

**İSTANBUL BİLGİ UNIVERSITY**  
**GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**  
**MA PROGRAM IN**  
**PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL THOUGHT**

**AGAMBEN'S POTENTIALITY: AN OVERVIEW**

**MASTER THESIS**  
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**İSTANBUL/2014**

Agamben's Potentiality: An Overview  
Agamben'de Potansiyellik: Bir Genel Bakış

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Tezin Onaylandığı Tarih: 11/08/2014

Toplam Sayfa Sayısı: 62

Anahtar Kelimeler

- 1) Agamben
- 2) Potansiyellik
- 3) Tekillik
- 4) Esersizlik
- 5) Politika

Keywords

- 1) Agamben
- 2) Potentiality
- 3) Singularity
- 4) Inoperativeness
- 5) Politics

## Abstract

This thesis will aim to give an overview of Agamben's notion of *potentiality* and will try to show how central that conception is—to identify his trajectory—throughout his various works that extend to a large time span. A strong bond can be established between his ideas of *potentiality*, *vocation*, *inoperativeness*, *infancy*, *singularity*, *community*, *sovereignty*, *philosophy*, *representation*, *paradigm* and *ethics*. As one further investigates his books, the centrality of potentiality becomes increasingly clear.

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## Introduction

Agamben is a controversial figure in philosophical scene whose methods and articulations have been subject to several criticisms. The variety of his field of studies makes it even more complicated for readers to follow Agamben's line of thought and see how his various investigations—relate to one another or—complete each other. More importantly, Agamben does not tend to present his work as a systematic whole or his books as parts of an ultimate project. On the contrary, he often characterizes his books as separate investigations aiming to answer individual questions and leaves the connections between his vast field of research to the readers interpretation.

It is always tempting to locate “breaks”, “turns” or finding out the “one idea that is truly singular” in works of philosophers. If we were to name one for Agamben, the key concept would be none other than that of potentiality. It's perhaps the most central concept that is inherited in every single aspect of his work. Although this is not a secret, since he makes it clear in several cases, it's not quite easy to completely grasp.

If we take a look at Agamben's publications, in regard to potentiality, first thing we notice is the extensive diversity of the field of his research. Second thing we notice is the time span. Not every publication implicitly deal with potentiality, but they are always directly-indirectly connected with it.

The treatment of concepts pursued in his investigations are often not meant as criticisms—although they sometimes radically change the initial concept—instead, they are *Entwicklungsfähigkeit* in the works of others.

With *Entwicklungsfähigkeit* Agamben means that which the author had to leave unsaid, undeveloped, or as *potential*<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben, Conferences at EGS: *What is a Paradigm*

## Vocation and Potentiality

The events that took place in a southern French village called Le Thor in 1966, with the efforts of René Char—a French poet who came to know Heidegger during a conference held in Cerisy-la-Salle in 1955 and was so taken by him that invited him to his home—had a major impact on Agamben. He attended the seminars of Heidegger where he later on described as “in which one learns things”<sup>2</sup> and through which “philosophy became possible”<sup>3</sup> for him.

Through the seminars, Agamben observed in Heidegger’s ontology that “Dasein does not have a specific nature or a preconstituted vocation”<sup>4</sup>. That allowed him to call a new vocation which became central in his thought in the following years. According to Agamben, “a true vocation is always the *revocation* of an earlier vocation” and “an authentic philosophical vocation is really nothing so much as the revocation of every other vocation”<sup>5</sup>. Such revocation of an earlier vocation does not refer to a revocation of another vocation of the same nature. A “true” or “philosophical” vocation is something without set tasks or fixed content. It is, in this sense, a pure potentiality to think and to act.

This approach to vocation is present in Agamben’s thoughts about writing because for him, a meaningful vocation is best understood in terms

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<sup>2</sup> “I luoghi della vita.” Radio interview with Roberto Andreotti and Federico De Melis. *RAI Radio Tre*

<sup>3</sup> “Agamben, le chercheur d’homme.” *Libération*, p.ii

<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *La potenza del pensiero: Saggi e conferenze*, p.326

<sup>5</sup> “Agamben, le chercheur d’homme.” *Libération*, p.iii

“Das unheimliche Leben: Ein Gespräch mit dem italienischen Philosophen Giorgio Agamben.” Interview with Hanna Leitgeb and Cornelia Vismann. *Literaturen*, 2 (I), p.16

of writing. His motivation at the beginning, as he stated, was simply “wanting to write”<sup>6</sup>. However, such wanting to write did not consist of a specific or predefined meaning. Agamben did not aim “to write this or that specific work or novel”<sup>7</sup>. “Writing” in question here is more profound and “senseless and strange” for him<sup>8</sup>. “Wanting to write is the desire to experience potentiality”<sup>9</sup> claims Agamben. The questions he repeatedly asks regarding the collective and individual vocations, the potentialities or actualities that characterize mankind, the separation of man from animal and human from inhuman, consisted the foundation of his investigations in different forms in the years to come.

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<sup>6</sup> “I luoghi della vita.” Radio interview with Roberto Andreotti and Federico De Melis. *RAI Radio Tre*

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## Potentiality

Agamben's conception of potentiality can be traced back to Aristotle. Aristotle, in his *Metaphysics* and his *Physics*, links and opposes potentiality "*dynamis*" to actuality "*energeia*". He argues that, "in both metaphysics and his physics, Aristotle at once opposed and linked potentiality (*dynamis*) to actuality (*energeia*), and bequeathed this opposition to Western philosophy and science"<sup>10</sup>. Thus, Aristotle enables the relation between these two concepts, that of potentiality to actuality, to be articulated in two different ways. The first one stands as *the potentiality to be*. In other terms, for a thing to come to be, it must have first been possible. The second one however, which is harder to grasp yet equally important for Agamben, is "the potentiality to not-be (*dynamis me einai*) or also impotence (*adynamia*)"<sup>11</sup>. This second mode of "potentiality to not-be", or "impotence", should not be understood as an incapacity or privation. It does not refer to an unrealised version of actuality. It implies a possibility that has not passed into existence. A "*pure*" potentiality, a category without a substance.

Agamben points out that, Aristotle discusses "the potentiality to not-be" with respect to "the supreme theme of metaphysics"—thought itself<sup>12</sup>. So, for thought to be more than its object, it should not be considered only as an intelligible thing. It is more than the things which it thinks, that is to say, its capability to reflect upon itself. But this was not the only reason, to

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<sup>10</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, p.177

<sup>11</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p.35

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*, p.36

define thought, why Aristotle was interested in potentiality. He was interested in the questions such as “what is life for” and “what mankind is for”. In the first book of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle speaks of happiness and its relation with “honor, pleasure and reason”. He argues that, “we choose them indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them), but we choose them also for the sake of happiness, judging that through them we shall be happy”<sup>13</sup>. He also argues that, “no one chooses happiness for the sake of these things, nor, in general, for anything other than itself”<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, what is at hand, was also related with the question of happiness, which Aristotle linked it to a chief good as its own end. However, for the idea of happiness as its own end to not remain at the level of a platitude, man’s “function” must be clarified<sup>15</sup>.

Aristotle’s question related to this function is of importance to Agamben, as he points out “Is man born without work (argos)?”<sup>16</sup>. This is an important question to ask and it leads Agamben to the term *inoperativeness*, which for him means that mankind has no task to complete, no work that it must do, and no set function to exercise. However, *inoperativeness* does not imply a dysfunctionality. It only means that there is no already defined function. In *The Coming Community* he writes, “the fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize... This is the only reason why

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<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097a36-1097b6

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 1097a36-1097b6

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 1097a36-1097b6 , 1097b23-1099a16

<sup>16</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *La potenza del pensiero: Saggi e conferenze*, p.365

something like an ethics can exist, because it is clear that if humans were or had to be this or that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible—there would be only tasks to be done”<sup>17</sup>.

His understanding of potentiality is in pair with his understanding of philosophy. For him philosophy is not a totality of ideas, methods, forms or texts. Philosophy, for Agamben, has no pure content of its own<sup>18</sup>, in his own words; “the genuinely philosophical element in any work, be it a work of art, one of science, or one of thought, is its capacity for being developed”<sup>19</sup>. The same sentiment echoes in his idea of politics as well, since politics is the entire realm of human action for Agamben. Therefore, it should not be treated as a separate topic on a separate realm.

