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# A Perfect Fold: Agamben's form-of-life as archaeology and messianism

Georgios Tsagdis<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The essay offers a critical examination of what Agamben calls the 'syntagma', 'form-of-life'. This 'syntagma' becomes increasingly important in Agamben's work as a way of redeeming and reconciling the archi-political separation of *bios* and *zōē* that his project *Homo Sacer* undertook, as a whole, to thematise. Given its pivotal function, the attention that 'form-of-life' has received in recent years is unsurprising. The present essay aims to show the structural instability of the 'syntagma' and its implications for Agamben's ontology and politics. In doing so, it gestures towards a new path of investigation of the formation of life.

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## Opening: the stakes of 'form-of-life'

The following pages are devoted to an examination of the linguistic-conceptual compound, or as Giorgio Agamben terms it, the 'syntagma': 'form-of-life'. This syntagma becomes increasingly important in Agamben's work as a way of redeeming and reconciling the archi-political separation of *bios* and *zōē* that his project *Homo Sacer* set out to explore.

Its definition is there, immutable, from the beginning. In the eponymous essay of 1996, Agamben writes: 'By the term *form-of-life* [...], I mean a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate something such as naked life.'<sup>2</sup> In *The*

*Highest Poverty* (2011) the definition is: 'a life that is linked so closely to its form that it proves to be inseparable from it,'<sup>3</sup> And in *The Use of Bodies* (2014): 'a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate and keep distinct something like a bare life.'<sup>4</sup> The consistency of this definition is perhaps nowhere more significant and more telling, than in the function of 'never': never does a form-of-life splinter into *bios* and *zōē*. The aim of the present essay, then, is to demonstrate the impossibility of such a 'never' – it being not merely eroded, but in fact, precluded by the internal consistency of Agamben's project and by its avowed hope.

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<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Agamben, "Form-of-life," in *Means Without Ends: notes on politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3–4.

<sup>3</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: monastic rules and form-of-life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), xi.

<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 207.

## I. Making the human: the onto-anthropological machine

In the epilogue of *The Use of Bodies*, summarising the achievements of the *Homo Sacer* project, Agamben claims to have uncovered the function of ‘the anthropological machine of the West,’<sup>5</sup> which creates the human by exploiting the singular plurality of life. This machine is anthropological precisely because it is ontological, that is, a machine that processes being in and through *logos*. Accordingly, what Agamben undertook to show in *The Open* is that by dividing and articulating human and animal life *within* the human being, this machine has been able to institute the *exception* of the human, and along with it the *exception* of politics.<sup>6</sup> However, the operation of this machine is coming to a close. Agamben writes:

The Aristotelian ontological apparatus, which has for almost two millennia guaranteed the life and politics of the West, can no longer function as a historical *a priori*, to the extent to which anthropogenesis, which it sought to fix in terms of an articulation between language and being, is no longer reflected in it. Having arrived at the outermost point of its secularization, the projection of ontology (or theology) onto history seems to have become impossible.<sup>7</sup>

This passage hinges on the significance of the ‘historical *a priori*,’ an apparently contradictory term which bestows upon empirical history a transcendental function. Agamben adopts the

term from Foucault, who in turn adapts the Husserlian ‘*historisches Apriori*,’ designating the universal *a priori* of history as such, to a paradigmatic, or one might say, epochal form of history which determines specific historic configurations, within its domain.<sup>8</sup> In its peculiar provenance, the ‘historical *a priori*’ summarises the chiasm of anthropology and ontology that Agamben attempts to effect: on the one hand, the anthropological machine is able to function insofar as a specific ontological paradigm enables its operation and becomes defunct at the point of the exhaustion of this paradigm; on the other hand, ontology is made possible by the separation of *logos* from being, of human from animal life, and thus ontology appears and must appear, solely, as the product of this machine. In short, *anthropogenesis* is conditioned by what it conditions, namely, ontology.<sup>9</sup>

It begins to become apparent, how the project of *Homo Sacer*, like any philosophical system within the closure of metaphysics employing the familiar logic of the supplement, lends its foundational structures to an auto-deconstruction. Agamben is poignantly aware of thinking right up against the limits of this closure and considers it possible to fold this supplemental logic upon itself, in such a way that the onto-anthropological circularity can become originary, that its *aporia* can transform into a constitutive *a priori*.

