the world from which the inhuman species *accedes*

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[207] Zartaloudis, *Power, Law and the Uses of Criticism*, p.xi
[208] Mitchell, 'Contamination, Essence,' p.137

to become the 'living being who has language'. In order to move away from the position which can only view this relation in terms of a process of negation-affirmation (or *aufheben*) in which the (inhuman) incapacity for language is subsumed as the inaccessible and 'negative ground' of the (human) capacity for speech, Agamben sees the two dimensions as existing at a point of *coalescence* within the living being. The space of articulation between language and the world can thus be understood not as a 'mysterious origin' whose very obscurity ensures its implacable localisation, but rather as a *topos*, the site of incessant formation and deformation of the articulatory nexus in which the living being *produces* a relation to its environment. As such, Agamben consistently opposes the approach to the 'event' of anthropogenesis which guards its obscure and insubstantial foundation in the form of a differential condition of possibility.

This stance shapes Agamben's approach to a series of apparently foundational articulatory-divisions. The central ambivalence involved in such differential thinking is its inscription of a foundational logic of *opposition*, in which one primary or 'common' element is said to precede and thus found or govern the form of relation that a secondary or 'proper' element maintains with it. The catch is that the relation, far from being straightforwardly hierarchic in its economy, is in fact *mutually grounding*, and the idea that the primary, transcendental or 'common' element is in some way the superior – because prior and foundational – element is shown to be fallacious. Watkin describes the paradox at the heart of this oppositional logic in a passage whose explanatory clarity warrants my quoting it at length:

This conceptual structure is dominated…by an economy made up of an element which seems to found the phenomenon and a series of subsequentelements which appear to actualise this founding element or simply which are allowed to occur because of a held-in-common foundation…Agamben then insists that the consistency assumed for this economical system…is asctually inconsistent [and] the clear difference between the founding common and actual instances of this common foundation (the proper) becomes confused. First, it is difficult to ascertain which element *is* the common and which the proper. Second, it becomes therefore impossible to say that the common *founds* the proper as often the proper seems to construct the common as its foundation at a later date retrospectively and retroactively…Finally, the

energy of the dialectical system, one and many or common and proper, dissipates as this energy or economy depends on oppositional difference. The one and the many must be different from each other, and, across our Western metaphysical tradition they must always be in a state of contest, *gigantomochia*, with each other.[209]

The outcome of this approach is to project 'the characteristics that are known to us' about the relational structure of language (namely its being riven by an unbreachable and difference-generating division between signifier and signified) into the 'moment of arising' of the relation itself. This has the consequence of describing the conditions of possibility for the emergence of language itself in terms of its subsequent structuration and the paradoxes inscribed in its efficacy: 'Just as a chemical compound has specific properties that cannot be reduced to the sum of the elements that compose it, so also that which stands before the historical [articulatory] division – granted that something of the kind exists – is not necessarily the opaque and indistinct sum of the characteristics that define its fragments'. (*SL*, 16)[210] For Agamben those theories that assert the existence of a necessary undecidability conditioning every application of language and the differential relations it produces still 'need to presuppose a false beginning, that must be abandoned and removed' (*UB*, 45) as the absent ground *from which* all possible acts of language emerge. Whilst this form of anti-foundationalism has the 'salutary' (*S*, 152) effect of deconstructing the paradoxical form of negative relationality that allows for the passage between the system of language and its use (and to which endeavour Agamben's thinking is indebted), it leaves the 'obscure' ground from which the relation itself emerges intact. This correlates to the 'nihilism' Agamben rejects in the pages of *Homo Sacer* above: it cannot account for the *structural necessity* of such a negative and impenetrable foundation other than by asserting its incessant re-inscription as an absent condition of possibility. Thus, in a passage from *Homo Sacer I* which conflates the operations of language and law, Agamben suggests that:

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[209] Watkin, *Agamben and Indifference*, pp.xi-xii
[210] Of course, through his approach to the notion of the *archē*, Agamben will ultimately argue that *nothing* of the kind exists.

We have seen that only the sovereign decision on the state of exception opens the space in which it is possible to trace the borders between inside and outside and in which determinate rules can be assigned to determinate territories. In exactly the same way, only language as the pure potential to signify, withdrawing itself from every concrete instance of speech, divides the linguistic from the non-linguistic 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 langage is always beyond itself. (*HS*, 21)

Rather than preserve this void and indeterminate place in the form of an originary obscurity or foundational ambivalence, beyond which there exists some kind of original indistinction 'beyond itself' from which all differential relations proceed, Agamben directs our attention to the 'threshold of indistinction' itself. (*SL*, 17) This threshold is not subject to an inclusive-exclusion as the obscure foundation of a given system (or an effective application of its rules), but instead appears to sidestep the logic of articulatory-division altogether by exposing the 'simple level of its existence' at 'the realised event of meaning.' (*ST*, 78) What Agamben is after, in his relentless pursuit of 'all the binary oppositions defining the logic of our culture' (*ST*, 98), is not some kind of 'primordial' origin of their subsequent indistinction (or its absence), but the series of articulatory strategies and signatorial arts which *produce* (and do not stop producing) the 'vital relations' (*ST*, 80) within which the opposition becomes *effective*.

Here, in anticipatory parenthesis, we can recall the passage from the previous chapter, which referred to this place of the signature as the functional sphere of the 'guarantor' or non-specific medium of the referential bond between words and things. To augment the suggestion that this articulatory place might consist in a kind of *effective* immateriality (precisely, a topology of the unreal), and to introduce a theme which I shall take up in the next chapter, I would argue that what Agamben wants to address here in approaching this place is nothing abstract, but might be understood as 'the bit of the real that underwrites the circulation of signs and values'; the sphere of '*vital relations*' in which life and form coalesce.

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It is in the context of the preceding discussion that Derrida's objections to Agamben's formulation of the *zoē-bios* division can be considered more closely. Although Derrida asserts that the 'biopolitical structure' is first 'put forward by Aristotle' and admits that 'it's already there, and the debate opens there,' he has certain reservations about Agamben's approach to this 'opening' of the biopolitical 'structure,' as he calls it.[211] In particular, Derrida will question the distinction between *zoē* and *bios* that, he suggests, 'all of Agamben's demonstrative strategy' relies upon. Derrida highlights two reservations he has with such a 'strategy': first, that the differentiation between *zoē* and *bios* has 'never been secure' (as secure as Derrida thinks Agamben wants to make it), and second, 'the idea that there is something new or modern' in the increasing *indistinction* of this difference which takes place in modernity and which both Agamben and Foucault will focus on in their studies of biopower.[212] In order to make the claim that the 'founding event of modernity' is the 'introduction of *zoē* into the *polis*,' Agamben 'is required to demonstrate that the difference between *zoē* and *bios* is 'absolutely rigorous, already in Aristotle.'[213] It is interesting from the present perspective that Derrida seeks to undermine Agamben's treatment of the *bios-zoē* split by likening him to a 'more or less competent philologist' who will claim that 'seeing the difference between *bios* and *zoē*' is enough to 'reawaken politics to itself today.'[214] Agamben certainly detects a difference between the two terms, but the philological gesture which Derrida makes much of is, in a sense, a red herring. As we have seen, Agamben's is not a philological strategy in any ordinary sense of the term, and yet the opening remarks on the *zoē-bios* split are deliberately *conventional* in the philological claims they put forward (as Kevin Attell has shown, it can be claimed without much argument that there were in fact two terms for life used in classical Greek).[215] The decisive gesture on

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[211] Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, p. 349
[212] Ibid, p.327.
[213] Ibid, p.327.
[214] Ibid, p.326
[215] Attell, *The Threshold of Deconstruction*, p.183-4

Agamben's part is not to 'see the difference,' but to argue for the *constitutive* indifference between the terms that underwrites Aristotle's division.

The problem, as Derrida sees it, is that Agamben suggests there is a 'rigorous' distinction between the terms which simply does not exist, and thus the subsequent 'indistinction' can be put forward as constituting a 'decisive and founding event' can be considered spurious. But this is to fundamentally misread Agamben's text, as from the beginning what Agamben puts forward is precisely the opposite claim: Agamben points to the commonly accepted philological point that there were two terms for life in order to argue that the apparent distinction involved, from its inception in Aristotle, a topological exceptionalism. What this involves is the inclusion of *zoē* in the *bios* of the properly political-linguistic life of the human through its exclusion. This act of inclusive-exclusion is the articulatory strategy though which Aristotle produces a particular (and particularly powerful) 'articulation' and 'determination' of life. To turn to the Aristotelian definition of the human as a '*politikon zōon*' as in some way contradicting Agamben's thesis makes no sense, in that it is precisely the *politicisation of life* (*zoē*) as such that constitutes the exceptionalism of Aristotle's gesture and which Agamben wants to call into question. If Derrida appears somewhat off the mark here it is only in his grasp of Agamben's line of argument and not in terms of the conclusions he reaches regarding Aristotle's text. For he sees precisely what Agamben sees in the Aristotelian determination of life, namely, that the philosopher anticipates not only the biopolitical 'structure' of sovereignty, but also (and perhaps more tellingly) its 'governmental' manifestation in strategies of control and the care of life: that 'Aristotle already had in view, had already in his own way thought, the possibility that politics, politicity, could, in certain cases, that of man, qualify or even take hold of bare life (*zoē*).' (327) It is precisely the condition of possibility for this development that Agamben sees at work in the Aristotelian dialectic of withdrawal and self-concealment, which functions by establishing the ontological localisation of 'proper' human life (*bios*) in constitutive but obscure relation to the 'inaccessible substrate' of 'common' life as such (*zoē*).

What misdirection there is in Derrida's reading derives from the fact that he makes the common mistake of simply eliding the figure of 'bare life' with *zoē*. There is, significantly, no mention of the Benjaminian source of the term, which is key to understanding Agamben's use of it. Agamben suggests that in 'The Critique of Violence,' Benjamin introduces the figure of bare life (*bloßes Leben*) as the 'bearer of the link' (*HS*, 65) between law and the violence upon which it is founded, that is, as a *medium* within which the normative power of a tradition, and the foundational conditions of its historical efficacy, in some way maintain their obscure relation. The figure of bare life should be understood in this way primarily as describing an *articulatory space*. (I will come back to this (in my view) mistaken identification between bare life and *zoē* below.) By ignoring the conceptual source of the term (which is alluded to in the pages of the introduction to *Homo Sacer I* which Derrida's reading focuses on), Derrida suggests that in Agamben's text *zoē* is 'audaciously translated as "bare life," and [means] therefore life without qualities, without qualification, the pure and simple fact of living and of not being dead.' In making this accusation Derrida aligns Agamben's thesis with that of Aristotle's (as, he points out, it was critically conceived by Heidegger) as a 'forcing' and a 'domination and a hegemony' of something which is 'innocent' (namely life).[216] Agamben's own 'logic' is deemed to have 'determined, interpreted…travestied, disguised' the problem of life and as such, in a deft rhetorical move, Agamben is himself guilty of a form of 'sovereign mastery' over the interpretative 'structure' of biopolitics.[217] The failing of Agamben's attempt at mastery according to Derrida is that, in the last instance, the distinction between *zoē* and *bios* is indeed not 'sharp enough' to get 'deep enough' to a 'founding event'. But this, arguably, is precisely to the point. The 'instrument' or 'conceptual strategy' Agamben wants to make use of is *not* the distinction itself, not a 'radical, clear, univocal exclusion,' it is, rather, *that which gives rise to* or conditions the structure of the exclusionary act. Instead of focusing on the separation and distinction of *zoē* and *bios*, Agamben wants to analyse the articulatory strategy

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[216] Here Derrida appears to re-produce a problematic valorisation of the sphere of 'natural' and indeterminate life (*zoē*) as providing, *a priori*, a source of emancipatory potential for critical thinking. I come back to this point in my discussion of theories of the 'lifeworld' in the next chapter.
[217] Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, p.318

which simultaneously produces and conceals the real economy of their oppositional relation (as outlined above). Perhaps most importantly, if we are to re-orient our reading of Agamben's approach, we have to understand the 'founding event of modernity' he describes not as something like an 'origin' – as Derrida appears to do – but rather as the 'threshold of epistemologization' or 'opening' (to use Derrida's phrase) that takes place when the efficacy of a particular 'articulatory nexus' is established.

This last point impacts on the question of periodisation that Derrida raises with regards to the projects of Agamben and Foucault. In the final sections of this chapter I shall argue that the claim for a 'new' biopower that 'bothers' Derrida is precisely the point that Agamben's engagement with Foucault intends to problematize by revisiting the Aristotelian text (from a topological perspective I should add): not only the notion that biopower as a 'structure' in itself is something new that emerges in modernity, but also and more specifically, the hypothesis that there is a structural *distinction* to be drawn between the old sovereign model of power and the 'new' form of biopower. For now, it will I hope be clear that, although the 'historiographical constellations' within which the articulation of natural and political life – and indeed 'all the binary oppositions defining our culture' (*ST*, 98) – takes place are of course contingent and differential, Agamben's argument is that the *structure of effectivity* which renders the relation intelligible remains the same. The division of life into natural-biological (*zoē*) and political-human life (*bios*) provides the medium within which the philosophico-political 'construction of the unity of life' becomes possible in the first place. Bare life names the *topos outopos*, the placeless place in which this articulatory nexus becomes effective. This is not a spatially locatable or historically determinable site but rather constitutes the ongoing production within the human being of a 'mobile border' between natural life and political life. And it is, according to Agamben, precisely the *production* of this medium itself as the presupposed place of a distinction between *zoē* and *bios* that we must interrogate in order to understand the emergence and subsequent hegemony of biopolitical formations of power.

In making the topological connection between the ontological division of life, its sovereign capture within the relation of the ban, and subsequent management and control in the

meshes of governmentality, Agamben does not want to 'enclose political culture within a tightly defined logic'[218] but rather to emphasise that we are living through the 'fermented manifestations' of a series of densely interwoven and structurally *in*determinate modes of conceptualising and articulating life. Though each of these are of course historically contingent, they all participate in the same conceptual system of insubstantial foundationalism. This topological approach provides a hermeneutic device through which particular modes of socio-historical organisation and transmission become 'transparent as a structure that one can describe, analyze, criticize, and change.'[219] In this sense Agamben's interest in pursuing a 'philosophical topology,' first elaborated in *Stanzas*, can be said to come to fruition in the pages of the Homo Sacer project, which provide a means of orientation within the *topos outopos* of contemporary political configurations of the place of life. What is, I hope, clear at this point is that in turning to the figure of *homo sacer* in order to answer the question of why politics 'first constitutes itself through an exclusion of bare life,' Agamben does not propose to uncover a historiographical figure through which we can locate some kind of original or explanatory act of exclusion. What we need to concentrate on is the persistence of a structural logic that the paradigmatic location of the *homo sacer* 'exposes'. The 'transformation' that takes place at the 'threshold of modernity' is one that occurs, so to speak, at the level of a *surface deformation*; what Agamben wants to show is that despite alterations in the field of organisation and distribution the *topological structure* of power remains the same and so is 'positively identifiable'.

Sovereignty and Biopolitics

In the first sections of the essay 'What is a Paradigm' Agamben narrates in some detail a methodological shift in the work of Foucault as a result of which the latter abandoned 'traditional analyses of power that were grounded on…universal categories (of law, the state, the theory of sovereignty) [and] focused instead on the concrete mechanisms through which

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[218] Connolly, 'The Complexities of Sovereignty', p.29
[219] Geulen, 'The Function of Ambivalence,' p. 28

power penetrates the very bodies of subject and thereby governs their forms of life.' (*ST*, 12)

This methodological shift corresponds to a historico-political transformation which Foucault's

lectures and writings of the late 1970's came increasingly to focus on: the shift from sovereign

modalities of power, a system of power having a single centre and in which the law is the only

expression of authority, to biopolitical strategies of government and control, in which a more

diffuse series of normalising techniques are deployed in order to manage and regulate the life of

the populace. It is not surprising that Agamben should devote a good deal of the discussion of

his own methodology in the 'Paradigm' essay to the particular way in which Foucault sought to

address the emergence of what he first described in 1974 as 'biopolitics.' Much of Agamben's

work from the late 1990's – and in the Homo Sacer project in particular – has comprised an

ongoing engagement with Foucault's work on the emergence of biopolitics in modernity and the

consequent studies on 'technologies of the self'.[220] According to Foucault's influential studies,

with the passage from royal to democratic or popular sovereignty (from the 'territorial state' to

the 'State of population') there occurs a fundamental alteration in the organisation and

maintenance of operations of government, what Foucault describes as the 'threshold of

biopolitical modernity' during which 'natural life begins to be included in the mechanisms and

calculations of State power' (*HS*, 3). Foucault describes the growing intersection of the

discipline of the body and the control of the population in the extraordinary passages that mark

the culmination of *The History of Sexuality*:

In the space for movement [of life in general] and broadening and organizing that space, methods of

power and knowledge assumed responsibility for the life processes and undertook to control and modify

them. Western man was gradually learning what it meant to be a living species in a living world, to have a

body, conditions of existence, probabilities of life, an individual and collective welfare, forces that could

be modified, and a space in which they could be modified in an optimal manner. For the first time in

history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence; the fact of living was no longer

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[220] See Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*.

an inaccessible substrate…part of it passed into knowledge's field of control and power's sphere of intervention.[221]

In this reconfiguration of the operations and spatialisation of power the 'species and the individual as a simple living body (*zoē*) become what is at stake in society's political strategies.' (*HS*, 3)

By this I mean a number of phenomena that seem to me to be quite significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how starting from the eighteenth century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species. This is roughly what I have called bio-power.[222]

'For millennia,' Foucault thus writes in what has itself become a kind of 'threshold' formulation for modern political philosophy, 'man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics calls his existence as a living being into question.'[223]

Roberto Esposito describes the hypothesis Foucault develops as to the emergence of biopower as 'refer[ing] to the increasingly intense and direct involvement established between political dynamics and human life.' Esposito points out that, of course, it is not as if power had been simply indifferent to or had no relation to the existence of the living being until the historical passage dramatized by Foucault; 'politics has always had something to do with life'. The 'eugenic practices' advocated in Plato's *Republic*, the agrarian politics of ancient empires, and the politics of hygiene developed in Rome, all surely fall within the 'category of the politics of life'. But we cannot describe these events and texts as properly biopolitical in the sense

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[221] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley. Penguin Books: London, 1981, p.142

[222] Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, trans. Graham Burchell. Palgrave Macmillan: New York 2007, p.1

[223] Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, p.143

developed by Foucault as the maintenance and regulation of life was not the 'primary objective of power.'[224] Crossing the 'threshold of biopolitical modernity' means crossing over into a period in which the health of the population and biological life as such – which had previously been the concern of an economic and private sphere that was excluded from the realm of political action[225] – becomes for the first time the focus of the 'mechanism and calculations of State power.' When power confronts life itself, biopower is the result. According to Foucault the intensification of the State's interest in life as such produces a new modality of power that is 'absolutely incompatible with relations of sovereignty'.[226] Foucault perceives that the techniques and calculations of power are profoundly modified with the introduction of life into its terrain and preoccupations. As a result, 'sovereignty, as both a structure of power and a polity, has disappeared from the West with the emergence of modernity [and a] new form of organization, which has nothing to do with sovereignty, substitutes for it.'[227]

For Foucault, faced with this transformation, critical approaches to the problem of power which focus exclusively on juridical and sovereign models are no longer adequate to address a form of governance which assumes a multidimensional 'dissemination of power' over life, involving the existence of 'multiple networks, sites of control, the supremacy of the norm over the law, of discipline and technologies of conditioning over repression.'[228] To properly analyse this transformation in the operations of power it is neceesary, Foucault urges, 'to study power outside the model of Leviathan.'[229] When the effectivity of power can no longer be understood in terms of a (negating) dichotomous top-down structure (a system of power having a single centre and in which the law is the only expression of authority), but dissolves itself into something more (positively) diffuse and difficult to locate, so critical methodologies must themselves become more supple and multidimensional. Hence, as Agamben writes, Foucault

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[224] Roberto Esposito, *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics*, trans. Rhiannon Noel Welch. Fordham University Press: New York, 2013, p.69
[225] This is, of course, precisely the historical assumption that Agamben will seek to problematise, most notably and at most length in *The Kingdom and the Glory*.
[226] Michel Foucault, Society Must be Defended: *Lectures at the Collége de France 1975-76*, trans. David Macey. Allen Lane: London, 2003, p.35
[227] Catherine Malabou, 'The King's Two (Biopolitical) Bodies', Representations, Vol. 127 No. 1, Summer 2014, p.2
[228] Ibid, p.2
[229] Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, p.34

seeks to 'construct an analytic of power that would not take law as its model and code.' (*HS*, 5) All the more striking then is Agamben's decision in *Homo Sacer I* to 'complete' Foucault by focusing his attention almost exclusively on the 'totalizing procedures' of law and sovereign rule.