In his book *Idea of Prose*, he talks about how the link between “poetry and politics” has been broken, which was in close relation in Ancient Greek Philosophy.<sup>20</sup> In the very same book he also puts thought and politics together, “thought—that is, politics”<sup>21</sup> because, “thought exists,” according to him, “integrally in the mode of potentiality”<sup>22</sup>. Therefore, the same approach is applied to *knowledge* when he says “to think... means... to experience the pure potentiality of thought” where an experience of potentiality becomes “the foundation of our rationality, our knowing and

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<sup>17</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 43

<sup>18</sup> Intervista a Giorgio Agamben: dalla teologia politica alla teologia economico, p.4

<sup>19</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Signature of all things: On Method*, p.8

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle’s treatment of music is found in his *Politics*, Plato often uses the arts in his dialogues in *The Republic*.

<sup>21</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, p.98

<sup>22</sup> Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, p.7

speaking being”<sup>23</sup>. This formulation indicates how wide his idea of politics reach out. He also writes, “That which poetry does for the potentiality of speech, politics and philosophy do for the potentiality of action”<sup>24</sup>. Once again potentiality becomes a key concept where thought, politics and philosophy come together.

Such conception of potentiality is not only linked to the idea of politics, it is also related with institutions of political power. According to Agamben, our conceptions of potentiality condition our idea of power and its limits. That is something that also Hanna Arendt have questioned around the same time Agamben was investigating these questions. Arendt argued that “the progresses made by science have nothing to do with the I-will; they follow their own inexorable laws, compelling us to do whatever we can, regardless of consequences.” and she asks “the I-will and the I-can have parted company?”<sup>25</sup>.

To make this question clear, one must note that “I-will” stands for ethical actuality and “I-can” stands for practical possibility. Agamben’s departure point is exactly this failure to understand the difference between ethical actuality and practical possibility regarding the potential and possibility that Arendt have brought forward in her question. This approach relates to an urgency, “the urgency of catastrophe”<sup>26</sup> which will also become

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<sup>23</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, p.9

<sup>24</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Il Regno e la Gloria: Per una genealogica teologica dell’economia e del governo. Homo Sacer II*, p 275.

<sup>25</sup> Hanna Arendt, *On violence*, p.86

<sup>26</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p.12

the goal of Agamben as “to bring the political out of its concealment and, at the same time, return thought to its practical calling”<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.4

## Potentiality to Not-be

In his essay about potentiality, Agamben says “I could state the subject of my work as an attempt to understand the meaning of the verb ‘can’ [*potere*]. What do I mean when I say: ‘I can, I cannot?’”<sup>28</sup>. According to Agamben, following a passage from the second book of Aristotle’s *De anima*<sup>29</sup>, any question about potentiality in Western thought starts with a question about “faculty”. He argues that “vocabulary of potentiality has penetrated so deeply into us that do not notice that what appears for the first time.... is a fundamental problem that has only rarely come to light.. This problem—which is the originary problem of potentiality—is: what does it mean ‘to have a faculty?’”<sup>30</sup>. He argues that what we call “faculty” or “power” is potentiality that is not simply non-Being or a privation. It is the existence of non-Being, a presence of an absence.

Archaic Greece did not consider sensibility and intelligence to be “faculties” of the soul. The Greek term for “sensation” is *aisthēsis*. But it also expresses an activity since it ends with *-sis*. This leads us to the following questions: “How, then, can a sensation exist in the absence of sensation? How can an *aisthēsis* exist in the state of *anesthesia*?”<sup>31</sup> Agamben argues that such questions are closely related with potentiality, but more importantly that is why Aristotle distinguishes two kinds of potentialities as *generic* and *existing* potentiality. According to Aristotle, a

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<sup>28</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, p.177

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p.178

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.178

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.178

child's potential to know is a *generic* potentiality since the child has to suffer an alteration through learning. An architect or poet on the other hand, posses an *existing* potentiality on the basis of a *hexis*, a “having”, which would allow them to *not* bring their knowledge into actuality by *not* making the work. Since they already posses the knowledge, they are not supposed to suffer an alteration. This conception of potentiality—that is not simply the potential to do but also as a potential to not-do—allow Aristotle to criticize those who believe that all potentiality exists only in actuality<sup>32</sup>. Uniqueness of his conception of potentiality comes from the mode of its *existence* as *potentiality*.

There is a passage in Aristotle's *De anima* concerned with the problem of vision, that Agamben finds to be significantly important<sup>33</sup>. In this passage Aristotle talks about *diaphanes*. Agamben argues that it is usually translated as “transparency” but in this passage, it refers to a “nature”. Although Aristotle does not talk in detail about this nature—since he only says “there is diaphanes”<sup>34</sup>—he makes a distinction between the actuality (*energeia*) and potentiality of this “nature” as light and darkness (*skotos*). He calls the color of *diaphanes* in act as light, the color of potentiality as darkness and argues that they are one in nature<sup>35</sup>.

According to Aristotle, we feel ourselves seeing with vision itself.

This approach allows him to further explain why he answers the question

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<sup>32</sup> The main opposition of Aristotle here is towards Megarians.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p.180

Aristotle, *De anima*, 418 b-419 e I

<sup>34</sup> “esti ti diaphanes”

<sup>35</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, p.180

“hē autē physis hote men skotos hote de phos estin”

“Why is there no sensation of the senses themselves?” as “because sensation is only potential”<sup>36</sup>. In respect to his conception of light and darkness, this answer becomes clearer to the reader. The sight possesses color, as light or darkness, presence and privation or actuality and potentiality. Even when we do not see—which means our vision is potential—we are still capable of telling apart light and darkness, which can also be interpreted as *we see darkness*. Otherwise we would have no experience of darkness. Instead, we see/experience darkness and shadows (*to skotos*), we have this *possibility of privation as potential* not to see. It is this aspect of Aristotle’s potentiality to *not-be* that draws Agamben’s attention.

Agamben considers this *potential for darkness*, potentiality to *not-be* to be, the greatness and the abyss of human potentiality. The complexity of the issue at hand may seem to Agamben’s reader to consider it as an abstract thing. However, he alerts the readers that, it is not. The example he provides to make his point is boredom, which he sees as nothing other than the experience of potentiality-not-to-act.

Aristotle states in a passage from *Physics* that “privation [*sterēsis*] is like a face, a form [*eidōs*]”<sup>37</sup>. In his book Theta of *Metaphysics*, he investigates the “face” of this privation which is an original potentiality. Agamben emphasizes the importance of two statements. First one is “Impotentiality [*adynamia*], is a privation contrary to potentiality. Thus all

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.180

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p.180

Aristotle, *Physics*, 193 b 19-20

potentiality is impotentiality of the same and with respect to the same”<sup>38</sup>. Here Aristotle talks about the essence of potentiality which is constituted through its relation to its own privation, its own non-Being. According to Agamben, as stated by Aristotle here, to be potential means “*to be in relation to one’s own incapacity*” and therefore, “beings that exist in the mode of potentiality are *capable of their own impotentiality*, and only this way do they become potential. They can be because they are in relation to their own non-Being. In potentiality, sensation is in relation to anesthesia, knowledge to ignorance, vision to darkness.”<sup>39</sup>

In the following paragraph, which is an extraordinary one for Agamben, he quotes the second statement of Aristotle: “What is potential [*dynatos*] is capable [*endekhetai*] of not being in actuality. What is potential can both be and not be, for the same is potential both to be and not to be [*to auto ara dynaton kai einai kai mē einai*]”<sup>40</sup>. The potential not to be, as it is stated in this passage, constitutes the originary figure of potentiality for Aristotle. Agamben argues that in this passage, Aristotle clearly says that potential is capable [*endekhetai*] of both being and of not being. In Greek, *dekhomai* means “I welcome, receive, admit”<sup>41</sup>. Therefore, “The potential welcomes non-Being, and this welcoming of non-Being *is* potentiality, fundamental passivity.”<sup>42</sup> However, Agamben is careful to note that this

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<sup>38</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1046 e 25-32

“*tou auton kai kata to auto pasa dynamis adynamia*”

<sup>39</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, p.180

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p.182

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p.182

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p.182

passive potentiality undergoes its own non-Being. So, it is not a passive potentiality that undergoes something other than itself<sup>43</sup>.