Indeed, Agamben considers his practice a philosophical archaeology, aiming to uncover the hierarchical order of historical *a prioris*, the most foundational of which has been for the West, ontology, or first philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Ontology fashions, accordingly, an apparatus that

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>9</sup> The labour of a fuller reconstruction of the ontological horizon of Agamben’s work would facilitate the appreciation of the manner and significance of the vanishing of the anthropological lines of flight of his work into this horizon. Since, however, the focus of this essay is precisely the vanishing point at which Agamben’s ontology and anthropology converge, this labour must be deferred.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

is both ‘chronogenic’ and ‘historicogenic’, the one, Agamben claims because of the other: ontology sets and preserves history in motion.<sup>11</sup> Within this history:

anthropogenesis [...] 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. First philosophy is the memory and repetition of this event: in this sense, it watches over the historical *a priori* of *Homo sapiens*, and it is to this historical *a priori* that archeological research always seeks to reach back.<sup>12</sup>

First philosophy is the memory and repetition of itself as the birth of *homo ontologicus*. From the beginning, from its earliest, most originary utterance, first philosophy is repetition. The first within first philosophy is always already second. This desire for the perfect fold, which carries with it all the complexity of the Aristotelian *dynamis*, is accordingly trapped between the impossibility of anthropogenesis, its perpetual incompleteness and its always already having taken place. A differential logic accounting for the dynamics of anthropogenesis will however not suffice here, since Agamben, who is committed to the potentiality of the human, indeed to the human as pure potentiality, is also committed to the qualification of this pure potentiality as pure form, summarised in the syntagma ‘form-of-life’.

Turning anew to the closing of *The Use of Bodies*, one reads: ‘All living beings are in a form of life, but not all are (or not all are always) a form-of-life.’<sup>13</sup> This assertion condenses Agamben’s unavowed, but also uncon-

cealed anthropocentrism. As its title suggests, *Homo Sacer* is an exploration of the human and of the human’s humanity. Indeed, Agamben is interested no less in the anthropic than in the political exception, an exception which recurs surreptitiously throughout his work, and which leads to exceptionalism faster than his identification of the biological horizon of politics leads to biologism. It is no accident then that Agamben’s effort to thematise this exception runs up against the closure of metaphysics. This effort proceeds upon the need for a ‘conception of the human that not only does not add anything to animality but does not supervene upon anything at all [namely, a substratum of animal or vegetative biology; only such a conception] will be truly emancipated from the metaphysical definition of the human being.’<sup>14</sup> Adhering to the temporal palindrome already identified, Agamben’s project seems both to have already delivered upon this promise and to be merely announcing it – an impossible future, the messianism of a humanity to come.

## II. An inconclusive pharmacology of life

If this critique rings familiar, it is because its lineaments correspond to the reproof that Derrida rehearsed in the twelfth session of *The Beast and the Sovereign* lectures.<sup>15</sup> Much ink has been spilled on this critique, but a brief rehearsal will help to ground the gesture of this essay, which generalises Derrida’s provisional, yet already sweeping deconstruction of Agamben’s concept of life.

Agamben’s diagnosis in the opening pages of *Homo Sacer*, premised on the distinction, if not separability, of *bios* and *zōē*, is that the ‘entry’

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>15</sup> Lecture delivered on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2002. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *The Beast & the Sovereign*, Vol. I, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 305–334.

of the latter into the *polis*, that is, the politicisation of bare life, ‘constitutes *the decisive event of modernity* and signals a radical transformation of the political–philosophical categories of classical thought’.<sup>16</sup> A few pages later, however, Agamben corrects both himself and what he regards as Foucault’s thesis. In fact:

what characterizes modern politics is not so much the inclusion of *zōē* in the *polis* – which is, in itself, absolutely ancient – nor simply the fact that life as such becomes a principal object of the projections and calculations of State power. Instead the 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 *zōē*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction.<sup>17</sup>

Bare life has always been the principal object of state power – this is ‘absolutely ancient’. What is new is that this *principal object*, which was somehow confined to the political margins, becomes now central, by effecting an indistinction between itself and *bios*; one could say, camouflaging, dissimulating as *bios*. In effect, bare life, which was *always* the principal object of power comes only *now* into focus; it comes into focus *by effacing itself*.