Reflecting on Foucault's thesis in the opening pages, Agamben appears at first glance to agree that what was a strict separation in the classical world, between the simple fact of living (*zoë*) and a politically qualified life, becomes at the 'threshold' of the modern era a much more complex relation of separation. If the aim of Foucault's research is to analyse the transformation from a centralised sovereign model of power to the more diffuse, concrete 'techniques' through which power confronts life in the form of biopower, for Agamben the starting point for further consideration of the increasing interpenetration of life and power in modernity is a turn to the ontological distinction between two 'ways of saying' life upon which, he appears to claim, it is based. On this basis Agamben will argue that the transition from a sovereign modality of power to one which 'integrates the care of the natural life of individuals into its very centre' is one whose structural principles and conditions of possibility can be found in Aristotle's attempts to determine the proper form of human life by way of a distinction between natural life (*zoē*) and political life (*bios*). As we know, by turning to the topology of the exception Agamben will seek to argue that the inclusion of natural life in the sphere of political life that appeared to mark the threshold of biopolitical modernity is in fact 'absolutely ancient'. (*HS*, 9) Agamben thus seeks to radically expand the philosophical-historical *topos* within which the 'new' modalities of biopower can be analysed. Seeking to problematise Foucault's apparently epochal approach to the emergence of biopower in modernity,[230] Agamben suggests that the Aristotelian indistinction between the living being and political existence, far from representing a category of thought that has since been progressively transformed in modernity, in fact constitutes the 'systemic connection'[231] between sovereignty and biopolitics. The vital conceptual opening for Agamben is that the opposition between *zoē* and *bios* upon which Aristotle bases his

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[230] This 'epochal' reading of Foucault has been put forward recently by Stephen J. Collier. I develop his suggestions in more detail below. See Stephen J. Collier, 'Topologies of Power'.
[231] Geulen, 'The Function of Ambivalence', p.28

determination of a politicized form of 'good life' (*eu zen*) operates on the premise of an *inclusive-exclusion* of natural life. In order to define the 'good' life of the human being it is necessary, it would seem, to exclude *another* form of life *within* the human '[a]s if there were always two concepts of life in life.'[232] In Aristotle then, what appears as a 'strict and rigorous' distinction is (just as Derrida suspected) in fact shown to derive from a strategic logic of indistinction. As Agamben writes in his introduction to *Homo Sacer I*:

The opposition [between *zoë* and *bios*] is, in fact, at the same time an implication of the first in the second, of bare life in politically qualified life. What remains to be interrogated in the Aristotelian definition is not merely…the sense, the modes, and the possible articulations of the 'good life' as the telos of the political. We must instead ask why politics first constitutes itself through an exclusion (which is simultaneously an inclusion) of bare life. (*HS*, 7)

Politics as the sphere of constituted sovereign power thus has inscribed within its structural conditions of possibility a topological paradox: in order that the properly political form of life come into existence, it must establish a form of relation with the unformed and impolitical sphere of natural life: 'Life is not itself political – for this reason it must be excluded from the city – and yet it is precisely the *exceptio*, the exclusive-inclusion of this Impolitical, that founds the space of politics.' (*UB*, 263)

As I suggested in the previous chapter, there is an anticipation of this vision of political inconsistency as early as *Stanzas*: Aristotle's definition of the political good life is reliant on the same 'principle of foundation' informing the 'metaphysical task *par excellence*', the isolation of pure Being. In his reading of Aristotle Agamben will thus assert, as we have seen, that the ontological determination and politicisation of life are inseparable and are bound together within the topological structure of the exception. According to Agamben, what the Aristotelian division and 'exclusive-inclusion' of life reveals is that in placing biological existence at the 'centre of its calculations' the modern biopolitical state does not constitute a decisive break with

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[232] Malabou, 'The King's Two Bodies,' p.4

the logic of sovereignty, but only signals a 'radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought'. (*HS*, 4-6) Agamben thus not only extends the historical horizon of intelligibility of biopolitics by claiming to locate its roots in the Aristotelian articulation of life, in doing so he also turns to the spheres of law and sovereignty which Foucault appeared if not to reject then certainly marginalise. As I have suggested, the articulatory nexus that Agamben will describe as bare life – which provides the conceptual device for de-stratifying Foucault's account, and within which he will suggest the variegated deformations in the sphere of intelligibility of power take place – is, however, (and this will be precisely the *point*) somewhat difficult to locate.

Locating Life

If for Foucault biopolitics emerges when life is *included* in the sphere of political calculations, for Agamben the exclusion of *zoē* and subsequent production of bare life as the ontological 'substrate' of politically qualified life provides the systemic *arché* of modern and contemporary biopolitics. Thus, in its implicit or repressed ontological commitment to the production of bare life, 'the metaphysical task par excellence,' Agamben will suggest that 'Western politics has always been biopolitics.' (*UB*, 245) But what does it mean to say that this ontological-political structure *produces* bare life? What is bare life, and where is it located? And in what sense can it be described by Agamben as the first 'proper political space of the west'? There has been much confusion over Agamben's use of this term and so it is important to clarify the sense in which I approach the figure here.

By separating the simple fact of living from politically qualified life Aristotle's onto-political exceptionalism introduces, in a decisive gesture, a complex form of relation between two forms of life *within life*:

It is important to observe that Aristotle in no way defines what life is: he limits himself to breaking it down, by isolating the nutritive function, in order then to rearticulate it in a series of distinct and correlated faculties or potentialities (nutrition, sensation, thought). Here we see at work that principle of

foundation which constitutes the strategic device par excellence of Aristotle's thought. …To ask why a certain being is called living means to seek out the foundation by which living belongs to this being. That is to say, among the various senses of the term "to live," one must be separated from the others and settle to the bottom, becoming the principle by which the life can be attributed to a certain being. In other words, what has been separated and divided (in this case nutritive life) is precisely what – in a sort of *divide et impera* – allows for the construction of the unity of life as the hierarchical articulation of a series of functional faculties and oppositions. (*O*, 14)

What Agamben is at pains to point out is that we are not dealing here with a simple exclusion of natural life but rather with its exclusive-inclusion. Central to Agamben's revision of Aristotle is thus a *topological deformation* present in the system, as a result of which the division and separation between two terms is complicated: *zoē* is not simply excluded from the *polis*, Agamben will contend in his reading, but remains in a *negative form of relation* (or abandonment) to it as a result of which it can function as its obscure 'principle of foundation.' Those critics who have rejected Agamben's 'flattening' out of Foucault's insights into the complex diffusion of power and its multiple 'positivities' completely misread him on this point and so forego any detailed analysis of the philosophical-historical questions that his foregrounding of the topological structure of the exception bring into play. Typical of such a view is the one expressed by Timothy Campbell when he suggests that Agamben has extended the moment of social coverage that Foucault describes 'to some unknowable and unlocalizable point in the past such that governing always involves separation.'[233] What Campbell takes to be a failing in Agamben's account, namely the location of contemporary social-political 'coverage' in an 'unlocalizable' point in the past, can only be deemed so if it is read as proffering some kind of 'solution' to the problem of biopower's increasing pre-dominance as a form of governing, or as an attempt to 'explain modernity by tracing it back to something like a cause or historical origin.' (*ST*, 31)

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[233] Campbell, *Improper Life*, p.45-6

The problem Agamben wants to bring into critical view and study further by turning to pre-Capitalist and pre-modern forms of organizing the government life, arises from an important point of difference between his own approach to the *zoe-bios* dichotomy, and that of both Aristotle and Foucault. In Aristotle's negative determination of life and in Foucault's attempt to map the transformation of this 'inaccessible substrate' in modern political formations we can see a familiar logic at work: the presupposition of a relation to that which must remain in a certain sense non-relational (transcendent, indeterminate, 'pure'). For Foucault, as for many other thinkers of the twentieth-century (including Derrida), this indeterminate sphere of life comes to represent the space of a potentially emancipatory politics.[234] Interest in a 'pure' and 'innocent' realm of life is central to a number of critical-philosophical attempts to confront the growing techno-scientific rationalisation and instrumentalisation of life in modernity, and finds its biopolitical orientation developing in the face of the 'increasing politicisation of the biological life of human beings [that] is taken to be a defining characteristic of technological modernity.'[235] I shall provide a more detailed survey of where Agamben's work stands in relation to this critical turn to the sphere of the 'lifeworld' in the next chapter. It will be seen that the location of this 'other' life within life is in many ways the abiding problem of Agamben's work – as well as the engagements with Aristotle and Foucault over biopower, the place of the presupposed life lies behind Agamben's reworking of Heidegger's analytic of Dasein, and his intervention in the Schmitt-Benjamin agon over the state of exception, to name the most prominent among numerous examples. But what is important to note at this point is that Agamben's project works from the basis of the 'disintegration' of the lifeworld as a viable critical-emancipatory concept.[236] And, by extension and more broadly, the disintegration – or better, the deconstruction through philosophical method – of all notions of a philosophically accessible 'substrate' or exteriority of human life, whose accessibility and conceptual functionality is, as we have seen time and again in these pages, precisely the result of its supposed ineffability and innacessibility. If for Foucault in his analysis of the dissemination of

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[234] Malabou develops a critique of this tendency in her essay 'The King's Two Bodies'.

[235] Sinnerbrink, 'From *Machenschaft* to Biopolitics,' p.240

[236] Vatter, *The Republic of the Living*, p.102

biopower the indeterminate and 'inaccessible' sphere of life represents a form of resistance, a force of being that exists both 'prior to all historical orders and exists in excess of those orders as well,'[237] Agamben will suggest that such a position does not escape the structural exceptionalism introduced by Aristotle's systemic division of life, and that a focus on the 'excess' that natural life represents for this system obscures the modulations of its *articulatory* function. Foucault's thought is obviously not here in some way to be seen as reducible to that of Aristotle; rather Agamben wants to show that there is a 'systemic connection' between their approaches to the political-philosophical definition of life. Catherine Malabou has recourse to the image of the border to describe this presupposed division informing such critical-emancipatory investments in life as such: 'a border remains then, in these approaches, between two notions of life, between two lives.'[238] What I will argue here is that the novelty of Agamben's topological approach is to insist on the *mobility* of this border.

Amidst the debate over the precise status of what Agamben calls 'bare life' it has not, I think, been sufficiently noted that the introduction of this figure is intended above all to directly confront the philosophical and juridico-political localisation of what Agamben calls a 'biological substrate' of the human (*UB*, 145); the assumption that there are 'two lives' within life. Bare life is thus *not* (as many have assumed) correlative to *zoē*. It is neither life conceived 'in its very physical base' (though it is in relation to the biological fact of existence, i.e. *zoē*) nor is it 'life conceived as a biological minimum…to which we are all reducible.'[239] Rather, bare life can be understood as the medium or threshold-figure *within which* the split between biological life (*zoē*) and politically qualified life (*bios*) takes place, and is in this sense a figure for the 'moment of arising' of the conditions of possibility for a certain articulation of socio-political being. But in tracing the increasing juridification of a certain ontological articulation of

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[237] Tom Frost, 'Agamben's Sovereign Legalization of Foucault', in Oxford J Legal Studies, 30 (3), 2010, p.546
[238] Malabou, 'King's Two Bodies', p.102
[239] Alison Ross, 'Agamben's Political Paradigm', p. 432; Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*: *The Power of Mourning and Violence*. Verso: London, 2004, p.67. The numerous accounts which simply identify bare life as an abject and vulnerable figure, one whose only characteristic is its ability to be killed, completely miss the point here. This misunderstanding of bare life is epitomised in Alain Badiou's remarks in *The Logic of Worlds* that Agamben's concept can only posit 'being as weakness' and thus stands for a form of life that 'must always be sacrificed'. Again I would put this down in part to an unwillingness to attend to the detail of Agamben's confrontation with Heidegger and his revision of the concept of potentiality as the 'quiet power of the possible'; a life having nothing left, in this view, may be the means by which a previously determinate form of life becomes available for a different and new use. See Alain Badiou, *Logiques des mondes: L'être et l'événement 2*, Paris, Seuil, 2006, p. 583

life in modernity, Agamben is not claiming that there 'once' was an actual, *lived* separation between *zoē* and *bios* in some kind of primordial scene before the historical and articulatory division in which they were yoked together in classical Greece (even Agamben doesn't love philosophy that much). What he is suggesting is that there exists a structural correlation – a topological continuity – that intersects the ontological division of life, its juridico-political subjection, and subsequent governmental care and management. This is a structure (or a 'machine') of possibility within which the nature of the relation between natural life and political or 'formed' life becomes intelligible in a determinate way. Bare life can be understood then as a vanishing mediator which makes the relation between *zoē* and *bios* intelligible in the first place and thus produces a relation between two terms which is *effective*. *Sacer*, as we have seen, operates in a correlative manner, that is, it performs the same strategic function, instrumentalising the relation between the sacred and profane spheres in order to separate certain forms of life from others. The transformations in the functioning of power that Agamben will seek to trace are not meta-historical or static-structural, but rather concern the modulations and shifts in a dynamic structure – a topology – of effectivity. This is necessary because the articulatory nexus that determines the relation between life and its forms is not itself *localisable*, and is thus not reducible to an ontological, religious, or political sphere, but rather circumscribes the continual structural transformations which produce the conditions of effectivity of a given articulation of the relation between life and form. To put this simply, what is at issue here for Agamben is, in the last instance, *the production of subjects*. The paradox, of course, is that this relational articulation which is in some way unlocatable aims precisely at a definitive localisation of life in a determinate form – in its proper *place*. According to Agamben it is this process of localisation which informs the operations of power, and simultaneously reveals its paradoxical structure of exceptionalism. He will thus argue that by tracing the inconsistencies and flaws within these attempts to locate life and give it a form, it becomes possible to identify life's 'infinite dislocation' from this articulatory mechanism. But, as will be seen below, 'what is decisive' is that, at the threshold of biopolitical modernity, the structural effectivity of this articulatory nexus comes itself to consist in this dislocation of life and form, and as such power

'no longer acts as much through the production of a subject, as through processes of what can be called desubjectification.' As I shall discuss in more detail below, it is here that Agamben's affirmative insistence on the *negative* form of relation inhering in the production and articulation of life and form comes into sharpest relief, and, what is more, that the topological turn is at its most compelling.

For Aristotle and classical political theory, the strategic significance of this articulatory relation is to *uphold* the distinction between natural life and political existence and so to inscribe a series of social and political relations between the household and the city, between the *physis* and *nomos*, and to establish the coherent and totalising identity of the polity by placing certain forms of life outside the city and beyond the law. Whereas in the sovereign model of power certain forms of life were separated and placed outside the space of the law (as 'bare life') and as a result the polity was able to recognize itself as comprised of political subjects in opposition to those excluded bodies 'beyond the law,' in the biopolitical configuration this border-limit in which the politicisation of life can occur or not occur (the essence of the 'sovereign decision over life') is *internalized* and thus the indifference between *bios* and *zoē* that had once constituted the polity 'becomes internal to every individual.'[240] Notwithstanding the conditions of effectivity traced here, none of these configurations can function without the logic of the exception through which life is subject to a force that locates and determines through a process of division and separation. Through this strategy of exclusive-inclusion of life Aristotle thus introduces a topological structure which Agamben suggests, albeit in a 'radically transformed' configuration, still largely determines our understanding of the relationship between natural life and politics, and so between life and form, to this day. Everything depends on how one understands this transformation in the conditions of effectivity of power.