Aristotle argues that only humans are capable of such potentiality. As far as humans produce and know, they *exist* in the mode of potentiality. Every human power is *adynamia*, impotentiality. He exemplifies this potentiality with respect to the domain of arts and human knowledge<sup>44</sup>. Agamben considers this aspect of human power to be limitless and violent. He says “Other living beings are capable only of their specific potentiality; they can only do this or that. But human beings are the animals who are capable of their own impotentiality. The greatness of human potentiality is measure by the abyss of human impotentiality.”<sup>45</sup>

At this point one may wonder how to consider the actuality of this potentiality to not-be. How are we to understand the actuality of this potentiality to not-be? Agamben argues that the answer that Aristotle provides is an indicator of Aristotle’s genius. However, he points that this goes unnoticed in the tradition of Western thought. Aristotle writes: “A thing is said to be potential if, when the act of which it is said to be potential is realized, there will be nothing impotential”<sup>46</sup>. Agamben points that this sentence has always been interpreted as “What is possible (or potential) is that with respect to which nothing is impossible (or impotential). If there is

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p.182

<sup>44</sup> Such as the examples of an architect or a poet.

<sup>45</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, p.182

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p.183

“*esti de dynaton touto, hoi ean hyparxei he energeia ou legetai ekhein ten dynamen, ouden estai dynaton*”

Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1047 a 24-26

no impossibility, then there is possibility.”<sup>47</sup>. However, if we read it carefully—having everything Agamben previously discussed in mind—we note that it directs us towards *adynamia*. Therefore, it is related with potentiality to *not-be*. Thus, Agamben interprets these lines as : “if a potentiality to not-be originally belongs to all potentiality, then there is truly potentiality only where the potentiality to not-be does not lag behind actuality but passess fully into it as such”<sup>48</sup>. Therefore, it *preserves itself* as such in actuality. Contrary to a potentiality that is nullified in actuality, here we witness a potentiality that survives actuality and *gives itself to itself*.

This conception of potentiality that Agamben draws from Aristotle, will consist a fundamental aspect of his investigations in various forms. This central concept, in the following years to come, through figures such as Bartleby, will allow him to search for new paradigms of community, politics, ethics and freedom.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p.183

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p.183

<sup>49</sup> According to Agamben, to be free is not limited only to do this or that thing or to the refusal of them. As it is articulated in Agamben essay, to be free is to be capable of one’s own impotentiality.

## Art and Potentiality

A painter named Conti asks his prince “Do you think that Raphael would still have been the greatest painterly genius if by mischance he had been born without hands?”<sup>50</sup> in Lessing’s play called *Emilia Galotti*. The difficulty of the question—which the prince finds it hard to answer—comes from conceiving potentiality independently of actualization. Such question is neither a question about where artistic creativity resides, nor about the relation between the actual and the potential. Raphael as a child possesses the potentiality of becoming a gifted painter yet to develop his painterly genius. The question that Conti poses however, points out to an extreme case where all the future realisation is negated.

The extremity of the question is a striking one and probably it was not a coincidence that Lessing posed it having Aristotle’s potentiality in mind. The figure Aristotle chooses to illustrate such dormant potentiality was a sleeping geometer who possesses a type of potentiality quite different from the one that an individual without any knowledge of geometry would have as the mental capacity to learn it.<sup>51</sup> To point the importance of this potentiality, Agamben chooses neither the famous example of Lessing nor that of Aristotle’s geometer. Instead, in *The Coming Community*, he refers to Glenn Gould to make his point. “Every pianist necessarily has the potential [*potenza*] to play and to not-play, Glenn Gould is, however, is the only one who can *not* not-play, and directing his potentiality [*potenza*] not

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<sup>50</sup> Lessing, *The Dramatic Works of G. E. Lessing, Emilia Galotti* trans. B. Dillon Boylan, e-book

<sup>51</sup> Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 1141; 735a26, p.1141

only to the act but also to his own impotence [*impotenza*], he plays, so to speak, with his potentiality to not-play”<sup>52</sup>. This means for Agamben that Gould’s potentiality to play remains fully his and his musical genius accompanies him all the time whether he plays or not, and whether he has a piano in front of him or not. The artist is still an artist even in the absence of an instrument, just like Aristotle’s geometer—even in his sleep. However, obvious that may sound, it points to something quite complicated to grasp. That something is the lack of straightforward terms for discussing Agamben’s potentiality as a *pure* state. A potentiality independent of its actualization is a subject that will play an important role in Agamben’s thought, and art becomes one of the means for envisioning such potentiality. He implicitly deals with this issue in *Stanzas* investigating the proximity between poetry and philosophy.

The title of Agamben’s second book is called *Stanzas* which refers to divisions of verse, groups of lines not less than four. However, there is more to the title since in Italian Stanza simply means “room”. The book is about poetry and its divisions but it is also a book about creative criticism in search for “a science without an object” to put end to the division caused by an “ancient enmity” opposing poetry and philosophy. He urges for artistic creation to be more critical towards a “science without object” that could hope to become “the general science of the human”, which can be formulated through the investigation of division between poetry and philosophy.

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<sup>52</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p.36

Just as Heidegger noted that the forgetfulness of ontological difference between beings and Being they share has become the most natural thing, similarly for Agamben the forgetfulness of the division between poetry and philosophy has become a natural thing. The result was that, ever since Plato first mentioned of such enmity in *The Republic*<sup>53</sup>, according to Agamben, it became the shaper and the source of other enmities such as between *criticism* and *creation*, *truth* and *beauty*, *thought* and *language*.

This division running down since the beginnings of Western Thought is the subject of Agamben's book *Stanzas*. He investigates the idea of subject's possession of objects of knowledge. *Stanzas* refers to the elusive "third area". It is about a space but not a real one, it is instead a "potential space". It is a "potential space" "between *subject* and *object*" which is in fact the space of *thought*.

The "decadence" of criticism is found in the disciplinary divisions that are entailed with social sciences and the humanities. That is also something that Heidegger states in 1929. Technological organization of universities allows the decadent multiplicity of disciplines which led scholar activity to become uprooted from its essential origin. This approach becomes key for Agamben's understanding of "a science without object" which he tries to investigate through a "discipline of interdisciplinarity". Criticism's goal, for Agamben, is not to seize its object, but instead to ensure the work's durable freedom. The issues held in *Stanzas*, the founding

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<sup>53</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, 607b-c

of a “discipline of interdisciplinarity” or a “general science of the human”, is something that Agamben abandons in the following years because of their unrealizabilities. But, he keeps reflecting upon this abandonment in the years to come.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Signature of all things: On Method*, p.109-II

## Representation and Potentiality

For Agamben, “The only true representation is one that also represents its distance from the truth”<sup>55</sup>. In “The Idea of Enigma” Agamben points to Plato’s Academy and the his long awaited lecture about “The Good”. During this lecture, Plato does not speak about the Good. Instead, he speaks about *mathematics*—of numbers, lines, movement of stars and such which allow him to draw to the conclusion of “the Good is the One”<sup>56</sup>. According to Agamben this disjunction between the content of the lecture and its title is central for Plato’s teaching. He writes, “Plato, who had always warned his students about the difficulties entailed in direct thematic treatment of problems, and who in his writings had willingly included fictions and stories, himself became for his students a myth and an enigma”<sup>57</sup>.

Similarly to Plato, Agamben having this idea of representability in question, discusses things that seem unrelated. This indirect method is a warning against thematic treatment of questions. This is something that Plato was aware of and that Agamben sees in his lecture, the danger of a belief that an unmediated revelation will come about the thing itself rather than a representation of that thing<sup>58</sup>. This idea of representation plays an important role in Agamben’s *Idea of Prose* and he argues that this is the reason why Plato neither wrote in prose nor in poetry but in “their middle

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<sup>55</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, p.107

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p.108

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p.108

<sup>58</sup> Dialogue style and allegories are examples of what is at issue here.

term” where this new idea of prose, notifies the difficulty of expressing the nature of things and ideas.

Such problems of signification, representability and indication has been a subject of Agamben’s various books and essays<sup>59</sup>. In an essay about Plato he argues that “the thing itself is not a thing; it is the very sayability, the very openness at issue in language, which is language, and which, in language, we always presuppose and forget”<sup>60</sup>. In “The Idea of Language” he claims that “the meaning of revelation is that humans can reveal that which exists through language, but cannot reveal language itself”<sup>61</sup>. So, Agamben’s idea of enigma which is treated in the passage bearing the same title is one that has to do with *language* itself.