The thesis overloads its own bearing. If *zōē* has always been the principal object of politics and if, moreover, there has never even been a clear semantic cut between *bios* and *zōē* as the

extant sources attest, it is impossible to maintain that the entry of *bios* and *zōē* ‘into a zone of irreducible indistinction’ constitutes the decisive biopolitical event of modernity.<sup>18</sup> For Derrida, Agamben wishes, like the unconscious, to give nothing up, to be both the first to announce this unprecedented event, which Foucault had already proclaimed, and to be the first to recall its immemorial pre-eminence, which Foucault had failed to notice.<sup>19</sup>

There are, however, a few caveats. Derrida’s equation of *zōē* with bare life is warranted by a terminological slippage, if not strategic conflation, on behalf of Agamben. Yet, numerous instances, such as the paradigm of the *loup garou*, the wolf-man or werewolf, that sums up the Medieval state of exception, offer a counterpoint. The ban of the werewolf from the city constitutes an inclusive exclusion, which is only possible insofar as this life is neither human, nor animal, but precisely a life which has entered a zone of indistinction.<sup>20</sup> Agamben is thus in a position to claim that bare life should have never been understood as mere *zōē*, but precisely as an effect of sovereign power, the effect of a specific operation that separates a sliver of life from its unity and proceeds to include it by means of exclusion, in order to enable its operation. This operation of power constitutes, in this reading, both the foundation of politics and the creation of the human.<sup>21</sup> Agamben can accordingly claim that only the diagnosis of this operation, not its function, should be attributed to him. If power is rehearsing the logic of the supplement by turning into a foundation what it separates, debases and excludes, if power auto-deconstructs, this is not Agam-

<sup>16</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: sovereign power and bare life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Derrida, *The Beast & the Sovereign*, Vol. I, 316.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 317; 330.

<sup>20</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 52.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Serene Richards, “A fragile threshold: tracing Agamben’s reply to Derrida’s critique,” *Journal for Cultural Research* 23, no. 4 (2019): 338.

ben's sovereign decision, but the very structure of sovereignty itself.

Thus, scholars such as Duy Lap Nguyen can turn the tables on Derrida, by exculpating Agamben from the bestiality and stupidity of sovereignty, its tautological *bêtise*, which wishes to think that 'life is simply life',<sup>22</sup> that 'life is life'<sup>23</sup> and that's that; Agamben, can clearly see that the threshold between the sovereign and the beast is neither fixed, nor stable and designates this threshold as a zone of indistinction or indifference.<sup>24</sup> It is from this zone that animality and humanity, bestiality and sovereignty emerge. This zone is, Nguyen argues, not unlike the Derridean 'trace': both 'arch-ancient' and modern. Just like deconstruction, Agamben's archaeology of biopolitics and of anthropogenesis, is a 'decisive event of modernity' that announces a presupposition which has always existed, from time immemorial,<sup>25</sup> and calling into question our thinking of history, of the event and of periodisation.<sup>26</sup> Nguyen adduces the following quote, in which Agamben explains the notion of the 'undecidable', what in his later work will be also configured as the 'inappropriable', incessantly moulding within the zone of indistinction. We read:

It is possible to consider an undecidable as a purely negative *limit* (Kant's *Schranke*), such that one then invokes strategies ... to avoid running up against it. Or one can consider it as a *threshold* (Kant's *Grenze*), which opens onto an exteriority and transforms and dislocates all the elements of the system [...]. This is why the notion of the

'trace' constitutes the specific achievement of Derrida's thought. [...] Derrida makes [... logical] paradoxes into the place [...] in which the very notion of sense must be transformed and must give way to the concept of the trace.<sup>27</sup>