What Agamben's description of the apparently distinct modalities of sovereignty and biopolitics as entering into an 'intersection' and 'zone of indistinction' makes clear is that it is not so much an ever-finer degree of differentiation he is after, as the specific nature of the

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[240] Colebrook and Maxwell, *Agamben*, p.62

relation between the two forms of power. What is decisive here is the *negative structure of the exception* within which this movement of bare life from the margins to the centre of political life becomes possible in the first place, as opposed to a simple observance of the inclusion of *zoē* in the *polis* which results in life becoming the primary object of power but rather. To repeat: the claim here is not that *bios* and *zoē* were once strictly differentiated and then gradually begin to coincide. The difference itself is *produced* in order to articulate the 'two lives' at the point of their indistinction. We are not dealing with a linear-historical, nor conceptual-foundational question here, but rather with a process of *localisation*; a transformation in the strategic function and *topos* of the articulatory nexus that is bare life. As we have seen, in order to analyse the mutational parameters of life's localisation, Agamben concentrates on the juridification of a first-philosophical logic of exclusion, which reaches its apotheosis in the juridico-political concept of the state of exception and the logic of the ban. The paradigm '*homo sacer*' thus serves to constitute and make intelligible the broader historical-problematic of the political form of relation Agamben terms 'inclusive exclusion'. What has not perhaps been emphasised is that Agamben's collapsing of sovereignty and biopolitics into a generalised negative logic of the exception results from a *topological deformation* of the surface of the philosophical-political structure, which in turn produces a *re-location* of the articulatory mechanism Agamben calls 'bare life':

[T]he decisive fact is that, together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoē*…enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction. (*HS*, 9)

We can only understand the working of contemporary forms of governance, as a particular localisation of life, if we analyse the *logical inconsistency* in the constitution of sovereignty which it exploits and comes to *deform*. And the point I have been attempting to further develop in this chapter, through analysis of the shadow of the sovereign, the sacred

remainder, and the *topos outopos* of bare life, is that this inconsistency consists in a systemic relation to what we might term *auto-privation*. Here we can return to the terminological questions informing Agamben's re-interpretation of the concept of potentiality which were introduced at the outset of the chapter. Agamben's theory of power [*potenza*] as the articulation of life and form, and, more specifically, the way in which he approaches the interrelation of sovereignty and biopolitics as the place of transformation in this articulatory structure, forms part of a broader attempt to 'de-activate' the 'Aristotelian apparatus potential/act, which assigns to *energeia*, to being-at-work [that is, to *effectivity*] primacy over potential.' (*UB*, 93) To trace the modulations in the structures of effectivity within which life is given form means asking, first and foremost, in what way this effectivity is related to its *inefficiency*; how is the effective functioning of power related to its *incapacity* and non-functioning. The topological approach is key here as it enables Agamben to develop a different approach to the structure of power [*potenza*] on which sovereignty is based, and so develop an alternative (though not incompatible) critique of the governmental paradigm which displaces it. This enables Agamben not so much to critique Foucault as to approach the problem from a different direction and within a different field. In order to ensure the internal constitution and coherence of a totalising, sovereign order this power must *always already* have excluded and withdrawn from that which is 'Impolitical,' powerless, and in some way *lacking* in life. But, as Agamben's turn to the logic of the ban suggests, insofar as it is *constituted* by a reciprocal negation-affirmation, the paradoxical logic of sovereignty lies in its *maintaining a relation to its own privation*. The important point to note here is that by pointing toward a logical inconsistency within its very constitution and so revealing the *negative* operative ground of sovereign power, Agamben's approach develops an image of power that is more complex than the oppressive 'power-over' model usually associated with sovereignty, and so, by extension, troubles the neat distinction between sovereignty and biopolitics.

Conclusion: A Topological Affinity?

What is clear is that Agamben radically opens up the historical-philosophical purview of Foucault's account. By inverting Foucault's 'abandonment' of the universal categories of law and sovereignty and placing them at the operational 'core' of biopower, Agamben, we might say, reveals that there is an exclusive-inclusion at work in Foucault's own hypothesis which he fails to properly consider.[241] Far from abandoning or excluding sovereignty and the law, according to Agamben biopower in fact *includes* the negative capability of the Sovereign-God at the very nucleus of its apparatus. But in describing Foucault's attitude towards the juridical sphere as a 'decisive abandonment' I would suggest Agamben makes rhetorical use of an early and 'epochal' hypothesis put forward by Foucault, subsequently revised, in order to dramatize his own 'corrections' of the former's hypothesis. As we have seen, the common conception is that Foucault insists that once life itself moves to the centre of the political sphere there emerges a new form of organization that 'has nothing to do with sovereignty,' and it is on this point that Agamben makes his topological move. But this is in fact the earliest and most overtly totalising account Foucault provides of the emergence of biopower. As his studies progress, the picture becomes more nuanced and the relation between sovereignty and biopolitics becomes more complex. Foucault modifies his approach and seeks to develop what Stephen Collier describes as a 'topology of power' as opposed to a previously more 'global' and diagnostic style.[242] Whilst studying the transformations in the organisation and operations of power as it becomes preoccupied with life, Foucault will begin to suggest that this new form of biopower is in fact still linked in a crucial way to the juridico-institutional structure and logic of sovereignty: it is not then for Foucault, as indeed Agamben is surely aware, a case of a simple 'paradigm shift' from one modality of power to another, nor an epochal succession of totalising categories (sovereignty to biopower, classical to modern), but instead a matter of exploring a configuration that is more complex and within which, Foucault claims, the 'new form of organization does not replace sovereignty, but rather comes to penetrate and permeate it.'[243] Indeed, in *The Kingdom*

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[241] My thanks to Michael Jonik for suggesting this last formulation.
[242] Collier, 'Topologies of Power,' p.89
[243] Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, p.241

and the Glory Agamben states clearly that Foucault is 'careful to specify that these…modalities of power do not succeed one another chronologically or mutually exclude each other, but co-exist and are articulated with one another in such a way that…one of them constitutes the dominant political technology.' (*KG*, 109)

Collier is in agreement, pointing out that increasingly Foucault perceives that there is 'no succession from one kind of power to the other, but rather different patterns of correlation among them,' and it is subsequently through a form of 'topological analysis [that he] tries to capture these mutational parameters'.[244] That is to say, Foucault was well aware that when the borders and distinction between the surface configurations of one discursive regime and another become porous, entering into what Agamben terms 'a force field traversed by polar tensions' (*ST*, 20) and 'permeating' one another, a model of critique which seeks to establish a linear succession from one kind of power to another is not adequate to confront the 'mutational parameters' that power now moves along in order to 'penetrate the very bodies of subjects and thereby governs their forms of life.' Perhaps most significantly for the present analysis is Collier's claim that it is precisely the capacity of topology to account for properties that remain constant despite surface transformations that becomes key to the late topological turn in Foucault:

There are patterns of interrelationship among techniques, forms of knowledge-power, and institutions that [Foucault] discover[s] in country after country, over many centuries. Of course there are particularities of any given case that are important, interesting, and worth studying. But it is crucial to have a general vocabulary for describing how particular formations become possible and intelligible…[Y]ou have of course to analyse particular cases, and pay attention to what is singular about them. But it is of course much more powerful to find an analytical tool that provides leverage in describing forms of correlation that can be observed across many cases. This is the register of topology.[245]

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[244] Stephen J. Collier, 'Interview with Stephen J. Collier on Foucault, Assemblages and Topology'. Available online at: http://www.theoryculturesociety.org/interview-with-stephen-j-collier-on-foucault-assemblages-and-topology/
[245] Ibid.

Contrary to the oft-repeated claim that biopolitics constitutes a decisive break with sovereignty – and which is central to Agamben's account – what becomes increasingly important in Foucault's approach to the emergence of this new modality of biopower is the manner in which it 'integrates itself into the more general processes of sovereignty and the law.'[246] In a sense Foucault appears to come close to Agamben's own approach to the relation of sovereignty and biopolitics when he describes the structural logic of sovereignty as 'permeating' the new forms of biopolitical government. Contrary to the majority of critics who have stressed the incompatibility of the two thinkers' approaches (in his elision of sovereignty and biopolitics Agamben's account is too generalising and 'undifferentiated'[247] to contend with Foucault's interest in historically specific and 'discrete techniques of power'[248]), there is a certain convergence apparent here which can be best understood if approached in topological terms. This is of course not to suggest that there is some kind of unseen continuity between the two projects, nor to argue that either gets it 'right' and the other necessarily 'wrong' over the question of the relation between sovereignty and biopolitics, but rather that the intentions and nature of Agamben's attempt to 'correct' or 'complete' Foucault's studies can be re-assessed in light of a topological affinity that both thinkers share and which informs their respective understanding of the relation. For both Agamben and Foucault, that is, in the so-called transition from sovereign power to biopolitics the *topological structure of power remains constant despite deformations of its surface*. If biopolitics is, in Malabou's memorable formulation (itself a paraphrase of Eric Santner's own image for this afterlife of sovereign power[249]) 'secretly inhabited by the remnant figure of the sovereign,'[250] then the differences and the convergences between Foucault and Agamben revolve around how they approach the posthumous manifestations of the sovereign *topos* and the manner in which it 'permeates' biopolitics. Here I would suggest Agamben is not so much 'correcting' Foucault as *transforming* a hypothesis that,

[246] Katia Genel, 'The Question of Biopower: Foucault and Agamben', trans. Craig Carson. *Rethinking Marxism*, Volume 18, Number 1, 2006, p.44
[247] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, p.67-68
[248] Whyte, *Catastrophe and Redemption*, p.28
[249] See Eric Santner, *The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2011
[250] Malabou, *The King's Two Bodies*, p.3

as Katia Genel has pointed out, is in effect an 'open, nonunified…work in progress with conceptual tools that are both rich and malleable and able to authorize numerous appropriations.'[251] Agamben's assertion that the operations of sovereign power not only continue to determine this new modality of governance but were also themselves all along concerned with the politicisation of life itself – an assertion that serves as the tensile point from which his departure from Foucault proceeds – is thus perhaps not such a decisive break from the approach of the latter as is commonly suggested.

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[251] Ibid, p.45

Chapter Four

The Structure of the Lifeworld: Life Encounters Form

'*It is no longer possible to think in our day other than in the void left by man's disappearance. For this void does not create a deficiency; it does not constitute a lacuna that must be filled in. It is nothing more and nothing less than the unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think.*'[252]

Introduction

Over the course of the previous three chapters I have been arguing that a topological perspective can be seen to inform a series of key concepts in Agamben's work and to play a significant role in the development of his methodology. In this chapter I will situate Agamben's interest in topology within a broader historical and theoretical context. I approach this field in terms of its orientation towards two interrelated concerns: first, the growing interest during the twentieth-century in the 'lifeworld' as a sphere that escapes the rationalizing logic of 'instrumental reason'[253]; and second, the wide-ranging 'logical and metalogical inquiry into totalities and their structure,'[254] specifically, the totalising structure of language. Paul Livingston encapsulates the interrelation between these two concerns concisely:

> In the twentieth century, the material and historical "rationalization" of social life (for instance, in the widespread development and standardization of technologies and practices of communication, information exchange, and commodification) is in fact closely linked with developments arising from critical *reflection* on language and its formal structure or structures.[255]

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[252] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Routledge: London and New York, 2002, p.373
[253] Max Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason*. Verso: London, 2013
[254] Livingston, *Politics of Logic*, p.20
[255] Ibid, p.7

This double-pronged critique of the rationalization of life and the internal constitution and limits of formal-symbolic structures comprises a crucial backdrop against which Agamben's project for a 'philosophical topology' develops. What I will be arguing is that an interest in topology can be seen to run through and intersect these different areas of thinking, and that Agamben's sustained critical engagement with the onto-linguistic tradition of metaphysics, together with his affirmative theorisation of bare life, can be understood as a continuation of modern and postmodern critiques of instrumental reason and the rationalization of life. Thinkers as diverse as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Carl Schmitt, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Serres, Jacques Lacan, and Alain Badiou, have all made use of a topological perspective to examine what we might describe, bringing the two theoretical orientations together, as the *structure of the lifeworld*. In what follows I will look more closely at how this interest in the structural constitution and limits of the lifeworld has been developed by a series of thinkers through recourse to topology, and argue that Agamben's attempt to produce an affirmative biopolitics through the figure of bare life develops a series of ideas deriving from this topologically infused critical lineage. This is not to say that Agamben simply *reproduces* this line of critical thinking. Rather I will suggest that we can understand Agamben's work as moving between these two facets of critical thought: the interest in re-thinking the sphere of the lifeworld develops from a sustained interest in the paradoxes revealed by formal-structural analysis. From his early works on, Agamben seeks to re-orient the concept of the lifeworld away from its perceived position as a sphere 'outside' or 'beyond' history and structural form, and through the figure of bare life to reinvest the experience of the lifeworld with a critical capacity consequent upon its position *within* the formalizing structures of instrumental reason and biopower (its *articulatory function*). At the same time, in his interest in the structure of totalities and in particular the relation between subjectivity and the total system of language, Agamben moves the groundbreaking metalogical inquiries of structuralism into an ethico-political register that has less to say about the aporetic movement of difference than about the logical operations by which life is increasingly captured in a series of formal-symbolic

structures. What I want to demonstrate here is that there is a consistent topological orientation informing these interrelated lines of inquiry that Agamben's work pursues.

After providing an overview of the critical turn to the lifeworld I will focus in particular on Agamben's early call for a form of 'philosophical topology' in *Stanzas* and his engagement with Heidegger's reworking of the concept of facticity. Heidegger's topological perspective on the lifeworld – his 'topology of being' (*Topologie des Seins*) – provides an important and unremarked formative influence upon Agamben's re-mapping of the aetiology of modern and contemporary biopolitics and the attempt to develop a positive theory of bare life. Having explored the re-interpretation of the lifeworld which informs his theory of bare life, I will turn now to the influence of formal-structural analysis upon Agamben's approach to the biopolitical *topos*. Specifically, I look at Agamben's reformulation of three key concepts through which he develops his response to structuralism: Claude-Levi Strauss's work on the function of the 'floating signifier'; Emile Benveniste's theory of the 'middle voice'; and Jacques Lacan's concept of the 'extimate' figure.

Lebenswelt

The term 'Lifeworld' (*Lebenswelt*) is introduced by Edmund Husserl in his 1936 work *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*.[256] For Husserl the lifeworld designated a prescientific world of immediate experience, and his analysis of this sphere of life developed as an attempt to establish the relation between the dictates of scientific theory and the world of 'prescientific practical experience,' in order to strictly separate the latter from the calculative quantifications of the former.[257] The analysis formed a crucial part of Husserl's critique of the objectivism and norms of scientific positivism that increasingly enveloped modern experience at the expense of the 'pure' realm of lived experience. Husserl's theory represents a deeply nuanced and sophisticated example of early twentieth-century critical attempts to confront the growing techno-scientific rationalisation and instrumentalisation of life.

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[256] Though it had in fact been used by Husserl's friend Alfred Schütz in an earlier work, it is Husserl's treatment of the term that made a lasting impact on philosophical thinking in the twentieth century.
[257] Dan Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*. Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2003, p.125

For Schütz, as for Max Weber and, somewhat later, Jürgen Habermas, the lifeworld represented the 'common-sense reality' of the social world as it is lived by ordinary individuals, which though by definition irregular, contingent, and prone to error, forms the only basis on which social scientists can develop what Weber called 'meaningfully adequate' explanatory accounts of social action and belief.[258] For the writers of the Frankfurt School, most notably Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, the lifeworld represented a means of resistance to the 'instrumental reason' and rationalization underwriting the logic of capitalist relations of production, which increasingly pervades not only the spheres of production but every aspect of individual experience. And for Heidegger, as we will see in more detail, the space of what he calls 'factical life' provides the means for a re-articulation of the fundamental ontological relation between essence and existence, which provides the 'forgotten' conceptual basis for the techno-scientific organisation of life. The critical strategy common to these diverse and in certain respects directly opposed theoretical positions is that of *separating* a certain form of 'pre- or non-formalized' life and bestowing upon it a privileged position of critique:

[L]amenting the progressive instrumentalization and technicization of reason in the twentieth century [such critiques] undertake…to reject "instrumental rationality" altogether. This yields an invocation of supposedly distinctive organic or "non-instrumentalized" conceptions of reason (Adorno, Horkheimer) or, in a more extreme variant, the neo-Romantic invocation of an explicitly *ir*rational nostalgic lifeworld or 'ground' (Heidegger).[259]

The common aim is to preserve the autonomy and emancipatory potential of this non-instrumentalized form of existence that resides in the somewhat obscure sphere of the lifeworld. According to such accounts the autonomy of the lifeworld is premised on its pre-scientific and pre-conceptual character, which has been forgotten and repressed by a scientific logic that has, as a result of this forgetting, produced a 'disastrous rupture between the world of science and

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[258] Austin Harrington, 'Lifeworld', in *Theory, Culture, and Society*, vol. 23 no. 2-3, May 2006, p.341
[259] Livingston, *The Politics of Logic*, p.283

the world of everyday life.'[260] The consensus in the turn to the *Lebenswelt* is, as Austin

Harrington writes, that '[i]nstrumental, purpose-rational imperatives and expedients operative in

the institutions of the market, the state, the juridical system and other expert apparatuses invade

and disfigure [the] space [of the lifeworld].'[261]

A number of thinkers turn to topology as a means for mapping out and illustrating this

alternative dimension of experience that was to be thought of as opening quite literally to

another world, one that exceeds the objective, scientific organisation of space. Merleau-Ponty

ruminates on the possibilities of such an approach in the famous 'working notes' to *The Visible*

and the Invisible:

Take topological space as a model of being. The Euclidean space is the model for perspectival being, it

is…positive, a network of straight lines, parallel among themselves or perpendicular according to the

three dimensions, which sustains all the possible situations…The topological space, on the contrary, [is] a

milieu in which are circumscribed relations of proximity, of envelopment, etc.[262]

For phenomenology, what the topological perspective offers is a way to re-conceive the very

location and *topos* of that 'prescientific practical experience' Husserl had sought to grasp,

namely the spatially situated body itself. In this conception the lifeworld is a place in which the

embodied subject does not stand at one remove from a world of objects in a 'positive' 'straight

line,' but is rather approached in of terms of its 'proximity' to and 'envelopment' within the

world; as a 'fully situated, fully-fledged participant engaging in transactions so intimately

entangling that it cannot rightly be taken as separated either from its objects or from the worldly

context itself.'[263] In his treatment of the lifeworld Heidegger describes these 'relations of

proximity' as constitutive of the particular form of human life as a 'being-in-the-world'. What

this entails is a conception of the *situatedness* and place of the subject firmly within and not

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[260] Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*, p.126
[261] Harrington, 'Lifeworld', p.342
[262] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, 1968, p.210
[263] Steven M. Rosen, *Topologies of the Flesh*: *A Multidimensional Exploration of the Lifeworld*. Ohio University Press: Athens, 2006, p.40

opposed to its environment, and it is here that the appeal of a topological perspective proves helpful. As Jeff Malpas puts it in his study of Heidegger's interest in topology:

[T]o talk of "situation" almost invariably introduces topological, that is, place-related, considerations. To be in a situation is to be "placed" in a certain way, and, typically, such "placing" involves an orientation such that one's surroundings are configured in a particular way and in a particular relation to oneself— just as one is also related in a particular way to those surroundings.[264]

Above all, in its interest in place as a series of limits and possibilities of spatial configurations, and in opposition to the 'disembodied'[265] practices of Euclidean geometry, topology (somewhat paradoxically) involves a concreteness and a particularity and is, as Maxine Sheets-Johnstone suggests, thus 'rooted in the body.'[266] Topologically speaking, what this conception of the subject as first of all a body in place entails is an opening of the previously closed surfaces of the subject to its environmental relations.