This kind of understanding is clear warning against direct “thematic treatment” of certain problems such as the limits of *language* and *life*. For him, one of the most important lessons of *philosophy*—which is also a lesson about *language*—is that systematic, direct treatment of ideas does not *exhaust* them. He calls for a new idea of *representations* and *prose* because reaching the limits of the *language* or that of *life* would never give us the revelations we hope for as a message or as a thing in our world. For that, a true revelation is a revelation of *possibilities* or an opening to the field of possibilities. What we experience in such revelations, according to him, is that there is no final secret that we discover. He calls this state as *profane*<sup>62</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup> Language and Death, The Idea of Language.

<sup>60</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, p.35

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p.40

<sup>62</sup> He uses this term a lot in the following books.

It frees us from waiting for a revelation so, it is not a loss or an aporia. It means we have a field of activity that is open to new *possibilities* here and now.

This echoes in a section added to second edition of *Idea of Prose* called “The Idea of Study” where Agamben says “study is per se *interminable*. Whoever has spent long hours roaming among books when every fragment, every codex, every letter one comes across seems to open a new path, in turn quickly abandones for a new encounter... knows not only that study can have no true end, but also that it desires none”<sup>63</sup>. Such a study would consist of “reading what was never written”, a reading that not of a content communicated in *language*, but a reading of the communicativity of *language* itself. It is not a “reading” in literal sense since what is read is what cannot be written, or said, in *language*. It refers to a form of thinking which is precisely a thinking about *potentiality*.

A study which allows to read what is not written is a way of reading the *potentiality* inherited in *thought* and *life*. Our necessity to think of *potentiality* through some form of actuality applies to reading as well as other activities. But there is always more to it than simple processing of a text. As we read, we bring together the actuality on the page in front of us with that of the potentiality of thought that we bring to the reading table. Such a reading is none other than a creative one which is the only sort of reading that Agamben sees worthy of our time.

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<sup>63</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Idea della Prosa*, p.45

He emphasizes the importance of a “freed prose” that has “broken the chains of writing.” This means to free the written work from its frozen form, and thereby, to experience it in all its potentiality. In his essay “The Potentiality of Thought”, he says that “the most demanding and inescapable experience possible: the experience of potentiality” and it is this experience that he has in mind when he talks about the completion of a work.<sup>64</sup>

In the afterword of the French edition of *Stanzas*, Agamben exemplifies this through Leibniz’s figure of a “palace of destinies”. He writes, “on the infinite shelves of which are conserved the possible variants of each work, the books we might have written had something not intervened at a given moment, leading us to write and publish the book we did”<sup>65</sup>. The possible works in question here, that never made actual, help Agamben’s reader to understand the actual work in a new light.

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<sup>64</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, p.178

<sup>65</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Parole et phantasme dans la culture occidentale*, p.270

## Inoperative

In *The Coming Community* Agamben suggests that *inoperativeness* might be “the paradigm for the coming politics”<sup>66</sup>. His term *inoperativeness*, owes a great deal to George Bataille. Bataille’s *désœuvrement* was one of the most radical rejections to the utilitarian aims of modernity and its progressive thought. Bataille’s concept was a response to the totalizing tendencies of modern societies dominant modes of conceiving itself as a homogenous body. This refusal to contribute to the work of society lead him to the possibilities of experiences – such as ecstasy – that managed to escape the universalization and absolution of individual and community experiences.

It is important to note here that Bataille’s understanding of ecstasy is different from that of Agamben’s, which is written in the form of *ek-stasis*<sup>67</sup>. Agamben does not aim to reach an extreme position of exteriority in the form of transgression that destroys all identities. For him, “whatever is the figure of pure singularity” that has “no identity and it is not determinate” but, as Agamben carefully states, “neither is it simply indeterminate; rather it is determined only through its relation..... to the totality of its possibilities”<sup>68</sup>.

Singularity borders all possibility and receives its determination through this bordering. Therefore, belonging in the sense of “being-*such*, is

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<sup>66</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p.93

<sup>67</sup> Ek=out; stasis=stand ... “to be or stand outside oneself, a removal to elsewhere”

<sup>68</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p.67

only here the relation to an empty and indeterminate totality”<sup>69</sup>. This bordering, as he states in the following lines, “is a point of contact with an external space that must remain empty”<sup>70</sup>. This space in question is “a space of pure exteriority, of pure exposure”<sup>71</sup>. The outside that Agamben refers to here is not “another space, it is a passage to exteriority”<sup>72</sup>. Thus, he points out that “ek-stasis is the experience of being-*within* an outside”<sup>73</sup>. Such interpretation of ek-stasis is essential to understand the ontological aspect of Agamben’s singularity, which does not necessarily require a transgression, that aims to avoid the determination of a totality.

Agamben’s *inoperativeness* or *désœuvrement* is similar to that of Bataille’s with some extentions. In *Homo Sacer* he argues “the only coherent way to understand inoperativeness is to think of it as a generic mode of potentiality that is not exhausted in a *transitus de potentia ad actum*”<sup>74</sup>. It does not pass from the possible to the actual. This non *transitus de potentia ad actum* points out something about potentiality that we have discussed earlier. It is the potentiality to not-be, the possibility that a thing might not come to pass. So, aside from the common understanding of *potential to be*, a true *potentiality* is what also contains—at the same time—the possibility of not actualizing itself. This is why Agamben writes, “only a

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p.67

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p.67

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p.67

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p.68

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p.68

<sup>74</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, p.62

potentiality that is capable of both potentiality and impotence is then supreme potentiality”<sup>75</sup>.

These two aspects of potentiality are of same importance to Agamben. This is crucial also to understand his *inoperativeness* since it evokes a link to his conception of potentiality that cannot be understood only from the perspective of the actual or completed work. A similar attitude echoes when he writes, “politics is that which corresponds to the essential inoperativeness of mankind”<sup>76</sup>.

Heidegger argues that we are accustomed to think in terms of actualities<sup>77</sup>. This is why we struggle when it comes to thinking potentiality which is a creative thinking. In that regard, Heidegger not only forms a bond between creation and possibility, but he also points out a linguistic difficulty that reveals itself as we try to understand and discuss potentialities. Such discussion would require not only intelligence, but more importantly creativity. This is also valid for understanding the concept of inoperativeness in Agamben which is linked to a concealed mode of potentiality.

Similarly to Heidegger, Agamben also calls out for the need to overcome “the primacy of actuality over potentiality”<sup>78</sup>. Heidegger tried to reverse this tendency in *Being and Time* by trying to define *Dasein* through its *potentiality* rather than its *actuality*. For Heidegger, *Dasein* is always and

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<sup>75</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p.36

<sup>76</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, p.140

<sup>77</sup> As presence, *ousia*.

<sup>78</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, p.44

essentially its own possibility. For Agamben and Heidegger, who approach to the idea in a similar fashion, it is important to think of the Being not only in regard to actuality and necessity. One should also unconceal the potentialities and contingency that conceals itself beneath the presents of everyday things.

## Destruktion

Heidegger is an important philosopher who had a major influence on Agamben. One of these influences was regarding the task of destroying. *Destruktion* played an important role in *Being and Time* where Heidegger devised a whole section named “*The Task of Destroying the History of Ontology*”. The destruction he had meant was not a negative one. He pointed out that it was motivated by a positive intention. The question of Being was central for Heidegger's philosophy. The forgetfulness of the question has become so severe that, once central to Ancient Greek philosophy, the true task of metaphysics—which was the question of being—was pushed to the margins and forgotten. So his response was that extreme measures were required for the destruction of the history of ontology. It is important to note that such *destruction* was a taking apart, a dismantling that whilst rendering *inoperative*, also exposed a concealed structure. This attempt to unconceal the concealed—that is hidden from view—influenced some thinkers as it did Agamben. It was an important tool to show the innermost flaws of the construction of the matter at hand.

Agamben's destruction of aesthetics and technology was a critique of modern conceptions of rationality.<sup>79</sup> The instrumental rationality of modernity destroyed the ethical totality and left no link to anything substantial. In his book *Man Without Content* Agamben writes, “the work of art is no longer... the essential measure of man's dwelling on earth, which, precisely because it builds and makes possible the act of dwelling, has

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<sup>79</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*

neither an autonomous sphere nor a particular identity, but is a compendium and reflection of the entire human world”<sup>80</sup>. On the other hand, for the Ancient Greeks the, artist was the shaper of the world, giving its cultural forms and limits which Agamben describes as, “the wonderful and uncanny power of making the world appear, of *producing* being and the world in the work”<sup>81</sup>. For Agamben, same as Heidegger<sup>82</sup> art has no longer has the same meaning for us moderns as it did for the Greeks.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p.33

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, p.34

<sup>82</sup> As Heidegger describes in his article Building Dwelling Thinking.