The *topos* of the lifeworld is not then one characterised by the strict separation of subject and object but, on the contrary, by the 'reciprocal insertion and intertwining of one in the other.'[267] The philosophical antagonist in re-thinking the situation of the subject in terms of the porosity of its worldly relations is the 'smoothly functioning mindlessness'[268] of the Cartesian organisation of space. In this view, to simplify, objective space is understood as an immutable and unchanging container for objects and events which take place – it is a *transcendental precondition* for the existence of any given object (including, most significantly, the human being). Space itself is thus not an object but 'the changeless context within which objects are manifested.'[269] There is a presupposition at work here as to the position of the subject in relation to the world, one that we have already come across; what I have termed the *substantial orientation* of the subject. Steven M. Rosen describes this as 'the crux of classical

[264] Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World*. MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2006, p.34
[265] Rosen, *Topologies*, p.3
[266] Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, *The Roots of Thinking*. Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 1990, p.42
[267] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*.
[268] Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*, p.126
[269] Rosen, *Topologies*, p.11

cognition…the self-evident intuition of *object-in-space-before-subject*.'[270] Crucial to this formulation is the functioning of the transcendental 'container' for the placement of the object in space before the subject as the medium for this interaction between subject and world: 'implied here is the categorical separation of what we observe – the circumscribed objects – form the medium through which we make our observations,' that is, the transcendental medium of objective space.[271] These are the Cartesian co-ordinates within which what I have termed the 'referential bond' between subject and object is grounded, and the problem that emerges in both the phenomenological-topological re-interpretations of this model is its presupposition of a transcendental medium or container within which the encounter between subject and world must always take place. It is this presupposition which forms the basis of Agamben's own re-interpretation of the sphere of the lifeworld, which gets underway earlier in his work than we might expect.

In *Infancy and History*, Agamben's third book published (just a year after *Stanzas*), we see the beginnings of a critique of the Husserlian articulation of the lifeworld and the broader move to develop a 'philosophy of life' that it informed. Although Agamben is not using the terminology in this early work, we can certainly see the outlines of the later critique of biopower and theory of bare life coming into view here. Described in its subtitle as 'An Essay on the Destruction of Experience,' Agamben's text traces – in a recognisably Husserlian vein – the emergence of modern experimental science and its production of the 'modern subject of experience and knowledge,' (*IH*, 23) whilst mapping the 'expropriation' (*IH*, 19) of prior classical and mediaeval models of knowledge and what Agamben describes as 'traditional' experience. In its exploration of the 'poverty' of modern experience that results from the triumph of this 'new subject of science,' (*IH*, 24) the real subject Agamben's text wants to draw out is the perennial philosophical endeavour to describe something like a 'transcendental' or 'pure' stratum of experience. Agamben approaches the early twentieth-century turn to the lifeworld critically as the modern exemplar of this metaphysical tendency. For Agamben, those

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[270] Ibid, p.12
[271] Ibid. p12

Lebensphilosophie which 'set out to capture…lived experience as introspectively revealed in its preconceptual immediacy' (*IH*, 40) run aground in seeking to illustrate the very thing which is supposed to lend the lifeworld its emancipatory potential, that is, its resistance to scientific formalisation and objective conceptualisation: 'It is precisely in [its] idea of 'lived experience'…that the philosophy of life betrays its contradictions.' (*IH*, 40-41) Agamben uses the examples of Dilthey and Bergson to show that, in trying to provide an account of the 'preconceptual immediacy' of the lived experience of the lifeworld, they can only resort to poetic or mystical registers and so return the sphere of life to the realms of the irrational and the incomprehensible. To put this another way, life here remains in the position of an obscure and inaccessible substrate, a location which (as we have seen) comes under intense scrutiny in Agamben's subsequent biopolitical approach to the lifeworld. In Agamben's early reading, these philosophies of life thus constitute a topological variation of the structure of exception and sacralisation that is taken to task in the Homo Sacer series.

It is clear, nonetheless, that Agamben's project owes much to the early twentieth-century discovery of the lifeworld. Certainly, the radical reorientation of the subject that these theories open up (and in particular Heidegger's analytic of Dasein as Being-in-the-world) is of great consequence for Agamben's early attempts to examine the structure of philosophical articulations of life in terms of the relation between subjectivity and language. What is most significant for Agamben is the inability of these theories to escape the problematic conception of life as such as an ungraspable transcendental precondition of individual existence. Indeed, according to Agamben, whilst it is Husserl who, in his critique of empirical attempts to 'provide a source for the experience of consciousness…got closest to the idea of pure experience,' (*IH*, 41-2) he nonetheless still sought to conceive of the lifeworld as the sphere of an 'immobile factual situation' (*P*, 190) which, in the last instance, provides the transcendental conditions for what Deleuze describes as 'centres of individuation.'[272] Where Husserl comes up against difficulties in describing what he calls a 'pure – and, so to speak, still dumb – psychological

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[272] Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale. Columbia University Press: New York, 1990, p.98

experience,'[273] is precisely his refusal to consider the expression of this 'pure' experience in the form of a transcendental 'I think' *as* an expression, and 'hence as something linguistic.' Husserl thus bases his conception of the lifeworld as a sphere of 'pure experience' on the presupposition of a 'still dumb' strata of experience, which serves as the, so to speak, *articulatory ground* for the 'formal unity' of the living being that has language. On this basis Agamben introduces the central thesis of his early period of study: to 'redefine the concept of the transcendental [experience] in its relation with language.' (*IH*, 5)

Here again Agamben wants to consider experience 'not in the direction to which it refers' but rather in 'the dimension that gives it.' This dimension is revealed to consist of something eminently structural: the articulatory function of 'elocutionary indicators' (*I, you, this, here…*) whose purpose is not to refer to or communicate anything, but rather to 'give' the individual the dimensions of its spatio-temporal *localisation* within which something like 'experience' becomes possible. Here, once more, 'sites prevail over whatever occupies them.'[274] And as such, the direction to which this experience refers, namely the 'human individual' that is its 'subject', finds its 'centres of individuation' radically de-personalised. This is because the 'transcendental' element of language, far from providing the substantial 'centre' of the subject, points rather to its functioning above all as a certain *place* in 'a topological and structural space defined by relations of production.'[275] We might say first and foremost a space of auto-production, as it is only through the linguistic existence of the otherwise 'empty' and placeless deictic signifiers that it is possible for a subject to exist. In exploring deixis and the demonstrative pronoun in particular, Agamben will explicitly identify the structurally 'reflexive element' within language with the place of the subject and suggest that 'if the subject is merely the enunciator,' that is, if its relation to a transcendental sphere resides not in the obscurity of a 'pure experience' which delimits the proper foundation of individuation, but rather in being the anonymous placeholder for the localisation of an event of speech, then, 'contrary to what

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[273] Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*: *An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorian Cairns. Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague, 1960

[274] Gilles Deleuze, 'How Do We Recognize Structuralism?,' in *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-74*. Semiotext(e): Paris, 2004, p.174

[275] Ibid, p.174

Husserl believed, we shall never attain in the subject the original status of experience.' (*IH*, 54) The subject appears to be radically cut-off or lacerated by what (philosophically at least) had served as the very criterion of its own constitution. In its place – in every sense of the term – remain only a series of 'local or positional criterion' which appear as 'nothing other than the shadow cast on [the human] by the system of elocutionary indicators'. (*IH*, 53):

[L]anguage…appears for each speaker as what is the most intimate and proper; and yet, speaking of an "ownership" and of an "intimacy" of language is certainly misleading, since language happens to the human being from outside, through a process of transmission and learning that can be arduous and painful and that is imposed on the infant rather than willed by it. …[L]anguage is something with which the living being must be familiarized…and yet it has always remained to some degree external to the speaker. (*UB*, 86)

I will come back to the *exteriority* of language evoked here further on in the chapter. For now, what I want to concentrate on is the 'substrate' of the lifeworld. Not only its functioning as a problematic critical-conceptual criterion, but rather as something more intimate to the living being, something '*inappropriable,*' as Agamben describes it, 'with which we are nevertheless intimately in relation.' (*UB*, 82) In this regard we can read Agamben's discussion of Husserl in a more recent text, *The Use of Bodies*, as an appendix to the earlier encounter. Here Agamben suggests that there exists a 'structural analogy' between the intimate 'inappropriablity' that defines the use of language and the use of the body, and turns once again to the place of the subject in the 'testimony of experience' (*UB*, 82) in his discussion of Husserl's attempts to define the 'body proper' as the conditions for the 'original status of experience'. In the 'doctrine of the body proper' Husserl suggests that 'the experience of the body…together with the I,' constitutes the 'propriety…of lived experience,' that is, an 'immediate participation in external lived experience' that underwrites the 'primacy and originarity' (*UB*, ibid.) of the subject:

The apperception "my body" is in any originally essential way [*urwesentlich*] the first and only one that can be fully originary. Only if I have constituted my body can I apperceive every other body as such, and this apperception principally has a mediated character.[276]

The emphasis in this passage is on circumscribing the proper *surface* of the subject, a procedure which Agamben suggests 'never stops giving rise to aporias and difficulties.' (*UB*, 82) The first and most significant of these is the perception of another body, and Agamben turns to the memorable image offered by Max Scheler in a work whose theories Husserl sought to refute:

When I observe with full participation the acrobats who are walking suspended in the void and cry out in terror when it looks like they will fall, I am in some way "with" them and feel their body as if it were my own and my own as if it were theirs. (*UB*, 83)

This kind of empathetic experience, Agamben suggests, 'introduces into the solipsistic constitution of the body proper a "transcendence," in which consciousness seems to go beyond itself and distinguishing one's own lived experience from another's becomes problematic.' (*UB*, ibid.) What emerges in this zone of indistinction between the self and other, in which the surface of the body appears in some way to become porous, is a familiar, problematic *presence* accompanying and conditioning the experience and use of the body: 'however much one affirms the originary character of the "propriety" of the body and of lived experience, the intrusiveness of an "impropriety" shows itself to be all the more originary and strong in it.' (*UB*, 84) What is most significant here is not the perception of the other body *per se*, but rather the intimate estrangement to which it exposes the apparently impermeable surface of the body. The 'transcendence' evoked in these passages can be drained of all metaphysical residue, together with any suggestion of some kind of *grasped exteriority*, and understood rather as pointing to the materialisation of a *common* place into which the propriety of the subject 'does not cease to

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[276] Edmund Husserl, *Husserliana: Gesammelte Werke*, vol.13, *Zur Phänomologie der Intersubjektivität: Texte aus dem Nachlass. I, 1921-28*, M. Nijhoff: The Hague, 1973, p.7

disappear.' (*PR*, 61) Here we might recall the topological indistinction between interior and exterior which Agamben introduces with the notion of the 'substitutability' of the subject in *The Coming Community*, in which '[w]hat is most proper to every creature is thus its substitutability, its being in any case in the place of the other.' (*CC*, 23) This topology of the subject disrupts the surface of the 'fiction of the unsubstitutability of the individual,' and disperses the 'body proper' into a field in which 'the I and the body of the other are perceived in the same way as one's own'. (*UB*, 83) What this encounter with an apparently absolute exteriority (the empty deictic 'I,' the body of the other) ultimately points towards is in fact an *internal limit* crossing the place of the individual living being itself. In the intimate proximity to the 'inappropriablity and externality' which it 'gives' the subject, it is 'as if the body proper always cast a shadow, which can in no case be separated from it.' (*UB*, 84) Another shadow evoked, another phantasmatic presence. The compelling question Agamben will pursue is: what kind of 'ownership' is this, in which '[m]y body is given to me originarily as the most proper thing, only to the extent to which it reveals itself to be absolutely inappropriable' (ibid, 85)? And how are we to *locate* the place of the individual living being if its only characteristic appears to be its relation to an obscurity and a constitutive inaccessibility?

As Agamben notes following this discussion, the 'polar tensions' which condition the body proper, 'whose extremes are defined by a "being consigned to" and a "not being able to assume,"' are precisely those which Heidegger attempted to confront in developing the ontological structure of Dasein as a being 'irreparably thrown into a facticity that is improper to it and that it has not chosen.' (*UB*, ibid.) Agamben's attempt to re-interpret the lifeworld develops on the basis of his confrontation with Heidegger's thinking, and it is to this I shall now turn. What we can draw out from Agamben's remarks in *Infancy and History* and *The Use of Bodies* at this stage is a clear recognition on his part of the problems that emerge with the positing of the lifeworld as existing in some kind of 'pure,' critically autonomous, non-formalized, pre-conceptual (and pre-linguistic) sphere. It is what we might describe as the *critical inaccessibility* conditioning the concept of the lifeworld that he will seek, ultimately, to overcome through his reading of Heidegger. For Agamben, in order to critically examine the

processes by which 'the spheres of moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive communication start to become narrowed down by the sphere of science and technology under conditions of advanced capitalist administration,'[277] it is simply not possible to separate the lifeworld from the sphere of techno-scientific and capitalist operations. The lifeworld can no longer be thought as a repressed or occluded reality that 'precedes' these powers and so provides an external vantage point from which to resist them. The lifeworld is not something anterior to or inherently oppositional to the normalising grasp of techno-scientific and economic progress, but has rather become the very *substance* of such progressive forces; as Miguel Vatter has suggested, 'biopolitical forms of power [now] constitute themselves in and through the disclosure of life-worlds.'[278] Indeed, 'that pure experience' or – we can say it now perhaps – the *bare life* 'which [was] to be [the] foundation' (*IH*, 42) of a philosophy of life and provide the articulatory nexus within which the preconceptual impenetrability and irrationality of 'sheer existence' might produce a means of resistance, now becomes the central concern of instrumental reason and its biopolitical and economic manifestations. As such, what is required is an analysis of the *underlying systematic logic* of the technologies in question in their complex entanglement with our ordinary ways of life.

At the same time, Agamben's criticisms of the *Lebensphilosophies* also focuses on their attempts to provide a substantial foundation – a 'fiction of unsubstitutability' – for the subject. What becomes clear is that the constitution of the lifeworld proceeds according to the same logic of insubstantial foundationalism we have encountered throughout this study. The 'subject' (or indeed the 'human') is constituted in the hollow of its negative image. Its identificatory characteristics and the propriety of its location within its environment emerge once the non-linguistic, the body of the other, is posited as something negative and improper, in order for the human-subject to be determined. But, as Vatter points out (in terminology which alludes to Agamben's proximity to Adorno's negative dialectics here), 'such a negation of the negation only manages to bring in the particular as something subsumed by the universal, thus

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[277] Harrington, 'Lifeworld,' p. 343
[278] Vatter, *Republic of the Living*, p.102

eliminating *zoē* or animal life as the nonidentical.'[279] It is the structural necessity of this

elimination of the non-identical that Agamben wants to call into question. In the discussion of

Foucault and Nietzsche in 'Philosophical Archaeology' Agamben hits on one of those semantic

ambivalences with which we are familiar, this time within the French term '*conjurer*,' which

'encompasses two opposite meanings: "to evoke" and "to expel"'. Perhaps, Agamben wonders,

'these two meanings are not opposites, for dispelling something – a spectre, a demon, a danger –

first requires conjuring it.' (*ST*, 84) The phantasmatic undercurrent of these ruminations sends

us back to the pages of *Stanzas*, in which Agamben describes the 'unceasing alchemical effort

of human culture to appropriate to itself…the negative and to shape the maximum reality by

seizing the maximum unreality.' (*S*, 26) Opposed to the dialectic which excludes and negates

the non-identical, Agamben suggests that there is an 'immobile dialectic' at work within this

relation with the non-identical and the inappropriable, which he describes as a 'topology of the

unreal'. To better grasp the affirmative promise of such a topological encounter with the

negative it is necessary to turn to Agamben's confrontation with Heidegger.

Facticity: Heidegger and the *Topologie des Sein*

Given the importance Agamben accords his attendance at Le Thor in shaping him as a thinker,

and his abiding engagement with Heidegger's thinking, it is surprising that his interest in the

question of the 'place' of being and regular use of topological figures has not been considered in

light of his former teacher's own topological affinities. I should say immediately that it is

impossible in the present context to provide anything close to a comprehensive account of the

significance of Heidegger's thinking for an appreciation of Agamben's work, nor of the many

difficulties with which it presents us. Such an account will no doubt be written at some point in

the future. Here I will follow a topological line of approach to this question, and focus in

particular on the problematic already introduced in the previous chapter, namely, what it means

that beings have or are 'given' their being as a result of *being* in intimate relation to a *privation*,

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[279] Vatter, Republic of the Living, p.104

to a *withdrawal* and a 'self-concealment'. As we saw, this conception of a *constitutive* relation to privation is intimately connected to the question of actualisation more generally: how a thing comes to *be*. As early as *Stanzas*, in the invocation of a 'placeless place' and a 'topology of the unreal,' Agamben is seeking to develop Heidegger's re-direction of philosophical thought away from 'precisely determined actuality' and the 'mere representing of some existent thing'[280] toward that which can never be reduced to what is most apparent, namely presence, but instead opens another modality of being: 'only if one is capable of entering into relation with unreality,' Agamben writes, 'is it possible to appropriate the real and the positive.' (*S*, xix)[281] In a seminar held four years after Le Thor, Heidegger describes his interest in a 'phenomenology of the inapparent' (*eine Phänomenologie des Unscheinbaren*). As in English, *unscheinbar* in German has the sense of that which is opposed to the apparent or immediately obvious, but can also refer to the marginalised, the unnoticed, or overlooked. At the same time, however, the root *-schein* entails the permission of a thing 'to be' (as in a license or warrant) and so, in order that given phenomena can attain the status of *un-scheinbar*, they would need to not-be in some way, to not have the 'warrant' to be but nonetheless still *remain* in some way as being 'inapparent'.[282] As much as Agamben's philosophical topology is concerned to establish the place of being, he is equally interested in attending to that which in the very act of taking place remains in some way 'inapparent'; the shadow, we might say, of the place taken by being.

In the third Le Thor seminar (at which, I reluctantly note, Agamben was not present) Heidegger had spoken of the desire to articulate 'the place of being' (*die Ortschaft des Seyns*) and described his later thought as arriving at a 'topology of being':

> With *Being and Time* . . . the "question of Being" . . . concerns the question of being *qua* being. It
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> becomes thematic in *Being and Time* under the name of "the question of the meaning [*Sinn*] of

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[280] Martin Heidegger, *Poetry. Language, Thought.* Trans. Albert Hofstadter. Harper and Row: New York, 1971, p.183

[281] As Heidegger put it in his lecture course on Nietzsche: '[I]n accord with the entire history of Western humanity hitherto, and in accord with the interpretation of beings that sustains that history, we are all too accustomed to thinking purely and simply in terms of actualities, to interpreting in terms of the actual (as presence, *ousia*). For this reason we are still unprepared, we feel awkward and inadequate, when it comes to thinking potentiality, a kind of thinking that is always creative. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche. Volume IL· The Eternal Recurrence of the Same*. Trans. David Farrell Krell. Harper and Row: San Francisco, 1984, p.130

[282] Jason Alvis, 'Holy Phenomenology: Heidegger's 'Phenomenology of the Inapparent' in Jean-Luc Nancy's *Adoration: The Deconstruction of Christianity II*'. Literature and Theology, Volume 29 Issue 4, 2015, pp. 434-435

being." Later this formulation was given up in favour of that of "the question of the truth of being," and finally in favour of that of "the question concerning the place or location of being" [*Ortschaft des Seins*], from which the name topology of being arose [*Topologie des Seins*]. Three terms which succeed one another and at the same time indicate three steps along the way of thinking: MEANING—TRUTH—PLACE (τοποσ).[283]

As Otto Pöggeler has argued, Heidegger's 'topology of being' is not a methodology that establishes subjects in a privileged positional relationship with an object to be investigated: 'the key to understanding Heidegger's [topology] is his attempt to redescribe spatial experience without presupposing objective space.'[284] This is part of Heidegger's response to the 'discovery' of the *Lebenswelt* and subsequent re-conceptualisation of the *situs* – the *situatedness* – of the subject in terms not of its cognitive distance from and mastery of the world, but rather in its physical *envelopment* within a series of relational structures. Rejecting the 'straight line' positionality which stands at one remove from a world consisting of static and invariant substances that can be subject to an *analysis magnitudinis*, Heidegger seeks to analyse phenomena 'not by showing how it is explicable in terms of some single underlying ground, but rather by showing the mutual interconnection of its constituting elements.'[285] It is the mapping of a region *whilst within it* – and yet, as will be seen, for Heidegger articulating this topology of being involves a profound *dislocation* of the being from its environment.[286] We can already see that in a quite general sense what Agamben derives from Heidegger is the insight that to be is always to be situated in a place, and thus being is to be in place, to 'take place'. As Heidegger writes in *Being and Time*: 'The entity which is essentially constituted by Being-in-the-world *is*

[283] Martin Heidegger, *Four Seminars,* trans. Andrew Mitchell and François Raffoul. Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2003.
[284] Otto Pöggeler, *Martin Heidegger's Path of Thinking*. Trans. Daniel Magurshak and Sigmund Barber. Humanities Press: New Jersey, 1989, p.232-238
[285] Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology*, p.34
[286] Hence Heidegger's suggestion that Dasein be described as a being-outside-itself. In *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, Heidegger describes Dasein as 'what oversteps (*überschreitend*) in its being and thus is exactly not the immanent.' And in the Zähringen seminar, held four years after Le Thor, Heidegger stresses that the essential character of Dasein is the ecstatic: 'Dasein is essentially ek-static'. The ek-static here literally means 'being-outside-of' and so 'The being, in *Da-sein*, must preserve an 'outside'. *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*. Revised Edition. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1982, p. 299; Martin Heidegger, *Four Seminars,* pp.70-72; I will return to this understanding of being as being-outside and its implications for Agamben's topology in the third chapter.

itself in every case its "there" (*Da*)…[Dasein] is an entity which has made a disclosure of spatiality as the Being of the "there."[287] Edward Casey has shown that despite the prominence given to temporality in Heidegger's early analytic of Dasein in *Being and Time*, there is a consistent attempt to think being in terms of its 'spatiality' in the earlier work. In *Language and Death*, Agamben will base his attempt to 'locate' language as the 'place of negativity' on an interpretation of Dasein that seeks explicitly and early on to accentuate its situatedness and the importance of its place: 'If we accept the now classic translation of Dasein as Being-there, we should nevertheless understand this expression as "Being-the-*there*,"' (*LD*, 5) suggests Agamben. Given that Agamben's approach to Dasein in these terms in *Language and Death* anticipates by some years the later interest of scholars in the gestation of Heidegger's interest in place and topology, it seems reasonable to suggest that Agamben's reception of Heidegger, and his call for a philosophical topology – which I have shown remains at the centre of his project during the next forty years – can be understood as being informed from the outset by the topological turn described at Le Thor.

If the central question of Heidegger's thinking is the 'place or location of being,' there is a particular negative quality with which he seeks to endow this *topos* of the human being. The singularity of this approach rests on a slight terminological adjustment that Agamben picks up on in *Language and Death* and to which he will return again and again in the years that follow. Heidegger describes the form of localisation that is at stake in the term Dasein in a letter to Jean Beaufret:

Da-sein is a key word in my thought [*ein Schlüssel Wort meines Denkens*] and because of this, it has also given rise to many grave misunderstandings. For me *Da-sein* does not so much signify here I am, so much as, if I may express myself in what is perhaps impossible French, *être-le-là* [Being-the-there].[288]

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[287] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Harper and Row: New York, 1962, p.171
[288] Martin Heidegger, *Lettre à Monsieur Beaufret* in *Lettre sur l'humanisme*, German text translated and presented by R. Munier, Paris, 1964 (as quoted in *Language and Death*). Heidegger's fullest elaboration on this matter comes in the *Zollikon* Seminars, where he explains his use of "Dasein" in Being and Time as follows: 'In the philosophical tradition, the term "Dasein" means presence-at-hand, exis- tence. In this sense, one speaks, for instance, of proofs for God's existence. However, Da-sein is understood differently in Being and Time. To begin with, French existentialists also failed to pay attention to it. That is why they translated Da-sein in Being and Time as être-là, which means being here and not there. The Da in Being and Time does not mean a statement of place [Ortsangabe] for a being, but rather it should designate the openness where beings can be present for the human being, and the human being also for himself. The Da of [Da-sein's] being distinguishes the humanness of the human being. The talk about human

Quoting Heidegger's letter in *Language and Death* Agamben will go on to ask: if we

understand this expression as 'Being-the-*there*,' and if 'being its own *Da* (its own *there*) is what

characterizes Dasein (Being-there),' then why, according to Heidegger, 'at the point where the

possibility…of being at home in one's own place is actualized [is this] Da…revealed as that

from which a radical and threatening negativity emerges'? (*LD*, 5) He goes on: 'Where is *Da*

[Being], if one who remains in its clearing [*Lichtung*] is, for that reason, the "placeholder of

nothing" (*Platzhalder des Nichts*)? It will perhaps come as no surprise by this stage that the

place of being is for both Heidegger and Agamben a 'place of negativity'. The notion that being

is somehow marked by a lack or a constitutive *withdrawal of place*, is, as we have already seen,

central to both Heidegger's and Agamben's understanding of the topology of being. The

ontological structure they each seek to explore is one in which the very conditions of possibility

by which something can come to be are in a decisive sense the 'place' of a relation to a

negativity. Presence, 'at the point' where it is actualised as 'one's own place', is always related

to and in some way constituted by a *withdrawal* and an absence. This is familiar terrain by now.

As we have seen in the discussion of the paradigm, a certain capacity for incapacity is the

exemplary condition of a series of topologically related concepts and positions that all feed back

into the central concern of Agamben's work: the *sterēsis* or privation that determines the place

and the power (*potenza*) of the living being. What is important to emphasise here again, is the

decsisive move Agamben makes in response to his former teacher's work, to which I have

already referred (see Chapter 1). Where Heidegger remains trapped in the negative logic of

opposition and differential thinking that, according to Agamben, defines the entire history of

Western metaphysics, Agamben seeks to move beyond this negative dialectic and ask 'why, in

our philosophical tradition, does not only consciousness but the very Dasein, the very being-

there of the human being, need to presuppose a false beginning, that must be abandoned and

removed to give place to the true and the most proper?' (*UB*, 45) Seeking to counter the

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Da-sein is accordingly a pleonasm, avoidable in all contexts, including Being and Time. The appropriate French translation of Dasein should be: Etre le là, and the meaningful accentuation should be Da-sein in German instead of Dasein. Martin Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars*, ed. Medard Boss, trans. Franz Mayr and Richard Askay. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, 2001, p. 120

articulation of life in which beings have their being by virtue of their relation to the place of a lack and a privation, which individual beings must always in some sense fill-up or assume, Agamben will consistently reject what we might term the insubstantial foundationalism of this ontological tradition. At the same time, and in contrast to the more affirmative critical responses to the metaphysical tradition, I would suggest that the great merit of Agamben's work is its willingness to *persist in the negative*,[289] and to work from *within* the logic of differential negation to fundamentally rethink the possibility of any and all forms of human activity, that is, the possibility of praxis itself. As Watkin puts it, for Agamben, 'before one can say yes, one has to say no.'[290]

But what does it mean to be-the-*there*? The formulation directly contravenes the cardinal philosophical principle of philosophical localisation which has been touched on throughout this study, and which Heidegger distils in his letter: 'I am here.' If 'I' am, rather, only insofar as I occupy a 'there,' then it would seem my proper place is to be in some way *out of* place. According to Heidegger '[Dasein] is an entity which has made a disclosure of spatiality as the Being of the "there," and the key word in this passage is the 'has', for it signals that the 'there' to which the being is consigned – which it simply *is*, the *factum brutum* or 'facticity' of its 'sheer existence' – has in a certain sense *already been* given and 'disclosed' to it in such a way that it precedes and has a 'priority' (*Vorrang*)[291] over any sense the being may have of its 'own place.' As Malpas puts it:

Heidegger's thinking begins with the attempt to articulate the structure of a certain "place." The place at issue is not, however, any mere location in which entities are positioned, but rather the place in which we already find ourselves given over to the world and to our own existence within that world—the place that is, one might say, the place of the happening of being.[292]

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[289] I refer here to Benjamin Noys' work *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Critical Theory.* Edinbughr University Press: Edinbugh, 2012
[290] See Watkin's searching accounts of the prjects of Derrida and Deleuze in this regard, in William Watkin. The full passage to which I refer above, in which Watkin describes the difference on this point between Derrida and Agamben, reads as follows: 'Put simply…Derrida always says yes to yes, While Agamben believes before one can say yes, one has to say no. Derride remains in a paradise of affirmation, while Agamben has to leave nirvana and wend his weary way down the grey defiles of purgatorial indifference.' Watkin, *Agamben and Indifference*, p.133
[291] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.34
[292] Malpas, *Heidegger's Topology*, p.15

For Agamben the problem that arises, in this conception of being as 'irreparably thrown into a facticity that is improper to it and that it has not chosen', is the implacable negativity and inaccessibility of place to which the 'priority' of Dasein consigns the living being. In the process of establishing this 'priority' of Dasein, Heidegger subjects the concept of the lifeworld to a rigorous critique, however, and Agamben's own attempt to move beyond his former teacher is indebted to this re-formulation. In particular, Agamben concentrates on Heidegger's approach to the concept of facticity which, he points out, is 'fundamentally different' to Husserl's use of the term. (*P*, 188) 'Facticity' is a term that Heidegger appropriates from neo-Kantian thinking in which it originally refers to the impenetrability and irrationality of sheer existence. Hence Lukács could describe factical life as a 'content which in principle cannot be deduced from the principle of form and which, therefore, has simply to be accepted as actuality.'[293] In Heidegger's re-formulation, the obdurate and impenetrable *is* – that is, in philosophical terms, the *essence* – of life (*zoē*) is not approached as the foundation of the human form of life (*bios*), but is rather *intrinsic to it*. 'Facticity is not added to Dasein; it is inscribed in its very structure.' (*P*, 195) Whereas Husserl had sought to establish the 'immobility' and determinate *here* of a 'factical situation' by recurring to the sphere of 'simple factuality' of beings in their relation to 'the objects of experience,' for Heidegger 'factical life is never in the world as a simple object'; '[the determinations of factical life] are not indifferent qualities that can be harmlessly established, as when I say, "this thing is red". Facticity does not mean '"presence in some place or another"' (*UB*, 176) or 'simply being thrown into the there of a given' place. In Heidegger's conception of factical life, the place at issue is thus not 'any mere location in which entities are positioned', but is to be grasped instead as the very location in which being itself becomes possible *in the first place*. And this 'first place' is no longer – despite its 'priority' – understood as something exterior to the being but rather in some sense *integral* to its coming to be. In this view, as Agamben suggests, 'the subject does not stand over the act [of determination] but is himself the

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[293] Lukács, *History and Class consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone. MIT Press: Cambridge, 1971, p.17

place of its occurring'. Hence, Agamben finds the distinctively biopolitical definition of Dasein as the most essential trait of facticity: '"Dasein is the being whose Being is at issue for it in its very Being."' (*P*, 193) The facticity of the lifeworld is thus no longer simply distinguished as the un-formed, non-identical foundation of the individual. 'Dasein is never to be defined ontologically by regarding it as (ontologically indefinite) life plus something else.'[294] What Heidegger attempts in his reformulation of the lifeworld is an undoing of the ontological distinction between essence and existence, between *zoē* and *bios*.

Whilst Heidegger succeeds in deconstructing the concept of factical life as in some way providing the inviolable foundation and 'full light of origin' of the subject, he nonetheless 'inscribes' within this new-found openness of the living being to its conditions of possibility – that is, its own formation – a relation to 'irreducible facticity and opacity.' As Agamben suggests, 'Dasein's openness delivers it over to something that it cannot escape but that nevertheless eludes it and remains inaccessible.' Dasein, as the *first place* of this encounter between life and form, 'is brought before other beings and, above all, before what it itself is; but, since it does not bring itself there by itself, it is irremediably delivered over to what already confronts it and gazes upon it as an inexorable enigma.' (*P*, 193) According to Agamben, in his attempt to re-think 'factical life' in the figure of Dasein Heidegger is thus – despite his radical dislocation of the place of the subject – still complicit with the logic of insubstantial foundationalism. To repeat a passage quoted earlier:

> [W]hy, in our philosophical tradition, does not only consciousness but the very Dasein, the very being-there of the human being, need to presuppose a false beginning, that must be abandoned and removed to give place to the true and the most proper?' (*UB*, 45)

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[294] Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.87

In the essay 'The Passion of Facticity,' in a characteristically idiosyncratic reading, Agamben shifts attention away from the phenomenological backdrop informing Heidegger's approach to facticity and turns instead to a passage in St. Augustine. Suggesting that it is 'more likely' that Heidegger's use of the term originates in his reading of this passage than in the work of his former teacher Husserl, Agamben highlights what 'interests Heidegger most' about the concept: 'the dialectic of concealment and unconcealment, this double movement [or *conjurer*]'. What Agamben describes here is a certain form of knowledge or *intelligibility*, whose conditions lie in its relation to 'a knowledge that is concealed from [the living being]'. (*P*, 190) The 'restlesness' of facticity, we read, 'is the condition of what remains concealed in its opening, of what is exposed by its retreat' or *withdrawal* (ibid.); and so, as Agamben writes in a different context but with perfect *topological* continuity: 'according to the apparatus that should be familiar to us by now, the knowledge of [the place of life] leads back, once again, to a privation: the knowledge that something invisible and insubstantial…has been lost. (*N*, 81)[295] In one of many such theoretical jump-cuts Agamben will suggest that, on the basis of Heidegger's use of the term 'repression' (*abgedrängt*) to describe this 'privative interpretation' of the place of being, there in fact exists a correlation with the Freudian concept of 'repression' (*Verdrängung*). (*P*, 193) The analogy, Agamben remarks in a note, is 'of course purely formal,' (*P*, 296) but not for that reason without consequences for an understanding of the way he will seek to overcome Heidegger's 'privative' articulation of being. Indeed, we have already seen that Agamben considers a certain therapeutic dimension to be at work in the 'regressive,' 'archaeological' approach to the historical subject (that is to say, to the subject and its history). What does consideration of the 'purely formal' analogy between 'Heideggerian ontology and the territory of psychology' (ibid.) tell us about this unlikely polarisation of their repressive hypotheses?

Unsurprisingly, in order to develop this suggestion Agamben directs us to the sphere of terminology, and in particular to the etymological root of the terms 'factical' and 'facticity'.

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[295] The text I refer to here is the essay 'Nudity,' which involves a discussion of this dialectic of concealment-unconcealment that moves towards a Benjaminian resolution of the (Heideggerian) aporia.