## Infancy

The dialectic of the *one* and the *many* that existed in the medieval philosophy was replaced with the dialectic of *subject* and *object* by Descartes. With such replacement came a new status for *experience*. As a result, a new fundamental epistemological problem emerged. Two distinct realms of medieval philosophy, *knowledge* and *experience*, which were not accessible by one and another, converged into a single subject. Agamben claims “The great revolution in modern science was less a matter of opposing experience to authority than of referring knowledge and experience to a single subject, which is none other than their conjunction at an abstract Archimedean point: the Cartesian *ego cogito*”<sup>83</sup>.

The other important breaking point for Agamben is the post-Kantian thought where “the reunification of the transcendental subject and empirical consciousness in a single absolute subject”<sup>84</sup> occurs. Hegel’s negation of experience with his dialectic, always pushed its own notion of “absolute knowledge” and “absolute subjectivity”. That is for Agamben, was the beginning of the end of experience. In the same book *Infance and History* he writes, “The fact that consciousness has a dialectical structure means that it can never grasp itself as an entirety , but is whole only in the total process of its becoming.... Experience is... something which one can only undergo but never have”<sup>85</sup>. This observation will lead Agamben to dig Hegel’s

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<sup>83</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, p.19

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p.32

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, p.34

dialectic and negativity deeper and he will declare the importance of “a critique of the dialectic”<sup>86</sup>.

His research of Cartesian subject and subjectivity will lead him to another term—*infancy*—that is intimately linked to *potentiality*<sup>87</sup>. Agamben’s interest in not actualized potentiality will find its place in *infancy*—coming from the Latin term *infantia*—that describes an inability to speak. The term refers to a state of being where the language is absent, thus *in-fancy* is the period in human development where he/she has not yet learned to speak. He says, “subjectivity and consciousness, in which our culture believed itself to have found its firmest foundation, rest on what is most precarious and fragile in the world: the event of speech”<sup>88</sup>. Thus, *infancy* becomes central for human experience.

To emphasize this point he writes, “Contrary to that which an antique tradition affirms, man is not ‘the animal which has language’ but instead the animal deprived of language and therefore obliged to receive it from elsewhere”<sup>89</sup>. Since we are not born with a language to express our experiences, we must first language from outside. He adds, “Animals are

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p.34

<sup>87</sup> Agamben considers *infancy* and *history* as transcendental categories of human experience which correspond to *language* and *time*. In his book *infancy and history* he makes the surprising links between linguistic categories and historical ones. The footsteps of the investigations of these concepts will lead him to an intersection that he calls “potentiality”.

<sup>88</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive. Homo Sacer III*, p.122

<sup>89</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, p.57

not in fact denied language. On the contrary, they are always and absolutely language”<sup>90</sup>.

What is key for Agamben in this formulation is that, animals communicate *immediately*. There is no mediation in forms of a sign system. Animals are always and absolutely one with their language. Human communication on the other hand, is mediated through language. Yes, humans have a more sophisticated communication in respect to animals, but at what cost? That cost is *immediacy* that always escapes us in our language. What does it mean to be an infant? It refers to the capability of speech that not yet possessed. Hence, in Agamben's thought, it is not just a *privation*, but it is a *potentiality* that hasn't actualized.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, p.52

## Bartleby

There is a sub-chapter in *The Coming Community* listed as “Bartleby”. Before focusing on how Bartleby relates to Agamben’s idea of community, we also have to note that, this enigmatic figure of indifference and his “I would prefer not to,” is something that Agamben has repeatedly returned his gaze upon. According to Agamben Bartleby is “a scrivener who does not simply cease writing but ‘prefers not to,’... writes nothing but his potentiality to not write”<sup>91</sup>.

This gesture has been brought forward in many of Agamben’s writing such as *The Coming Community*, *Idea of Prose*, “Four Glosses for Kafka”, “Bartleby No Longer Writes” and “Bartleby, or On Contingency”. The main aspect that these separate essays and books have in common is that, they all try to avoid any sort of recourse to psychology. Instead, Agamben focuses on a different gesture which he sees in great relation with Aristotelian lineage.

Agamben sees Bartleby as an example of potentiality instead of an refusal of unacceptable conditions or civil disobedience. As he repeatedly points out, we are accustomed to conceive potentiality as something that converts itself into actuality, but things get more meaningful with respect to that which remains as potential. This is what Agamben sees in Bartleby’s response, a glimpse of the potentiality *not* to do or *not* to be, and says

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<sup>91</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p.37

“writes nothing but his potentiality to not write”. It is this aspect that interests him the most.

The figure of Bartleby also gives us an idea about the path that Agamben’s potentiality has taken over the years. The idea of potentiality that Agamben have presented in his work, never had an organised and systematic development. It has been articulated in various themes through terms such as “the un-finished”, *latency* and *infancy*. Although *infancy* was quite central and present in Agamben’s work for a while, he gradually abandoned it in years to follow since it only focused on one side of potentiality that Agamben tried to formulate. In the very same book, he mentions a short story of Ludwig Tieck called “The Superfluity of Life”. Although he stresses it with respect to the contemporary status of individual experience, against which he tries to formulate a “legitimate defense”, there we also see first signs of his interest in Bartleby.<sup>92</sup> This becomes clearer in segments of his later work such as “Bartleby, or On Contingency”, “Potentiality and Law”<sup>93</sup> and *The Coming Community* through Avicenna.

Avicenna divides different types of potential intellect and Agamben finds his *infancy* to be in pair with that of Avicenna’s “material”<sup>94</sup> potential intellect<sup>95</sup>. However, Avicenna distinguishes this “material” potential intellect from “possible” potential intellect. The latter one corresponds to

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<sup>92</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, p.16

<sup>93</sup> A sub-chapter of Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*.

<sup>94</sup> Resembles the condition of a child who may certainly one day learn to write but does not yet know anything about writing.

<sup>95</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, p.246-247

Bartleby's case<sup>96</sup>. Bartleby possesses the "complete or perfect potentiality" of speech and writing, yet, he chooses to remove himself by not employing his potentiality. This unique gesture represents a pure potentiality for Agamben since Bartleby refuses to convert his potentiality<sup>97</sup> into act.

As it is evoked in *Infancy and History*, "In This Exile"<sup>98</sup> and other interviews<sup>99</sup>—where Agamben claims "Arendt once said that when everyone becomes unthinkingly carried away, those who do think find themselves unprotected and their refusal to join the others becomes itself a form of action"—an immediate act of resistance is not required under extreme conditions. A suspension or withdrawal, like that of Bartleby, presents itself with a unique approach to community. Such suspension of participation as the pure potentiality, which on an ontological level becomes a refusal to convert potentiality into actuality, is what interests Agamben the most, along with the actual choice of given form of resistance.

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<sup>96</sup> A complete or perfect potentiality that belongs to the scribe who is in full possession of the art of writing in the moment in which he does not write.

Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities*, p.246-247

<sup>97</sup> In this case it is writing.

<sup>98</sup> A sub-chapter of Agamben's *Means Without End*

<sup>99</sup> "Agamben, le chercheur d'homme." *Libération*, p.iii

## Community

Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* treated the conception of community that seemed to display itself as inexpressible and dysfunctional. Therefore, a reformulation of the idea of community was necessary. According to him, there is a nostalgic element that seeks to restore an original community that was lost – *Gemeinschaft* – as opposed to the society we live in, a *Gesellschaft*. However, the seek for the original community, as he carefully points out, often times was in the name of consolidation of power or shaping the dissent. The political consequences of this nostalgic idea leads to a search of purity that once was achieved, to be achieved once again, through religious-national-racial ideas of unity. Such conception of community that that lead to totalitarian body politics needs to be reformulated. For an idea of community to survive and overcome this crisis, we need a new approach to what communities have in common.

In a different fashion, Blanchot's *The Inavowable Community* reached out for a new idea of community by refusing the organizing principles of it. The concepts as negative, impossible, inoperative and inavowable were important to point out that a community could have no pre-defined conditions of belonging. Hence, there shall be no criteria for neither exclusion, nor inclusion, for a community to survive totalitarian threats.