Tracing the terms back to their common origin in the Latin *faticius*, meaning 'artificial,' Agamben follows their 'migrations' into the French *faitis* and German *feit*, which 'simply means "beautiful, pretty". Somewhat abruptly, Agamben suggests that it is 'in the context of this semantic history that we must situate the appearance of the term "fetish," which is, we read, 'morphologically identical to the French *faitis*.' (*P*, 196) What does the term fetish have to do with the concept of faciticity we have been considering? That is, what is its bearing on the Heideggerian formulation of the term? If we turn to the footnotes of the section in *Stanzas* significantly entitled 'The Absent Object,' we find a more detailed exploration of the root of the term 'fetish' which proves helpful here. There, as in the 'Facticity' essay, we learn that the term derives from the Portuguese '*fetiçio*,' which comes from the same Latin root as 'facticity': *faticius*. This artificiality that is thus common to both facticity and fetishism is in turn related back to the Indo-european root **dhē* and has, as such, 'an originally religious value' which, Agamben suggests, 'can still be perceived in the archaic sense of *facere* (to make a sacrifice).' (*S*, 35) We thus find ourselves, suddenly, back in the ambivalent semantic sphere of the sacred. In the same way that the juridification of the sacrificial mythologeme led us ineluctably to the functioning of *sacer* as an 'empty term' allowing for the simultaneous *evocation* and *expulsion* of the theological phantasms of secular modernity, so the polarisation Agamben introduces between facticity and fetishism will resolve itself in the ambivalent place of a reciprocal negation-affirmation: just as, for Freud, 'the fetish is not an inauthentic [or *artificial*] object,' but is instead 'both the presence of something and the sign of its absence' which as such 'both is and is not an object,' so too 'the structure of Dasein [and facticity] is marked by a kind of original fetishism…on account of which Dasein cannot ever appropriate the being it is, the being to which it is irreparably consigned.' (*P*, 196)

Here we must recall the possibility that is at issue in Agamben's discussion of repression in 'Philosophical Archaeology,' that is, of an experience which might be 'given in the form of a constitutive inaccessibility.' (*ST*, 100) For in this sense, in 'delivering' being over to something that it cannot escape but which at the same time remains inaccessible to it, there is 'a kind of original repression [which] thus belongs to this character of Dasein's Being.' (*P*, 193)

As the decisive rejection of the concept of repression in the 'Archaeology' essay suggests, Agamben (after a number of textual encounters and years of consideration which I can only gesture towards here) ultimately finds that, in his attempt to overcome the ontological difference and re-articulate the place of being, Heidegger reproduces the same foundationalism inherent in the ontological separation of the biological 'lifeworld' (*zoē*) and the formed life of the human (*bios*) which 'betrays' those philosophies of life from which he sought to distance himself. As with the Freudian theory of repression, Agamben ultimately suggests that Heidegger's privative interpretation of life produces a relation to the 'first place' of being which 'infinitely repeat[s] an original trauma.' (*ST*, 102) We will see that Agamben turns to another psychanalytic approach to this privative articulation of the subject and its formation, in order to develop an alternative and affirmative response which does not seek to repeat an inaccessible trauma, but rather to *recuperate* the living being's conditions of possibility. Contrary to being consigned to the 'enigma' of its own formation, Agamben will propose a theory of the self which involves 'assimilation to what has been lost and forgotten.' (*TTR*, 41)

Despite Agamben's attempts to overcome the thought of his teacher, the vital opening which Heidegger provides is his indetermination and potentializing of the *form* of being, in which he 'replaces the physical "I" with an empty and inessential being that is only its own ways of Being'. (*P*, 260) That is to say, Heidegger poses in a radical way the problem of the relation between life and form. If at times Heidegger appears to 'retreat from the radicality of this thesis' (*P*, 197), he nonetheless provides Agamben with a conceptual clearing within which he will pursue his own studies. What we are approaching, in these considerations of the privative place of factical life and the peculiar existential status of the fetish object, are variations on a figure introduced at the outset of this thesis: the 'topological game' of 'putting together and articulating.' It would seem that in order for such an articulatory nexus to come into being, we have to continually confront the place of an emptiness and a withdrawal; to traverse a 'topology of the unreal.' The 'clearing' that Heidegger's repressive hypothesis creates takes its place, so to speak, within the *topos* of living being itself. And as such, if 'the human being exists in the human being's non-place,' (*RA*, 134) and is confronted by its 'central

emptiness,' Agamben will nonetheless seek to grasp this zone and make it *habitable*, 'for its emptiness is the possibility of movement'[296] and 'the unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think.'[297]

The Forms Thought Takes

In a 1983 interview, whilst seeking to distance his thought from the term 'structuralism,' Foucault makes the following observation:

> I'm not sure how interesting it would be to attempt a redefinition of…structuralism. It would be interesting, though, to study formal thought and the different kinds of formalism that ran though Western culture in the twentieth century'.[298]

It is interesting to consider these remarks in light of Agamben's reflection on his own approach to form:

> [F]or me, reflecting on the forms thought takes has always been central, and I have never believed it possible for a thinker to evade this problem, as if thinking were somehow nothing more than simply expressing opinions that were more or less right concerning a given argument.[299]

I have already insisted that Agamben's thinking is neither structural or historical, but rather involves an ongoing critique of their separation. This could well be described in terms of the tension between the ontological and ontic registers in his work. In an earlier chapter I took up Foucault's formulation of this tension in terms of the relationship that exists between formal analysis and social history and, in working through Agamben's own navigation of the 'narrow

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[296] Martin Heidegger, *Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristotles*: *Einfhürung in die phänomenologische Forschung*. Klostermann: Frankfurt am Main, 1985, p.131
[297] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, p.342
[298] Michel Foucault, Gérard Raulet 'Structuralism and Post-Structuralism: An Interview with Michel Foucault,' Telos March 20, 1983, pp.195-211
[299] "Un'idea di Giorgio Agamben," p.32-33

path' evoked by Foucault, I have more often described this in terms of the relation between life and form. It is in this sense that I approach Agamben's interest in structuralism. In discussing the impact of certain aspects of structuralist thinking upon Agamben in what follows, I am not then making a claim for Agamben as a structuralist thinker. Fredric Jameson's remarks on the emergence of a certain 'perspective of form on itself' in modernity are helpful in developing upon Agamben's claim for the 'centrality of form'[300] in his work:

> [I]n isolating the pure forms of their representations and substituting the play of those formal categories for an older or now traditional representation of content…we have begun to pass over into the perspective of form on itself, of a formalistic production of form; and also into the historical moment designated as modernism, in which the ideological forms of an older content are somehow neutralized and bracketed by an abstraction that seeks to retain only from them their purely formal structures, now deployed in a kind of autonomy.[301]

If, as Stephen Rosen has suggested, topology is a 'modernist discipline par excellence,'[302] then as Jameson's remarks suggest what this 'moment' signals perhaps above all is an intense interest in and exploration of the limits of formal configurations, what Livingston has described as 'the formalization of formalism itself, the reflection of formal-symbolic structures within themselves, and thus of the possibility of these structures coming to comprehend and articulate their own internal constitution and limits.'[303] I would suggest that, if we are to understand Agamben's turn to topology as a means of responding to the clearing of the 'non-place' of the human, it is through his particular approach to the 'perspective on form itself.' Furthermore, and as we have seen, Agamben's understanding of the forms thought takes is *topological*, and it is this orientation that shapes his critical approaches to the underlying systematic and formal logic of contemporary technologies of power and control. In this sense, Foucault's suggestion – so

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[300] Ibid, p.33
[301] Fredric Jameson, *The Modernist Papers*. Verso: London, 2007, p. xvii
[302] Rosen, *Topologies*, p.23
[303] Livingston, *Politics of Logic*, p.7

important to Agamben's wider project – that 'with man life reaches a living being who is never altogether in his place,'[304] is developed solely within this *topos outopos*.

In particular, by orienting his studies of the 'forms thought takes' in the light of topology, what Agamben seeks to examine is the place of 'the relation between language and the world'. Given his interest in abstraction, de-activation, and the apparently empty place or *topos* of the 'unreal,' it may come as something of a surprise that in considering this relation Agamben does not seek to dwell on the impassable breach between word and thing and between language and the world, but rather to attend to the articulatory topologies within which this encounter 'generat[e] linkages and real effects.' (*TTR*, 133) Although Agamben will pay great attention in his early work to the 'pure exteriority' (*IH*, 6) of language, as his work develops and he continues to confront the '*étalement du langage dans son être brut*,' he will insist this has nothing to do with the impotence of the subject faced with the anonymity of a language that merely 'uses' it, but rather involves a 'practical activity, that is, the assumption of *langue* by one or more speaking subjects'. (*SE*, 39) According to Agamben, what takes place within the topology of this placeless place of the human is nothing more nor less than the game of putting together and articulating the relation between language and the world. Foucault is helpful once more in describing this place of the living being between life and form:

> The fact that man lives in a conceptually structured environment does not prove that he has turned away from life, or that a historical drama has separated him from it – just that he lives in a certain way, that he has a relationship with his environment such that he has no set point of view toward it, that he is mobile on an undefined or a rather broadly defined territory, that he has to move around in order to gather information, that he has to move things relative to one another in order to make them useful.[305]

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[304] Michel Foucault, 'Life: Experience and Science,' in *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion. The New Press: New York, 1998, p. 476
[305] Foucault, 'Life,' p.475

What this beautiful passage expresses in its limpid way is that the relationship between the living being and its environment is not a place of determinate forms but an ongoing and dynamic intersection between 'mobile elements' within an 'undefined territory'. In order to understand the articulatory relation between forms and life, and in particular to follow the surface deformation of the space between the linguistic symbol and its practical application, Agamben has turned, throughout his work, to the register of structuralism. As one might expect, I cannot provide a comprehensive survey of Agamben's relation to this area of thinking, and so will consider briefly the importance of a topological perspective for the structuralist method, before moving on to consider Agamben's reception of this line of thought. What emerges in Agamben's ethical inflection of the formal-logical analyses of structuralism is a response to the 'hidden intersection' evoked in the opening pages of *Homo Sacer I*: between 'integrated techniques of subjective individualization' and 'procedures of objective totalization'. For Agamben in order to understand the topological borders, exclusions, limits, and divisions which mark the biopolitical state in modernity, it is necessary to attend to their interweaving with the interior topology of the living being itself. It is here that we can see how the critique of the autonomy of the lifeworld is combined with a series of formal-logical analyses of the 'structural analogies' between the subject and power.

Discovering Topological Space

In his *History of Structuralism* François Dosse suggests that the 'structuralist landscape was not a pale copy of the geographer's.' This is not an approach to space that is topographical in its intent, then. 'By definition,' he continues, 'it was void of content and meaning [and] concerned nothing more than the position of the elements coming together to compose its structure.'[306] The voiding of content to which Dosse refers is the result of a fundamental re-conceptualisation of the referential bond existing between two principles or 'orders' of representation. This 'discovery' of a formal 'regime of constitution' that, whilst producing the conditions of

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[306] Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, p.380

possibility for the meaning of propositions and words, itself owes *nothing* to imagination or resemblance, is, as Livingston suggests, 'one of the most transformative and significant outcomes of the philosophical turn to language in the twentieth century.'[307] Deleuze describes this deformation of the ground of representation in the great 1967 essay 'How Do We Recognize Structuralism?':

> We are used to, almost conditioned to a certain distinction or correlation between the real and the imaginary. All of our thought maintains a dialectical play between these two notions. Even when classical philosophy speaks of pure intelligence or understanding, it is still a matter of a faculty defined by its aptitude to grasp the depths of the real (*le real en son fond*), the real "in truth," the real as such, in opposition to, but also in relation to the power of imagination.[308]

Life, Deleuze suggests, has long been interpreted from the perspective of these two principles, and as such is 'wholly inscribed within the real and the imaginary, within the frame of their complex relations'. The innovation of structuralism is 'the discovery and recognition of a third order, a third regime,'[309] which comprises a specific domain or order of signification completely distinct from both the orders of the real and the imaginary. 'Beyond the word in its reality and its resonant parts, beyond images and concepts associated with words, the structuralist linguist discovers an element of quite another nature': the symbolic.[310] We might, on the basis of previous discussions, anticipate the place and function of this 'third' figure – the symbolic element of the structure constitutes the principle of a *genesis*. That is to say, as with the signature (to which it is structurally correlative), the symbolic pertains neither to the sphere of the sign nor its object of reference, but is rather the medium of their *relational actualisation* and so of the process of signification itself. Most importantly, as a result of this declension of referential actuality into its 'purely formal' conditions of possibility, the sign is revealed to be 'split between signifier and signified, between the order of things on one side and the order of

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[307] Livingston, *Politics of Logic*, p.334
[308] Gilles Deleuze, 'How Do We Recognize Structuralism,' p.171
[309] Ibid, p.171
[310] Ibid, p.172

concepts on the other, and the recognition of its differential structure provides a profound insight into the paradoxical point that defines and conditions both orders.'[311] Once content and meaning have been bracketed and the formal processes and *position* of the elements that combine to make up the system come into sharper focus, the structuralist 'space' allows for a conception of the *generation* of meaning that is 'grounded neither wholly in the reality of things nor in the resemblances of the imagination,' but rather in what Deleuze describes as a structure that 'has no relationship with a sensible form, nor with a figure of the imagination, nor with an intelligible essence.'[312] As Dosse writes, structuralism concerned 'this lack of being, this gaping hole of Thing, this original signifier, this ever invisible degree zero, this Being that eludes being, a simple virtuality.'[313]

The newly recognised 'regime of constitution' is early on identified by Deleuze as a *topological* space: 'such a purely abstract universe, empty of concrete sites [is] in fact properly structural, which is to say, topological.' Insofar as it *dislocates* the referential nexus between a term and its object of reference, and so between language and the world, in order to analyse this 'third' order of the symbolic it is 'not a matter of a location in a real spatial expanse, nor of sites in imaginary extensions, but rather of places and sites in…a topological space.' Structuralism and topology meet over an abyss, so to speak, and can both be understood as arts of abstraction. For in the same way that structuralism prioritises the relational spaces over the sensible forms and 'real beings' which come to occupy them,[314] so topology is above all a tool for abstraction and, more specifically, for abstracting the continuous properties of objects or spaces *despite their formal deformations*. In this way, we might say that both structuralism and topology are not *meaningful* but 'necessarily and uniquely "positional."' This interest in positioning and localisation extends – or rather becomes *necessary* – to descriptions of the place of the subject itself, once it is plunged into the empty space of the breach between the 'word in its reality and its resonant parts,' between the 'reality of things' and the 'resemblances of the imagination'.

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[311] Livingston, *Politics of Logic*, p.96
[312] Deleuze, 'How Do We Recognize Structuralism', p.173
[313] Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, p.381
[314] Deleuze, 'How Do We Recognize Structuralism,' p.174

Deleuze's description of Foucault's thinking resonates with the earlier discussion of the topology of the paradigm, and leads us to Agamben's reception of these structuralist topologies:

> When Foucault defines determinations such as death, desire, work, or play, he does not consider them as dimensions of empirical human existence, *but above all as the qualifications of places and positions* which will render those who come to occupy them mortal and dying, or desiring, or workman-like, or playful.[315]

Here we can perhaps get a clearer sense of why Agamben will insist, for instance, that the paradigm is 'not an object endowed with real properties,' or that the camp not be considered as a 'historical fact'. In the discussion of the paradigm and the signature, and in the figures of the camp, *homo sacer*, and bare life, what we have been tracing here are precisely *the qualifications of places and positions* within an articulatory network of topological relations. The structuralist discovery of the order of signification allows us to see the foundations of meaning in an order that has *nothing* to do with resemblance, mimesis, or the representation of a preexisting order of things or concepts. In their *place* thinking concerns itself with the unfolding of the structural possibilities and systematic properties that allow for the formation of any kind of space at all. Perhaps the most significant figure for Agamben, in the 'discovery' of this topological 'regime of constitution', is Claude Levi-Strauss, and we can return now to his abiding interest in the functional position of those 'empty terms' already discussed in the previous chapter.

Agamben approaches Levi-Strauss's insights into the topological structure of signification in terms of that event to which I have suggested all of his work leads us: anthropogenesis, the becoming human of the human being, 'in which man was constituted as a speaking being.' (*SL*, 66) Following the work of Marcel Mauss, it was, Agamben suggests, 'in reference to such an event' that Levi-Strauss hit on a 'fundamental inadequation between signifier and signified that was produced in the moment in which, for the speaking man, the

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[315] Ibid, p.174

universe suddenly became meaningful' (ibid.). Agamben quotes the famous passage from Levi-Strauss's *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*:

At the moment when the entire universe all at once became significant, it was none the better known for being so, even if it is true that the emergence of language must have hastened the rhythm of the development of knowledge. So there is a fundamental opposition, in the history of the human mind, between symbolism, which is characteristically discontinuous, and knowledge, characterised by continuity. Let us consider what follows from that. It follows that the two categories of the signifier and the signified came to be constituted simultaneously and interdependently, as complementary units; whereas knowledge, that is, the intellectual process which enables us to identify certain aspects of the signifier and certain aspects of the signified…only got started very slowly… The universe signified long before people began to know what it signified.[316]

As we have seen, the result of this 'lost equalization' between language and life is that the human has 'at its disposition a signifier-totality' (that is, the total system of language which it assumes through a process of transmission and learning) which it is 'at a loss to know how to allocate to a signified' (in individual instances of speech).[317] That is to say, the relation between the two is marked by an originary 'inadequation' and, in order for the relation between language and the world to become possible, a third element must be introduced between them. Thus, the effectivity of the relation between signifier and signified is reliant on this third order that Deleuze calls the symbolic and which Agamben refers to as the sphere of 'signatures'. As Agamben writes in 'Theory of Signatures,' within language 'it is a matter of non-signs or signs having "zero symbolic value,"' and which thus mark nothing but the 'necessity of a supplementary symbolic content.' (*ST*, 78) The 'sole function' of *meaningless* terms such as *mana* and *sacer* is thus, as Levi-Strauss writes, 'to fill a gap between the signifier and the signified, or, more exactly, to signal the fact that in such a circumstance, on such an occasion, or in such a one of their manifestations, a relationship of non-equivalence becomes established

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[316] Claude Levi-Strass, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, p.60-61
[317] Ibid, p.62

between signifier and signified.'[318] We have seen how Agamben's critique of historicism situates itself in the space of this inadequation that defines the structure of communicability. What Agamben will seek to explore further on this basis is the specific kind of ability to which this logic of signification consigns the human being. What does it mean that that which is most intimate to the living being, its very capacity for speech, is organised around the place of a lack and an inadequation? If what Levi-Strauss describes as the 'floating signifier' signifies nothing other than the conditions of possibility for signification itself, what does it mean that the living being has as its most intimate and yet inappropriable condition a sheer *possibility*?

Notwithstanding the force of its 'discovery', there is a sense that, in Levi-Strauss's account of the process of anthropogenesis and the work of symbolic formalization, there is a familiar negative relation established in the *first place*. For Agamben this is the result of Levi-Strauss's concentration on the experience in its cognitive aspect, as if, he suggests, 'in the becoming human of man, there were not necessarily and above all ethical (and, perhaps also political) implications at issue.' (*SL*, 68) The inadequation between the symbolic and the intelligible which Levi-Strauss detects is inscribed within that apparatus which 'leads back, once again, to a privation: the knowledge that something invisible and insubstantial…has been lost.' But, Agamben will suggest (largely on the basis of his appreciation of the pathways opened by the structuralist topologies) that 'it is possible to offer a different interpretation of this absence of content of humanity's first knowledge. That this first knowledge is devoid of content can, in fact, mean that it is not the knowledge of something but rather the knowledge of pure knowability…only a possibility of knowing.' (*N*, 81) We will see how this 'possibility' of knowledge depends on a recuperative relation to the past based on an affirmative inversion of the concept of privation (*stērisis*). Before that, we need to consider in more detail how Agamben develops the insights of Levi-Srauss.