Agamben's *The Coming Community* had a similar starting point as Nancy and Blanchot. The communities that have criterias for conditions of

belonging, regardless of the nature of that criteria, they always ended up in exclusion and isolation of violent nature. The only way out was to formulate a community that had no criteria for belonging. The unifying point, for Nancy and Blanchot, was a reinterpretation of Heideggerian concept of *Mitsein* (being-together). A community that has “a possibility to *be together*”<sup>100</sup>. This concept was central to Nancy’s *Being Singular Plural*. Like Blanchot and Nancy, this “being together” was also central for Agamben.

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<sup>100</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*.

## Singularity

The relation of particular to universal in Hegel's dialectic, by many thinkers, was considered impossible to escape and overcome. Similarly, the relation of individual part to the political whole was dialectic. So the singularities were to be negated and subsumed into a larger unity with this dialectic. The outcome of this was the idea that absolute particularity and absolute universality were perfectly compatible. This relation of particular and the universal was important for Agamben's *The Coming Community* and his term *whatever*. "The Whatever in question here, relates to singularity not in its indifference with respect to a common property, but only in its being *such as it is*"<sup>101</sup>. The *whatever* here, is not a indifference in respect to a universal that renders those particulars meaningful. Hence, this idea of singularity is taken into consideration with all of differences from other singularities. A singularity seen as a singularity, "as it is".

The difficulty here is of thinking of something "as it is". To see beyond the properties and to think about the singularity itself is not an easy thing to do. Language always generates generalities that prevents us from expressing such singularities as they are. Agamben claims that we should find a way to see the singularities not only as the function of their predicates. "singularity is... freed from the false dilemma that obliges knowledge to choose between the ineffability of the individual and the intelligibility of the universal"<sup>102</sup>. Ineffable here, refers to what is not shared

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<sup>101</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p.1

<sup>102</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p.1

with anything else, making it nameless. Intelligible, on the other hand, refers to its predicates and parts.

The concept that Agamben rises up next to express singularity is the *example*. He writes, “One concept that escapes the antinomy of the universal and the particular, has long been familiar to us: the example”<sup>103</sup>. *Example* belongs to both universal and particular and allows Agamben to form a new relation between them. It enables a relationship between the two that is not dialectical, in other words not in as an opposition of particularity and universality.

*Remnant* is another central concept for Agamben through which how a totality conceives itself and of its component parts. It is a singular subjectivity. It is the leftover of a subject that cannot fully coincide with itself. A *remnant* is and outcome of the dialectic negation, the subject that always remains, as opposed to Hegel’s dialectic. It implies particular as well as universal, in other terms, it shows the parts and wholes in a new light. It implies an interpretation that does not merge singularities and communities in a totalizing sum of dialectical thinking. It is a new paradigm for the *part* and the *whole*.

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<sup>103</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p.9

## The Open

*The Open* is the title Agamben picks for his somewhat short but rich in detail book. The title refers to an unconditioned, unspecified openness. It is the space which separates and distinguishes man from animal. General tendency toward animals is that of an separatist one. Animals are always articulated with lower opinions and put at a distance. Descartes considered animal as *automata mechanica* to whom Linnaeus responded as “Descartes obviously never saw an ape”<sup>104</sup>. Heidegger also remarks that “Mortals are they who can experience death as death. Animals cannot do this. But neither can they speak”<sup>105</sup>. Animals cannot speak because they can’t distance themselves from their way of expression, similiary enough they cannot reflect on the world they are in. They also have no language, so they cannot reflect upon their voices as well. However, Heidegger was not the first one to say this. Aristotle claims the same in his *Politics*, “among living beings, only man has language”.<sup>106</sup>

This tendency to attach animals a sort of privation, is important for Agamben in terms of *immediacy*, that it has been discussed in a previous passage of this thesis. He points out that the fact that animals take no distance from their experience, through language, means they have an *immediacy* that humans lack. The reason we try to speak and think is because we are in the nature with many voices surrounding us. We can think

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<sup>104</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open; Man and Animal*, p.23

<sup>105</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*. xi

<sup>106</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a

in language according to Agamben, because it is not our voice.<sup>107</sup> This was a central theme for Agamben's concept of *infancy* as well. The very same passage from innocence and immediacy to experience and reflection, that shaped him develop his ideas of *language* and *speech*. The relation of *voice* to *language* is central in his book *The Open*.

The experience of "the open" is, for Heidegger, what makes us human and separates us from animals. This "open" is when where we leave the distractions of everyday life , of means and ends, behind and find ourselves in a "world" which is not only an environment that surrounds us. It is so immense that it is hard to grasp constantly as it reveals itself as a "world". This idea of open was central in Heideggers thought. It is also a "clearing". A clearing that opens onto a place that is of primary meaning and being. However, this experince is only limited for humans in Heidegger's perspective.

Agamben writes, "All living beings are in the open"<sup>108</sup>. He also notes, "animals are always already in the open" and humans "transform the open into a world"<sup>109</sup>. So, *open* is the place where these two meet. This assumption allows him to come up with another type of openness, an openness of inactivity which he describes as *désœuvrement*. At the beginning and at the end of his book *The Open*, he discusses this relation of openness of inactivity and *inoperativeness*.

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<sup>107</sup> Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben; A Critical Introduction*, p.326

<sup>108</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, p.91

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, p.93

As it has been articulated in earlier chapters, for Agamben, “the only coherent way to understand inoperativeness is to think of it as a generic mode of potentiality that is not exhausted in a *transitus de potentia ad actum*”<sup>110</sup>. *Désœuvrement* refers to an energy that has not been exhausted and *can never be* fully exhausted in the passing to the actual. It is a *potentiality* in this sense. Thus, it becomes the paradigm of the coming politics. *Inoperativeness* is the open space where formless life and lifeless form meet in a form of live with their own singular potentiality at the heart of a dialectic that had known no pause.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, p.62

<sup>111</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *La comunità che viene*. Nuova edizione accresciuta. P.93, Giorgio Agamben, *The Open; Man and Animal*, p.83

## Paradigm and Potentiality

“I first began to understand the figure of homo sacer after I read Foucault’s texts on biopolitics”

Foucault’s understanding of biopolitics has a major influence in Agamben’s thought, but he extends the fields of Foucault’s biopolitical inquiry to the origins of Western political experience in Greece and Rome. That would force Agamben not only to have a larger historical field of research, but also to a shift of disciplinary research. Therefore, Agamben’s investigations lead him towards law and theology as well. About this issue he says “Foucault worked in many areas, but there are two he left out of account: *law* and *theology*. It seemed natural to me to direct my efforts in these directions”<sup>112</sup>. It is not a coincidence that *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* and *Homo Sacer II 1 State of Exception* focuses on *law* and *Homo Sacer II 2: The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Geneology of Economy and Government* focuses on *theology*.

Foucault’s concepts such as archeology, geneology and sovereignty are important for Agamben. In fact, his analysis of *biopolitics* is closely related to the concept of *sovereignty*. In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault shows how a sovereign model was replaced by a disciplinary model of power. Resisting such a model was not about returning to the old sovereign model. Instead, he advised historians to abandon their focus on sovereignty in *History of Sexuality* and called for a “liberation from the

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<sup>112</sup> Intervista a Giorgio Agamben: dalla teologia politica alla teologia economica, p.5

theoretical privilege of sovereignty”<sup>113</sup>. Durantaye argues that “Agamben listens carefully to his advice – and does precisely the opposite. Instead of liberating his reflections from a theoretical privilege accorded to sovereignty, he radically intensifies them”<sup>114</sup>.

Agamben sees a tight link between sovereign power and biopower. For Agamben the original activity of sovereign power is the production of biopolitical body which also implies that modern politics does not present a break from classical sovereignty, instead it is as old as the politics itself. “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*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction”<sup>115</sup>.

Agamben’s thesis on his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* is that the original political relation is the *ban*. He draws to this conclusion by examining the sovereignty starting with the first part of the book which is called “The Logic of Sovereignty” where he traces the idea of sovereignty from modern interpretations to its earlier forms in ancient Greece and Rome. At the heart of the same conclusion lies the lapidary definition of Carl Schmitt who described sovereign as “he who can decide on the state of exception”. In this definition, sovereign not only declares but also exemplifies the state of exception in question.

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<sup>113</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, p.5

<sup>114</sup> Leland De La Durantaye, *Agamben A Critical Introduction*, p.210

<sup>115</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, p.9

This logic of the state of exception is similar to that of Agamben's *example* seen in *The Coming Community* since it involves a similar structure by both belonging to a set of phenomena and at the same time being independent from it. Next part of the book examines the "originary political element" in the West and "the production of bare life" revising Foucault's analyses of sovereignty<sup>116</sup>.

Third part of the book is the striking one where Agamben declares "in our age, the state of exception comes more and more to the foreground as the fundamental political structure and ultimately begins to become the rule. When our age tried to grant the unlocalizable a permanent and visible localization, the result was the concentration camp"<sup>117</sup>. However that camp is not in the city but it is "the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West"<sup>118</sup>. The importance of the camp is that it is the most biopolitical space for Agamben where "power has before it the pure biological life without any mediation"<sup>119</sup>. This state of exception at hand is not something we move away from, instead it's getting dangerously closer.

Agamben's understanding of paradigm owes a great deal to Foucault. Foucault's paradigm, in a certain sense, was similar to that of Plato since it evokes an "example"<sup>120</sup>. The one that Agamben compares to his own is the *panopticon* which is presented in *Discipline and Punish*. In panopticon Foucault found the concealed political and historical structures

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid, p.9

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, p.20

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, p.181

<sup>119</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, p.41

<sup>120</sup> Paradigma is Greek for example.

of Bentham's age which ensurfaced as individual buildings. Sovereign in the modern state, as Foucault argued, in order to increase the efficacy of its subjects subjugation, meticulously observed its subjects and allowed them to know it. This use of paradigm allowed Foucault, and others, to see history in terms other than those of traditional causality. As panopticon became a paradigm for an entire governmental model for Foucault—regarding the past, present and the future—the concentration camp is the paradigm of our age that relates to the recent past, immediate present and also a potentially obscured future.

Paradigm is something like an example for Agamben. It is not clearly inside or outside the group or the set it exemplifies. It is like the *sovereign* in a *state of exception*, both lying within and beyond the set of phenomena it represents. In this respect, it is not a coincidence that Agamben choses to pair these two separate investigations. He states that “The paradigm is a singular case that is isolated from the context to which it belongs only to the extent that by exhibiting its singularity it renders a new group of phenomena intelligible whose homogeneity the paradigm itself constitutes”<sup>121</sup>.

He traces this singular understanding of example back to Aristotle whose philosophy serves him as “the locus classicus of an epistemology of the example”<sup>122</sup>. Agamben translates Aristotle's “example” in *Prior Analytics* as paradigm which he describes as “stands neither in the relation

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<sup>121</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Signatura Rerum: Sul metodo*, p.20

<sup>122</sup> Ibid, p.20

of part to whole, nor of whole to part, but rather of part to part”<sup>123</sup>. This aspect of example governs Agamben’s notion of paradigm which also serves as a tool to break the dialectic relationship between part and whole in his various books. Continuing to his geneology of paradigm through Kant<sup>124</sup> and Heidegger, Agamben draws to the conclusion that his model for paradigmatic reasoning is not deductive/inductive but analogical in which “exemplarity and singularity are never fully separable”<sup>125</sup>.

So why does Agamben specifically focus on the camp as the paradigm of our political age instead of that of polis? With such a statement he provoking those who naively believe in the idea of progress in history and at the same time, he is showing the intimate solidarity between democratic and totalitarian states. Such solidarity lies in the appropriation of “bare life” by the mechanisms of the state. Therefore, Auschwitz serves as a *leitmotif* for Agamben. Asserting the status of unspeakable to the concentration camps as something to be honored through respectful silence is dangerous in his view. The immensity of the crime was so overwhelming that it often resulted in failure to carefully examine its “political-juridical structure”. This would not only obscure the past, but it would very well obscure the present.

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid, p.20

<sup>124</sup> Discussion of aesthetic judgement, the beauty of the work of art is not deduced from law, rules or percepts. It is instead simply recognized as beautiful and there by moves from part to part rather than from whole to part or part to whole. Ibid, p.22-23

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, p.32-33

## Power and Potentiality

Under the chapter “Potentiality of Law” Agamben connects the question of *potentiality* with that of *sacrality*, *sovereignty* and *law*. “only and entirely new conjunction of possibility and reality, contingency and necessity... will make it possible to cut the knot that binds sovereignty to constituting power. And only if it is possible to think the relation between potentiality and actuality differently—and even to think beyond this relation—will it be possible to think a constituting power wholly released from the sovereign ban. Until a new and coherent ontology of potentiality... has replaced the ontology founded on the primacy of actuality and its relation to potentiality, a political theory freed from the aporias of sovereignty remains unthinkable”<sup>126</sup>. It is this knot that Agamben tries to loosen through *potentiality*. But, how is this idea of potentiality is in relation to political question?

Agamben argues that “there is no human essence; the human being is a potential being”<sup>127</sup> In an essay Agamben notes that “We are used to thinking of the term potentiality [*potenza*] above all in terms of force, or power [*potere*],”<sup>128</sup> and this is something he wants to change. This topic becomes central in *Homo Sacer* through the analysis of “constituting power” of the sovereign state and “constituted power” that maintains it.

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<sup>126</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, p.44

<sup>127</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive. Homo Sacer III*, p.134

<sup>128</sup> De la Durantaye, *Agamben A Critical Introduction*, p.229

Such relationship of these two forms of power is “the secret connection that link power and potentiality”<sup>129</sup>.

His examination of these powers introduces his conceptions of *sovereignty* and *bare life* as well as their connection to the idea of *potentiality*. In doing so, Agamben establishes a similarity between *constituting power* and *constituted power* to that of *potentiality* and *act*. At this point, “The problem is therefore moved, from political philosophy to first philosophy”<sup>130</sup>. That is the only way to loosen the knot that binds sovereignty to *constituting power*.

This new and coherent ontology of potentiality is not an easy thing to grasp at first since it evokes an *autonomy of potentiality*. A potential is said to be autonomous in instances that is independent of its actualization<sup>131</sup>. The same logic applies to the sovereign exercise of political power<sup>132</sup>. This link between *potentiality* and *sovereignty* was introduced into Western philosophical tradition by Aristotle. He argues that “describing the most authentic nature of potentiality, Aristotle actually bequeathed the paradigm of sovereignty to Western philosophy”<sup>133</sup> and in the next page Agamben states that “potentiality and actuality are simply the two faces of the sovereign self-grounding of Being”<sup>134</sup>. Therefore, the question of

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<sup>129</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, p.51

<sup>130</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, p.44

<sup>131</sup> Aristotle’s architect’s potential to design buildings even when he is not desining them, or a kithara player’s potential for playing even when he or she is not playing is a potentiality independent of its actualization therefore it is, in a sense, autonomous.

<sup>132</sup> That the states has the potential to suspend the rule of law even when not doing so.

<sup>133</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, p.46

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*, p.47

sovereignty is none other than – in both *genealogical* and *ontological* terms – a question of *potentiality*.

At this point it becomes clear for Agamben that a new politics and a new idea of *community* is necessary. But in doing so, “one must think the existence of potentiality without any relation to Being in the form of actuality.... This, however, implies nothing less than thinking ontology and politics beyond every figure of relation , beyond even the limit relation that is the sovereign ban. Yet it is this very task that many today refuse to assume at any cost”<sup>135</sup>.

He is not the first one to try to conceive of being beyond the principle of sovereignty<sup>136</sup>. A few thinkers before him such as Schelling, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Bataille attempted with their philosophy<sup>137</sup> but the strongest objection arose from “Melville’s Bartleby, the scrivener who, with his ‘I would prefer not to,’ resists every possibility of deciding between potentiality and the potentiality not to”<sup>138</sup>. Thus, for Agamben, The problem of *potentiality* is not a problem like many others in *Homo Sacer* series; it is the problem that gives its paradoxes/logic to all others. This may only be clear through an unhabitual thinking about *potentiality*.

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid, p.47

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, p.48

<sup>137</sup> Schelling’s philosophy of revelation, Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal recurrence of the same, Heidegger’s Ereignis, Bataille’s desoeuvrement...

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, p.48

## Ontology and Politics

*Homo Sacer* links *ontological* and *linguistic* categories with *historical* and *political* ones. Agamben reminds his readers that there is a passage in Aristotle's *Politics* that "situates the proper place of the polis in the transition from voice to language" and that "it is not by chance"<sup>139</sup>. Therefore, "the question 'In what way does the living being have language?' corresponds exactly to the question 'In what way does bare life dwell in the polis?'"<sup>140</sup>. Agamben finds a similarity "between *zoē* and *bios*, between *voice* and *language*"<sup>141</sup>. "Bare life" or *zoē*, is like the voice of the individual being who has a relation to *language* as a *potentiality*<sup>142</sup>.