As I suggested above, the decisive step for Agamben is his analysis of the ways in which the empty, structurally 'reflexive element' revealed by the functioning of the 'third order'

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[318] Ibid, p.62

of the symbolic defines the place of the subject itself. By exhibiting in the event of speech the very impasses and paradoxes that underwrite the formalization of the system of language, Agamben argues that the subject exists in intimate relation (is structurally analogous) to the totalising systems within which it exists. What this reflexive mirror-play between the subject and structure implies is a 'transformed *topology* of structure in which "outside" and "inside" are no longer clearly distinguishable, but interpenetrate at the point of the figuration of the structure within itself.'[319] We have come across this kind of redoubling before, in the 'structural analogies' that exist between the *homo sacer* and the sovereign. The 'point' of figuration which Agamben will hit on, in which the outside and inside, structure and subject interpenetrate and are exposed in their mutual relation to a constitutive *inadequacy*, are those 'elocutionary indicators' whose purpose is not to refer to or communicate anything, but rather to 'give' the individual the dimensions of its spatio-temporal *localisation*. The subject can take its place only through the linguistic existence of the otherwise 'empty' and placeless deictic signifiers. This is the negative territory that Agamben will seek to re-define through an affirmative re-formulation of the inappropriability of language and the subject it produces. The living being's position between language and the world, that is, its always being in some sense out of place and dislocated from its environment, should be understood as opening the sphere of *ethical* possibility and not simply the mark of a cognitive lack. In making this claim Agamben will echo (at a distance of some forty years) his evocation of the topological game of *harmonia* in *Stanzas*, and suggest that the living being, in order to respond to the inadequation conditioning its encounter with the world, must 'be able above all to distinguish and to articulate together in some way language and life, actions and words.' (*SL*, 69) That is, to 'leaven' its negation through the encounter between life and its forms.

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[319] Livingston, *Politics of Logic*, p.82

The Use of Language

Agamben turns to Benveniste's concept of the utterance (*énoncé*) in order to elucidate the 'location' and 'taking place' (*LD*, 31/25) of the 'reflexive element' of discourse, which, whilst indicating the very fact of language being uttered, does not in itself have determinable, objective terms of reference. According to Benveniste, the utterance must be understood as 'the putting into action of the *langue* through an individual act of utilization' which should not, however, be understood in terms of the 'simple act' of *parole*, that is, the act of communicating something in language, but rather as the place of a self-referential relation:

> We should pay attention to the specific condition of the utterance: it is the very act of producing an uttered, not the text of the uttered. …This act is the work of the speaker who sets *langue* into motion. The relation between the speaker and the *langue* determines the linguistic character of the utterance.[320]

The place or 'sphere' of the utterance 'includes that which, in every speech act, refers exclusively to its own taking place, to its instance, independently and prior to what is said and meant in it.' (*LD*, 25) Here Benveniste displaces the event of language from its strictly logical, cognitive, or referential dimension into a different sphere. No longer a relation between words and things, the relation that emerges in this sphere is the 'pure form' (*TTR*, 133) of a self-referential relation. In the final section of *Stanzas* Agamben hits on a figure to illustrate the existential conditions of language revealed by the appearance of this inapparent, void, empty place within it:

[T]he forgetting of the original fracture of presence is manifested precisely in what ought to betray it, that is, in the bar (/) of the graphic S/s. That the meaning of this bar or barrier is constantly left in shadow, thus hiding the abyss opened between signifier and signified, constitutes the foundation of the "primordial positing of the signifier and the signified as two orders distinguished and separated by a barrier resisting

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[320] Emile Benveniste, *Course*, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek. University of Miami Press: Florida, 1971, p.80

signification," a position that has governed Western reflection on the sign from the outset, like a hidden overlord. …Every semiology that fails to ask why the barrier that establishes the possibility of signifying should itself be resistant to signification, falsifies, with that omission, its own most authentic intention. …The question that remains unasked is the only one that deserve[s] to be formulated: why is presence deferred and fragmented such that something like "signification" even becomes possible? (*S*, 137)

In drawing attention to the topological figure of the bar that 'divides and articulates' linguistic being Agamben situates his analysis within the *passage* between signifier and signified, between the semiotic and semantic, *langue* and *parole*. We can turn to Valéry's apposite image here:

Each and every word that enables us to leap so rapidly across the chasm of thought, and to follow the prompting of the idea that constructs its own expression, appears to me like one of those light planks which one throws across a ditch or a mountain crevasse and which will bear a man crossing it rapidly. But he must pass without weighing on it, without stopping – above all, he must not take it into his to dance on the slender plank to test its resistance![321]

In terms of the bivalent, dichotomous understanding of language, the bar is nothing but the threshold of indetermination between the universality of *langue* and the individual element of *parole* in which another form of topological relation can, at least potentially, be discerned. What the only apparently effective transition between system and use conceals is its condition of possibility in an element of speech that *exceeds* this dialectical oscillation. Insofar as the self-referentiality of the demonstrative pronoun produces its own effects and 'takes itself as its own referent' (*TTR*, 132), it is not produced as a result of the 'normal denotative relations between words and deeds,' or between use and system – with the aim of arriving at cognitive ends – but rather as a result of a *suspension* of these denotative relations. The utterance as exemplary of the 'evental emergence of language' is nothing more and nothing less than the empty place of this

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[321] Paul Valéry, 'Poetry and Abstract Thought', p.55

bar placed between language and the world. But, as Agamben writes: 'What is essential here is not a relation of truth between words and things, but rather, the pure form of the relation between language and the world, now generating linkages and real effects.' (*TTR*, 133)

      The emphasis that emerges here on *use* constitutes a decisive aspect of Agamben's ethical approach to the placeless place of linguistic being. The seemingly untimely interest in the situated 'fact of utterance' and the question of practical 'efficacy' of language is central to Agamben's vision of the relation between language and life. If the total structure of language relies for its functioning on the existence within it of a place that is generative of that structure by its very *absence* of referential capacity, it is still the case that these grammatical places have to be produced, that is, their *place has to be taken* each time by an individual speaker. In *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben will turn to Benveniste once again in order to develop this ethical relation between the living being and language. Following the studies of the Greek word '*chresthai*' undertaken by one of Benveniste's students, Agamben hits on an ambivalence in the semantic sphere of the term, which consists in the fact that it 'does not seem to have a proper meaning but acquires ever different meanings according to the context.' (*UB*, 24) Agamben lists some of the various meanings of the term ('to consult an oracle,' 'to have sexual relations,' 'to speak') and points to the insufficiency of attempts 'in our dictionaries' to lead the diffuse meanings 'back to a unity.' The fact is, Agamben suggests, that the term *chresthai* 'seems to draw its meaning from that of the term that accompanies it.' (*UB*, 24) It is something like a medium for articulatory efficacy. The semantic sphere to which the term is in closest proximity to is that of the verb *to use* (*chrestai logoi*, lit. 'to use language' = to speak; *chresthai symphorai*, lit. 'to use misfortune' = to be unhappy) (*UB*, 24) and here the central ambivalence emerges. For we cannot understand the relation between subject and object implied by the term to indicate something as straightforward as utilisation. It is not, as in the case of an active verb, which indicates the utilising of something by someone in a process that is realized 'from the subject and beyond him'. To be unhappy, Agamben points out, cannot mean to appropriate misfortune to oneself, any more than 'to feel nostalgic' can mean to appropriate return to oneself. (*UB*, 25) In order to demonstrate the ambivalent process involved here Benveniste

turned to the ancient grammatical 'middle term' (*media tantum*). What is at issue in this mediate

place is, according to Benveniste, the function of a term which indicates 'a process that takes

place in the subject: the subject is internal to the process'.[322] Verbs that have a middle diathesis

illustrate 'this peculiar situation of the subject inside the process of which he is an agent: Latin

patior, "to suffer"; *keimai*, "to lie"; Latin, *nascor*, "to be born". What these cases illustrate is a

situation in which the subject 'achieves something that is being achieved in him.'[323] In order to

describe this immanence of the subject that is captured in the 'middle term' Benveniste hits on

the striking formulation *il effectue en s'affectant*, 'it effects while being affected.' (*UB*, 28)[324]

The subject is here no longer simply exterior to the object or the action it uses, but in some

sense, becomes interior and so *indistinct* from it. Agamben recurs to the register of topology in

order to describe the 'singular threshold' (ibid.) opened up by Benveniste's enquiries into the

media tantum:

> On the on hand, the subject who achieves the action, by the very fact of achieving it, does not act
>
> transitively on an object but first of all implies and *affects himself* in the process; on the other
>
> hand, precisely for this reason, the process presupposes a singular topology, in which the subject
>
> does not stand over the action but *is himself the place of its occurring*. (ibid., *my emphasis*)

Here then we have a vivid illustration of the process of 'auto-production' referred to in an

earlier passage. It would appear that what Benveniste is intimating, and what Agamben is trying

to draw out, is a topological deformation of the inadequation that exists between the subject and

language, and between language and the world. For here, in this 'zone of indetermination

between the subject and object' (ibid.) indicated by the middle voice, there appears to exist a

radical immanence achieved between the subject and its *use* of language in encountering the

world. *Chresthai*, 'to use,' Agamben suggests, thus '*expresses the relation one has with oneself,*

the affection that one receives insofar as one is in relation with a determinate being.' (ibid.,

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[322] Emile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, p.148
[323] Ibid, p.149
[324] Ibid, p.149-50

italics in original) And, in a passage which returns us to the body proper and the sphere of the lifeworld, Agamben concludes that:

> The one who *symphorai chretai* has an experience of himself as unhappy, constitutes and shows himself as unhappy…the one who *nosthoi chretai* has an experience of himself insofar as he is affected by the desire for a return. *Somatos chresthai*, "to use the body," will then mean *the affection that one receives insofar as one is in relation with one or more bodies.* Ethical – and political – is the subject who is constituted in this use, the subject who testifies of the affection that he receives insofar as he is in relation with a body. (*UB*, 29)

The 'middle voice' thus opens a threshold in which there is not an inadequation between language and the world, within which the subject is always, so to speak, at a loss for the sake of words, but rather the sphere of 'vital relations' in which life and forms come into passionate contact. This 'singular topology' is described by Agamben in terms of an opening to an ethical relation between the living being and language. As he writes in a beautiful passage at the close of the *Sacrament of Language*:

> The decisive element that confers on human language its peculiar virtue is not in the tool itself, *but in the place it leaves to the speaker*, in the fact that it prepares within itself a hollowed-out form that the speaker must always assume in order to speak. (*SL*, 71)

What is most significant about Agamben's ethical declension of structuralism's formal-logical analyses is that the subject's privative experience of language – its incessant brushing against its own inadequation with the world – *potentializes* its relation with itself and with its past. This is, I would suggest, the essence of Agamben's affirmative project, and in order to move towards a concluding treatment of this I would like to turn to one more topological affinity informing Agamben's thinking.

Conclusion: The Topology of the Subject

As his reference to the 'barrier' between signifier and signified in the crucial passage from *Stanzas* indicates, Agamben learns much from Lacan regarding the problematic existential status of this articulatory nexus. When Heidegger comes late in his thinking to express an interest in the 'phenomenology of the inapparent', he is still seeking to understand the difficult existential status of potentiality, and in elaborating on this concept he expresses his interest in the 'saving power of insignificant things' and in particular those that resist technological and conceptual 'efficiency'. As we have seen, the marginalisation of certain phenomena due to their problematic or a-topical epistemological nature is discussed by Heidegger in ontological terms, as a question pertaining to what appears and what does not appear in the very process of something taking place and 'finding a station in presence,' as Agamben will later put it.[325] (*S*, 157) Turning to the Lacanian figure of the Borromean knot in order to describe the *topos outopos* 'traced' in the pages of *Stanzas*, Agamben introduces a topological figure which resides firmly in the realm of logical deficiency and problematic appearance. Indeed, from the perspective of mathematical logic it is a 'monster'.[326] The monstrosity of the Borromean knot (and of all topological figures) is due precisely to the 'game' it plays with the apparent and the inapparent, with what appears (actuality) and what does not appear in it (potentiality) and how it manages to 'show' the tension involved in the permission or warrant of a thing to be and to take place. As in the figure of *harmonia* evoked at the close of *Stanzas*, linked together in this way the three rings appear to exist precisely in 'a tension that is both the articulation of a difference and unitary'. Individually distinct, in this configuration or position they attain to a peculiar unity,[327] that is, an 'invisible articulation [and] harmony'. (*S*, 157)

The Borromean knot served as a visual representation of Lacan's topological configuration of the human psyche as comprised of the registers of the real, the imaginary, and

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[325] Agamben signals his own interest in this 'passage' within visibility in *Stanzas*, where he writes of an 'invisible articulation' of a singular 'station or situation in presence.' (*S*, 157)
[326] Jeanne Lafont, 'Topology and Efficiency,' in *Lacan: Topologically Speaking*, eds. Ellie Ragland and Dragan Milovanovic. Other Press: New York, 2004, p.5
[327] A precursor, perhaps, to Agamben's later interest in the Trinitarian *oikonomia* in the recent instalments of the Homo Sacer project. See in particular *The Kingdom and the Glory* and *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Office*.

the symbolic. This schema is derived from Freud's own topographical approach to psychical life, first the conscious, pre-conscious, unconscious, and then the ego, superego, and id. What becomes central to Lacan's account is the 'invisible articulation' achieved by the 'third' space of the symbolic. For Lacan, the subject must be understood as the place of this 'missing articulation'; an 'experiment and experience of the implications of where the body intersects with language'.[328] Most famously Lacan uses the Borromean knot to present his theory of the subject as the site of an interlacing of the real, imaginary, and symbolic (he later added a fourth 'ring' in the form of the sinthome).[329] For Lacan, the knot served to demonstrate that 'in the place of the overlap of any two categories…properties from each category are inscribed so as to make up a third, seemingly paradoxical place, whose contradictions arise only in that it shares properties of the other two categories.'[330] In demonstrating the overlaps and inscriptions that mark the subject as the place of a 'missing articulation', Lacan develops a powerful articulation of the perforated, non-totalized structure of the subject.

From 1972 Lacan's interest in topology (and the Borromean knot in particular) as a way in which to better understand the subject begins to intensify. But, as Elisabeth Roudinesco and Jacques-Alain Miller have both suggested (in a move parallel to Casey's claims *apropos* the 'spatial' reading of Heidegger), Lacan's interest in topology emerges as early as the now-famous 'Rome Discourse' of 1953, in which he drew on the Hegelian- Heideggerian notion of the relation between mortality and language to posit the existence within the subject of a radical and traumatic alterity (it is worth noting that this is precisely the philosophical terrain covered by Agamben in his study of the 'place of negativity' in *Language and Death*). If death is that which comes after life and as such is what is most external to the living being, for the speaking being that takes its place *within* the living being, the relation to death is more complex. According to Lacan the subject undergoes a 'mortification' in experiencing the missing articulation between language and the world (or symbol and thing) and so 'death is not merely

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[328] Justin Clemens, *Psychoanalysis is an Anti-Philosophy*. Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2013, p. 53
[329] For an extensive discussion of the Borromean knot and of the topological structure of the subject more generally see, Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XXIV*. Available online at: http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/insu-Seminar-XXIV-Final-Sessions-1-12-1976-1977.pdf
[330] Ellie Ragland, 'Lacan's Topological Unit and the Structure of the Mind,' in *Lacan: Topologically Speaking*, p.58

something beyond life but [is] a function installed in the very nucleus of existence.' Lacan will leave the dramatic death-haunted vocabulary behind but the topological insight it opens to proves hugely significant: 'To say that this mortal sense reveals in speech a centre external to language is more than a metaphor and reveals a structure.'[331] Having found that the formation of the subject through relation to a 'primordial' exteriority (that is, to a privation and a lack) can be understood as a topological structure, Lacan went on to use such figures as the cross-cap and the Möbius strip to demonstrate how the subject is formed through a series of internal exclusions and external inclusions, coining the term 'extimacy' to describe the indistinction – the 'singular threshold' – between interior and exterior that marks the place of the subject. Here the affinities with Agamben's philosophical topology are already making themselves felt. For both Lacan (and, one might suggest, Agamben after him) the turn to topology represents a turn to 'a particular understanding of structure and the formation of the subject, one that is also bound up with a rethinking of the operations of space.'[332]

While there is certainly scope for an in-depth study of the submerged Lacanian influence at work in Agamben, I will of necessity delimit my focus here, and concentrate on how Lacan's topological approach to the subject can be seen to inform Agamben's affirmative theory of the self as existing in a recuperative relation to what has been lost, and Agamben's reformulation of the position of the 'extimate' figure. As Jelica šumič has pointed out, in response to the generalised state of exception he analyses in the first volumes of *Homo Sacer I*, Agamben 'surprisingly' turns to a therapeutic, psychoanalytic register in order to develop a theory of 'salvation' that is 'centred on a new subjective figure'.[333] It is here that Agamben will develop a theory of *recuperative negativity*, that is, a *creative* and affirmative encounter with the negative. As in Lacan, where the subject is approached as the place of a 'missing articulation' and exists in intimate exteriority to that which cannot be represented (what he terms the *object a*), so for Agamben the subject – and its potential transformation – resides in a constitutive

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[331] Jacques Lacan, 'The function and field of speech and language in psychoanalysis' ('The Rome Discourse'), in *Ecrits*, p. 105
[332] Hewitson, 'From the Bridges of Konigsburg,' available at: http://www.lacanonline.com/index/2015/03/why-topology-matters-in-psychoanalysis-part-ii/
[333] Šumič, 'Agamben's Godless Saints,' p.14

relation to a *privation*. The search for a new subjective figure that is able to escape this negative identificatory logic by taking upon itself 'the assimilation to what has been lost,' (*TTR*, 41) gets underway as early as the discussion of melancholia and fetishism in *Stanzas* (which is in many ways Agamben's most Lacanian book). Justin Clemens has argued brilliantly that what is of interest in this remarkable early work, is Agamben's suggestion that it is possible to *deform* the operations of melancholia as simply a reaction to the loss of an object; arguing, 'rather, [that] the melancholic imaginatively and actively acts *as if* he or she had lost an object that he or she in fact never possessed'.[334] Here we being to see the potential opened up by the work of *recuperative negation*. If the perfect adequation between language and the world, or between *zoē* and *bios*, are not seen as somehow always and irretrievably lost, but rather as that which was *never possessed*, the generative negativity that this 'originary' loss consigns the subject to might be approached in a different way.

Agamben describes what is at stake here as the 'reactualization of the prehistoric threshold at which that border had been defined' (*O*, 21) 'That' border can be understood as the one between *zoē* and *bios*, between language and the world, between the subject and its historical formation. And we should recall here that the 'prehistory' evoked here has *nothing* of the past in it, but is rather a force that is active within the present. Such a *recuperative* relation to what has (never) been lost does not consist in a return to an original trauma, but is rather 'a matter of conjuring up its phantasm…in order to work on it, deconstruct it, and detail it to the point where it gradually erodes, losing its originary status.' (*ST*, 102-3) Rather than react to a loss that in fact never happened (what Zartaloudis describes as the 'original deception'[335]), Agamben suggests we can generalize the melancholic operation as one in which the subject renders the impossible '*possible as absence*.'[336] And, in an act of '*conjurer*' which bears deep affinities to the melancholic, fathomless attachment to an object that is not in fact there, the subject is able to turn impossibility (that which has never happened) into *unactualised potential*:

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[334] Clemens, *Psychoanalysis is an Anti-Philosophy*
[335] Zartaloudis, *Power, Law and the Uses of Criticism*, p.158
[336] Clemens, Psychoanalysis is an Anti-Philosophy, p.[FINISH…]

the 'unknowing simulations' of melancholia are thus directed towards the creation of loss *in order to summon the non-existent – potentiality – into absence.* Here we can recall the discussion in the second chapter of Agamben's historical method, which consists in a *disclocation* of the past as a critical strategy designed to recuperate the potentiality of that which *is*. And perhaps now it is possible to understand Agamben's somewhat obscure remark in *Stanzas*, that the 'topology of the unreal that melancholy designs is…at the same time, a topology of culture.' (*S*, 26) Daniel Heller-Roazen's description of the 'problematic' figure of potentiality captures this topology well:

> Unlike mere possibilities, which can be considered from a purely logical standpoint, potentialities or capacities present themselves above all as things that exist but that, at the same time, do not exist as actual things; they are present, yet they do not appear in the form of present things. What is at issue in the concept of potentiality is nothing less than a mode of existence that is irreducible to actuality. (*P*, 14)

But, as Agamben asks in the 'Archaeology' essay, 'how is it possible to gain access, once again, to a non-lived experience, to return to an event that somehow for the subject has never truly been given?' (*ST*, 89) For such retroactive production of the possible to take place, the subject must risk itself in this place that is irreducible to actuality. And, as we might perceive already here, the subject is confronted in this particular *use* of the negative by its own 'structural analogy' with power. The topology of recuperative negation that Agamben extracts from his readings in melancholia and fetishism in *Stanzas* will come to be formulated in the logic of the ban and the exception, and this intimate relation to privation to which the subject is consigned is seen to comprise the point of indistinction between 'integrated techniques of subjective individualization' and 'procedures of objective totalization'. In the same way that the melancholic withdraws from the object so as to render its existence possible, so the sovereign withdraws its juridical ban in order to hold the life of the *homo sacer* in the place of its absence. The melancholic includes the object as that which is excluded from his grasp, just as sovereign

power includes bare life as that which is excluded from its grasp. In both cases, we are confronted by a *topology of abandon*.

Here again we come upon that difficult proximity with the negative which defines Agamben's affirmative figures. It is worth quoting Adorno once more, for whom, 'consummate negativity, once squarely faced, delineates the mirror image of its opposite'. As Agamben has written, 'any thought that considers life shares its object with power and must incessantly confront power's strategies,' (*P*, 232) and it is in following this imperative that Agamben explores the possibility of a break with the existing state of exception through figures of 'extimacy' such as the *homo sacer*. Here there is a further, significant parallel with Lacan. Šumič has drawn attention to a striking similarity between Agamben's use of the figure *homo sacer*, the sacred man who exists inside and outside the law, and Lacan's figure of the saint, as both functioning 'in the negative terms of a dropout of humanity'. The crucial point for the present discussion is that in this radically negative localisation, characterized by a certain non-functioning and de-activation of the surface of the social totality itself, these 'extimate' figures reveal a subject who produces a 'force of suspension, a putting into parentheses of every point that could serve as a support' for the operations of power.[337] Here Agamben and Lacan are focusing – in an *affirmative way* – on what is, so to speak, *left behind* by governmental care-taking, the excessive elements which are not contained by crises-managing procedures or the determinations of political and economic relations. What the existence of the extimate figure exposes is the necessity – for the smooth functioning of such totalising and determinate social-political system – of what Thanos Zartaloudis and Alex Murray (no doubt with Lacan in mind) describe as 'a particular mode of existence as waste'.[338] Here the 'structural analogies' that exist between the extimate figure and the social whole for which it is 'waste' (as in the relation between the *homo sacer* and the sovereign) define a certain *location* in which the outside and inside interpenetrate and are exposed in their mutual relation to a constitutive *inadequacy*. As with Lacan before him, for Agamben the topology of the extimate figure is not simply a

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[337] šumič, 'Agamben's Godless Saints', p.140
[338] Alex Murray and Thanos Zartaloudis, 'The power of Thought,' *Law and Critique* 20 (3), 2009, 207-210.

metaphor for the subject's relation to its environment then, rather it *is* that very structure. The 'assimilation of what has been lost' here takes on an affirmative dimension insofar as, by *being* the location of an excess, a non-functioning and unproductive site of 'waste' material, the subject in fact discloses the place in which it becomes possible to re-articulate its own relation to the social whole.

Agamben and Lacan develop decidedly negative and inverted images of emancipatory potential for the subject here. We can get a broader sense of how Agamben comes to focus on this marginal, excessive figure by turning once more to the figure of bare life. What both Lacan and Agamben emphasise is the ambiguity of the extimate figure's *position*. And, as we have seen, this ambivalence emerges in the semantic sphere which these figures are caught. As with the sacred man, two terms are required to express the singularity of sainthood (*sacer/sanctus*), which signify the positive and negative aspects of these modes of existence, which are at once 'charged with divine presence' and 'forbidden to human contact.'[339] As 'the incarnation of the excessive leftover [that] finds no place in the given order,' the extimate figure exposes the flawed and porous logic of totalisation and foundational authority upon which the juridical-political order functions; the extimate, abandoned figure *shows* the necessity of its inadequacy to itself, its insubstantial foundationalism. Here we can return to the earlier formulation and view these extimate incarnations as *materialisations of the ban*. Eric Santner describes the necessity of this excessive position as follows:

Because this [sovereign] logic of representation can never absolve itself of its own ultimate groundlessness – its lack of an anchoring point in the real – the normative pressures it generated for its members, the pressures to be recognized as *fit* and *fitting* for the symbolic system in question, are always in excess of what could ever be satisfied.[340]

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[339] Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, p.17
[340] Santner, *The Royal Remains*, p.xxi

Santner has suggested that '[w]hat manifests itself as the law's inner decay is the fact that the rule of law is, in the final analysis, without ultimate justification or legitimation',[341] and it is this lack of foundation, this void at the centre of the law that the juridico-political logic of representation – which has deep ontological roots, we know – attempts to fill-up with the 'bloody presence' of the sovereign and the bloodless *withdrawal* of overt and authoritarian models of power in the management and care of life in biopolitical modernity.[342] What is crucial in the accounts of Agamben, Lacan, and Santner, is that this crisis of legitimation is not limited to the structure and 'representational apparatus' of the juridical and political institution but comes to invest itself in the *lived experience of the individual*. That is to say, when 'life begins to be included in the mechanisms and calculations of State power' (*HS*, 3) it becomes necessary not only to analyse the structural inconsistencies and internal paradoxes of this process, but also to consider the problem of the subject's *internalising* and *assumption* of those very same inconsistencies. Zartaloudis describes this assumption by the individual of the obscure and impenetrable *weight* of a forever absent origin in a powerful passage:

It is through this that an allegedly primordial guilt is implied and reproduced in a self-accusatory delirium of human beings. In this presupposed modality it is human beings who need to cognize that they falsely accuse themselves of guilt over something that they never commited (their inability to access the ineffable centre of their power, the impossible so-called origin of their being, their bare life) and through which veiling of the self-slanderous manner of the accusation the sovereign messengers of a so-called original foundation of the law of the *polis*…found the seed of a pseudo-superior power.[343]

Recognition of this 'original deception'[344] is, I would suggest, the seed of emancipatory potential that Agamben finds in Benjamin's figure of bare life, introduced in the 'Critique of Violence'. As Matthew Abbot suggests, Benjamin's claim there is that the 'space opened up in modernity at the heart of law…is in fact the site of a particular form of our subjection to it.' In

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[341] Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, p.xvii

[343] Zartaloudis, *Power, Law and the Uses of Criticism*, p.158
[344] Ibid, p.158

the figure of bare life Benjamin is thus already attempting to confront the more diffuse operations of what Foucault will describe as a 'microphysics of power'.[345] Benjamin's intimation of a form of medial violence produced by a crisis of the legitimacy marking the law and its 'application' (*SE*, 39) provides the backdrop against which Agamben will make a further and decisive affirmative advance in his understanding of the figure of bare life. What Benjamin and Agamben refer to as the 'guilt' of bare life is correlate to the figures of 'waste' and 'excess' already touched on. This guilt internalised by the subject is produced by its coming to be the 'bearer' (*HS*, 65) of the 'decayed' link between law and violence. In the permanent state of exception:

[the] law has a peculiar biopolitical hold over its subjects not in spite but because of its lack of ultimate foundation. Or rather: secular law captures the mere life of its subjects in a novel way, forcing it to stand in as its new, highly ambiguous foundation. Human life itself is forced in modernity to bear the burden of the law's own ungroundedness.[346]

As Zartaloudis points out, the means of its persistent 'colonization', but also the particular power (*potenza*) of the 'realm of the remainder' or of 'waste', derives from its functioning as a place of non-specific mediality:

[T]he decision on the exception to the rule is a decision on the distinction between political life and politically nondescript waste or bare life. But the even more crucial point in Agamben's analysis is that this exclusion provides the nutrient of every sovereign power. It does so in the sense that the realm of the remainder, or of waste, can be used as an apparatus that enables it to function as an ever-colonizeable, indefinitely politicizable realm.[347]

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[345] Matthew Abbot, 'The Creature Before the Law: Notes on Walter Benjamin's Critique of Violence.' *Colloquy* 16:80-95 (2008). p. 85; Sami Khatib, 'Towards a Politics of 'Pure Means': Walter Benjamin and the Question of Violence' available online at: https://anthropologicalmaterialism.hypotheses.org/1040
[346] Abbot, Ibid, p.85
[347] Zartaloudis, Power, Law and the Uses of Criticism, p.145

The dual nature of bare life – as figure for the 'one place' (*HS*, 9) for absolute subjection and complete emancipation – is perhaps the reason for much of the confusion and hostility Agamben's use of the figure has generated. In making such a double-handed gesture he is indebted to Benjamin's thesis in 'Critique of Violence'. There, Agamben writes, '[n]ot only does the rule of law over the living exist and cease to exist alongside bare life,' but the very dissolution of juridical violence, 'stems,' Benjamin writes in the crucial passage from the 'Critique' (which Agamben quotes directly) 'from the guilt of bare natural life, which consigns the living, innocent and unhappy, to the punishment that 'expiates the guilt of bare life – and doubtless also purifies [*entsühnt*] the guilty, not of guilt, however, but of law.'[348]

In this view, the 'guilt' of bare life is the result of its functioning as a 'medium' and 'bearer' (*HS*, 65) of the articulatory link between juridical order and the authority of the state. The guilt of bare life produced by this 'incarnation' is the result of its re-localisation within the articulatory nexus of power, or rather, it betrays the force of the topology of abandon within which life is held: where interior and exterior, 'freedom' and subjection, are not in any way oppositional figures but rather present the field of polarities within which a life attempts to take its 'proper' form and occupy a 'fitting' position. If the subject is nothing other than the 'empty function' or medium within which the link between life and juridical power is maintained, then Agamben suggests we adopt an improper and unfitting approach to the self, one which 'dislocates and, above all, nullifies the entire subject'. (*TTR, 4*) In order to develop this 'new,' *deformed* self, we must nullify the residue of bare life upon which this articulatory localisation depends. According to Benjamin and Agamben after him, it is in this way that the guilt of bare life also in some manner contains the possible means – what Benjamin will describe as a 'pure means' – for ridding life of its relation to law and 'releasing man from guilt and affirming natural innocence'. (*HS*, 28) As Agamben writes in *Homo Sacer I*, Benjamin 'points to life as the element that, in the exception, finds itself in the most intimate relation with sovereignty.' (*HS*, 67) In this difficult proximity of life and power, within the topology of abandon, it is

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[348] Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence' in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter. Verso: London, 1979, p.147

possible to suggest that life is not simply subjected to 'the controlling force of a sovereign power,' but for Benjamin and for Agamben after him, that the question of the place of bare life also concerns the 'freedom of the ethical man'. (*HS*, 28)

Epilogue: Form-of-Life

The guiding thesis of this project was that a deeper genealogy of the topological in Agamben would provide a perspective from which to analyse the affirmative possibilities his project puts forward. In re-framing an approach to the more affirmative dimension of Agamben's work I have, somewhat paradoxically, been concerned throughout with the question of what it means to maintain a relation to a privation. But, as has become clear, Agamben's affirmative, ethical gesture consists in a thoroughgoing deconstruction of the negative articulation of life. In the critique of the logic of the exception, the paradigmatic approach to historical knowledge, in the medium of bare life and through the living being's use of language, Agamben seeks to locate life in such a way that its forms become something it can use, or not use, develop and experiment with freely and without prior determination. In this way, by pursuing Agamben's topologies I have sought to show that he approaches the limits of language, the suppleness of being, the thresholds of subjectivity, community, and politics, not as fixed, totalising and closed systems, but above all as spaces of potential transformation. It is in this sense that Agamben's work is consistently, as he himself suggests, 'oriented in the light of utopia'. (*S*, xviii)

My intention in describing this u-topic place that Agamben's work seeks to delineate as a topology of abandon has been to amplify the difficult process of reciprocal negation-affirmation which Agamben suggests is the 'empty' dimension where life and form come into contact. Agamben's use of the term seems to me to well describe the singularly affirmative philosophical articulation of life his work seeks to develop. While abandonment is clearly a figure of negation and exceptionalism, Agamben topologically deforms this place in order to confront the *limits* of given determinations of the relation between life and its forms. One of the polemical aims of the project was to advance an alternative reading of Agamben's approach to studying historical phenomena in developing this work at the border-limit of what tradition has solidified. Agamben has come under criticism for turning to pre-Capitalist institutions and formations of power in his work, but my thesis here has been that he follows a topological line

of enquiry in order to expand the horizon of intelligibility within which contemporary formations of power can be studied. The difficulty in approaching such a form of thinking is signalled in its u-topic intent, for as Agamben suggests as early as *Stanzas*, the 'place' towards which this archaeology moves is, in a sense, a '*topos outopos*,' a placeless place that is yet to be imagined and inhabited.

The essence of Agamben's affirmationist gesture can be found in his attempt to collapse or 'let fall together' the ontic and the ontological, and to consider the possible indistinction between life and its forms. We have seen that Agamben consistently rejects the insubstantial foundationalism of the political and ontological tradition. Be it the ontological difference between essence and existence, the presuppositional structure of signification, the 'sacrificial mythologeme,' the dialectic between law and applicability, or the impotent transcendence of God versus the earthly power of governance, Agamben seeks out the insubstantial ground of all such dichotomies in order to analyse their structural and operative conditions of possibility. If this fixed and determinate structure of presupposition serves to install an inaccessible and transcendental foundation such that everything that comes to individual beings 'comes there as to the place of an exception,' the task Agamben sets himself is to think a presuppositionless modality of being: a form of life in which 'it is never possible to isolate and keep distinct something like a bare life.' In this view 'Being does not pre-exist the modes but constitutes itself in being modified, is nothing other than its own modifications.' (*UB*, 170) A life that is only its 'modes' or ways of being can also be understood as a radical and unceasing process of formal experimentation; life here has no determinate form, essence, or identity, but is rather something that is always in the process of being formed and deformed. Furthermore, his insistence on a structural analogy between the individual subject and the formation of the social totality of which it is a part leads Agamben to call for an abandonment of the subject – for an acceptance of its *loss.* Faced with the crisis of the localization of power and of life, Agamben does not respond with pessimism but rather sees an opening, a clearing and an opportunity for a different relation between life and its *topoi*, or rather, its forms. In order to escape, or better to *deflect* both the 'integrated techniques of subjective individualization' and 'procedures of

objective totalization,' Agamben thus calls for a radical process of desubjectivation. If we can

return to the prior discussion of use here, what Agamben appears to suggest is a use of the self

which consists in a grasping of the *loss of the subject itself*. In describing this process of

'desubjectivation' in an interview, Agamben alludes to a poetic relation between life and its

forms:

> It is [a] manner of formulating the problem of the subject. This is…individuation as the
>
> coexistence of an individual, personal principle and an impersonal, nonindividual principle. In
>
> other words, a life is always made up of two phases at the same time, personal and impersonal.
>
> They are always in relation, even if they are clearly separated. The order of impersonal power
>
> that every life relates to could be called the impersonal, whereas desubjectivation would be this
>
> daily experience of brushing up against an impersonal power, something both surpassing us and
>
> giving us life. That, it seems to me, is what the question of the art of living would be: how to
>
> relate to this impersonal power? How can the subject relate to this power that doesn't belong to
>
> it, and which surpasses it? It is a problem of poetics, so to speak. …Desubjectivation does not
>
> only have a dark side. It is not simply the destruction of all subjectivity. There is also this other
>
> pole, more fecund and poetic, where the subject is only the subject of its own desubjectivation.[349]

Agamben's work thus situates us in the not always comfortable place in which the relation

between life and form is *still being made up*. This is what he describes as form-of-life, in which

'there is never anything like a bare life, a life without form that functions as a negative

foundation for a superior and more perfect life.' (*UB*, 228) Rather, as in the image of *harmonia*

with which we began, a life with no negative foundation or determinate form is a life that

consists in the 'topological game of putting together and articulating' its own form-of-life.

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[349] Giorgio Agamben, "I am sure the you are more pessimistic than I am," Interview with Giorgio Agamben, in Rethinking Marxism: Volume 16, Number 2, 2004, p.124

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