Through Heidegger, Agamben claims that "today *bios* lies in *zoē* exactly as essence, in the Heideggerian definition of Dasein, lies (liegt) in existence"<sup>143</sup>. This means that conceptual difficulty that is presented as the relation of *bios* to *zoē* is a similar one to that of relation between Heideggerian conception of *facticity* and *transcendental immanence*. The difficulty at hand comes from the indistinguishability of these conceptions since they have become mutually embedded by one another. As catastrophic as it may seem, Agamben's writing also points towards a "real state of exception", which may be understood as a reversal of the process, that would lead to a truly liberatory society. Thus, an idea of a life in which indistinguishable parties - such as rule and exception, existence and

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid, p.7

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, p.8

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, p.11

<sup>142</sup> we have to keep in mind Agamben's concept of infancy and its link to potentiality here

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, p.188

essence, immanence and transcendence – come together in the being whose being at every moment is integrally and actually in question for itself, allow Agamben to treat this conception of “*real* state of exception” similarly to that of Heidegger’s “factual life [faktisches Leben]”.

This approach to *biopolitics* links it intimately to linguistic and ontological problem and therefore allows us to see Agamben’s ultimate trajectory; a search for means, ways for a new politics. He writes “Contemporary politics, is a devastating experiment that disarticulates and empties institutions and beliefs, ideologies and religions, identities and communities” and therefore we have to reconsider them in a “definitively nullified form”<sup>144</sup>. He follows the metaphysical trajectory of these forms in *Language and Death*, and investigates the effects of such devastations on identities and communities in *The Coming Community*.

The “politicization of bare life as such” is for him “the decisive event of modernity and signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought”<sup>145</sup>. To be able to transform the political, we need to transform our philosophical categories through which we experience our world. Various disciplines such as political science, philology, anthropology showed Agamben that none of them are suitable to meet the demands and dangers of our day and as long as we fail to revise them radically, “an unprecedented biopolitical catastrophe”<sup>146</sup> is present.

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<sup>144</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, p.110

<sup>145</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, p.4

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid*, p.188

## Conclusion

In *Means Without End* he writes that “to think... means... to experience the pure potentiality of thought” and continues that this experience of potentiality is “the foundation of our rationality, our knowing and speaking being”<sup>147</sup>. All these links, along with the ones that has been discussed in previous passages, hint us how central the idea of *potentiality* is for Agamben as they also help to clarify another connection—that is between the *power* and *potentiality*—for his neverending emphasis on *potentiality* as he also says, “I think the concept of potentiality has never ceased to function in the life and history of humanity, most notably the part of humanity that has grown and developed its *potentialities* to the point of imposing its power over the whole planet”<sup>148</sup>. This should alarm us for the coming catastrophe<sup>149</sup>. The catastrophe mentioned here however, is related with the abuses of power that turns the *state of exceptions* into a norm as we slowly start to accept them as such. For that we have to “bring the political out of its concealment and, at the same time, return thought to its practical calling”<sup>150</sup>.

Nowadays, even philosophers and intellectuals with different approaches would agree upon the increasing difficulty to identify the means by which subjects are being controlled. That opens the door to another interpretation of potentiality—as well as hope for a change—which makes the

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<sup>147</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, p.9

<sup>148</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, p.177

<sup>149</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, p.12

<sup>150</sup> *ibid*, p.4

task at hand to devise a real potentiality as opposed to an abstract formulation. So the intellectuals should not only realize how different things might be, but also they have to realize how this might can enter the world of human affairs leaving the conditional behind.

The response of Agamben to counteract against the *state of exceptions* that stripped down life to a “bare life” is to come up with a conception of *bios* and *zoē* all together in an indistinguishable proximity which he calls “form-of-life”. “form-of-life” is “a life ... in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilités* of life, always and above all potentiality”<sup>151</sup>. Such conception of life is not a sum of its attributes that can be isolated into a bare-life, but a life whose essence exists only as *potential*<sup>152</sup>. Reducing life into attributes assigned by the society-sovereign or the sacred, would only end up in exclusion and violence that filled our recent-ancient history. To think “bare-life” with potentiality at its essence does not refer to an unthinkable limit. Instead, for Agamben, it loosens the knot – that has been pointed in a quote to Agamben’s text – of the logic of sovereignty that keeps tightening around our conception of life. Agamben’s solution is to develop a conception of life with no universal attribute but one—which is—the “free usage” of the *potentiality*.

His interest in issues held at *The Open* is also related with his notion of “bare life” in *Homo Sacer* series. The concept of form of life was also an

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<sup>151</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, p.4

<sup>152</sup> De la Durantaye, *Agamben A Critical Introduction*, p.238

attempt to rethink the problem of subjectivity. The problem is to conceive the human singularity not in the form of subjectivity. The specific forms of life that transform through out the Western tradition in form of breakdowns<sup>153</sup> or continuities<sup>154</sup> is not Agamben's major concern in *The Open* and *Homo Sacer*. On the contrary, he is seeking for a new paradigm for human life. His understanding of division of a division is a way to render the dialectic still, whilst also rendering the "anthropological machine" inoperative, that sees as a threat to today's societies<sup>155</sup>.

The biopolitics helps defining human in its distance from the animal, and to seize hold of something Agamben calls bare life. Foucault's work has been crucial for his interest in such issues, as he does in *The Open* and *Homo Sacer*. An investigation of the conceptions of *life*, of the ways that the human life is distinguished from animal life. He writes, "To render inoperative the machine that governs our conception of man, would not mean to search for new—more effective or more authentic—articulations of this conception, but rather to dispaly the central void, the hiatus which—within the human—separates the human from the animal"<sup>156</sup>.

Agamben tries to think the community in a new fashion. "to think the relation of universal to particular in a completely new fashion, not only in the realm of logic, but in that of ontology and politics"<sup>157</sup>. Later on, about division of division he says, "an operation that divides these division of the

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<sup>153</sup> Like the one noted by Descartes and Heidegger.

<sup>154</sup> As in Aristotle

<sup>155</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open; Man and Animal*, p.83

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, p.92

<sup>157</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The time that Remains: Acommentary on the Letter to the Romans*. P.51

law themselves and renders them inoperative, without forasmuch leading them to an ultimate stage”<sup>158</sup>. Such rendering inoperative in various forms is the contrary to the task of erasing the division that delineate communities. It rather renders them *inoperative* as instruments of political division.

Agamben believes that, “the fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize... this is the only reason why something like an ethics can exist, because it is clear that if humans were or had to be this or that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible—there would be only tasks to be done”<sup>159</sup>. This community he envisions in *The Coming Community*, is not a community in the future that we will be subject to. The community *happens* to us in a sense that we are not subject to it. This *coming* he refers to in the title is neither the future, nor it has the connotations of a destiny for us to fulfill.

As it is articulated throughout *The Coming Community*, “Whatever singularity” indicates a form of being that rejects any conditions of belonging to a specific identity. “Whatever singularity” allows for the formation of community without the conditions of belonging, that is, nothing other than “co-belonging” of singularities itself. Such non-identical unification of life has its own *potentiality*.

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid, p.54-55

<sup>159</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p.43

In this aspect, it is clear that when he argues that the mankind is “inoperative”, he means that man is a being of potentiality that no identity, no destiny or no vocation can exhaust. He writes, “There is in effect, something that humans are and have to be, but this something is not an essence nor properly a thing: *it is the simple fact of one’s own existence as possibility or potentiality*”<sup>160</sup>. So ethics, is never a predefined list of tasks, it must remain open. We are so accustomed to conceive of ethics as linked to laws duties obligations that we cannot conceive an ethics that has nothing to do with those. While a true ethics, for Agamben, has no duty, no obligation, no law. He calls opposite of such ethics, “a complete falsification of ethics.”<sup>161</sup> Those are the outcome of judeo-christian tradition that penetrated the idea of duty into ethics through the *officium*<sup>162</sup>. It is what doomed Kant’s ethics to failure because he remained linked to this idea of a law, an imperative as opposed to an ethics based on *potentiality*.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid, p.43

<sup>161</sup> Giorgio Agamben, Conferences at EGS: *The Problem of Subjectivity*, parts 1-7

<sup>162</sup> Agamben investigates the concept of duty in his recent book *Opus Dei: An Archeology of Duty* and therein *officium* plays a central role.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

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