Just like the trace marks the becoming space of time and the becoming time of space, confounding spatio-temporal location, the *undecidable* marks a *threshold*: 'a diachronic or historical moment in which an immemorial exception [...] is recognized as normal condition of language as a synchronic system.'<sup>28</sup> As Agamben clarifies time and again: there is not '... first life as a natural biological given ... and then [its] implication in a law through the state of exception. On the contrary ... [l]ife and law ... result from the fracture of something to which we have no other access than through the fiction of their articulation.'<sup>29</sup>

If this is so, perhaps what ultimately confounds Derrida, what he gleaned but did not have the time to explicate, is not Agamben's *bêtise* in espousing the logic of sovereignty, including the myth of its ancestral originarity, but his *bêtise* in refusing to pursue to the end the demands of the deconstruction of sovereignty that he *did* undertake, refusing to remain consistent with the logic of the supplement he *did* employ. Nguyen's turning the tables on Derrida is correct; what it misses, is that Agamben's archaeology is *too* indebted to deconstruction to permit itself the naivety of mistreating the *pharmakon*: while it castigates the disease, it postulates the diagnosis as the miraculous cure.

<sup>22</sup> Derrida, *The Beast & the Sovereign*, Vol. I, 306.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

<sup>24</sup> Duy Lap Nguyen, "Stupidity and the threshold of life: language and law in Derrida and Agamben," *Derrida Today* 12, no. 1 (2019): 44.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>27</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: collected essays in philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 214.

<sup>28</sup> Nguyen, "Stupidity," 52.

<sup>29</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), 87.

The perfect fold of the diagnosis as cure, or, as configured earlier, of the *aporia* as the *a priori*, primes Agamben's onto-anthropological machine, the very same machine that generates the disease, to give the Carnot cycle the lie. Feeding on its exhaustion, Agamben's archaeology informs at one and the same time, not only his critique of what is unprecedented in the contemporary, but also his messianism.

### III. Who is a 'form-of-life'? Exclusions and aporias

We read anew, slower: 'All living beings are in a form of life, but not all are (or not all are always) a form-of-life.'<sup>30</sup> This 'always', or rather 'not always', invites as many questions as this 'all' pitched against the 'not all'. Starting with the latter, one is given pause to wonder where, in the circularity of the onto-anthropological machine, is the place of race and gender. If the foundation of the political and the driver of anthropogenesis is what Agamben calls at various instances the 'ontological-biopolitical',<sup>31</sup> the 'juridico-political',<sup>32</sup> or simply the 'anthropological machine of the West',<sup>33</sup> and if this machine is assembled on a Platonist-Aristotelian blueprint, does this mean that outside the West there are no humans and no politics? Are only Western lives able to assume a 'form-of-life'?<sup>34</sup> Agamben's acute critique of *natio* as the founda-

tion and ultimate purpose of national forms of life, gives way to a paralysis over against occidental *logos* as the *symbolon*, that is, the joining force of politics and the human. It seems that the only road to politics and humanity passes through an inclusion in the occidental exclusiveness of *logos*.

Gender places the universality of the onto-anthropological machine under equal strain. As Erinn Cunniff Gilson observes in a footnote: 'an analysis of the ways in which the production of bare life is [...] sex-specific rather than neutral and generalizable, [...] is a project that needs to be undertaken.'<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the paradigm of the werewolf that guides the *Homo Sacer* project is a male paradigm, its Medieval and early Modern feminine counterpart, witchcraft, never discussed.<sup>36</sup> It is certainly difficult to see how the same model could be supported by an analysis of witchcraft, in which political life is subverted by a demonic, rather than animal line of flight. In effect, the anthropogenesis that Agamben wishes to account for, along with the birth of history, law and politics seems to include only those forms of life that can be configured under the syntagma: 'white male'.

If race and gender are tacitly *silenced* in their exclusive inclusion among those forms of life that are able to become a form-of-life, the animal is in reverse the figure, whose inclusive

<sup>30</sup> Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 277.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 63, 264.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: man and animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 37-38. It might appear that the distinction between a modern and a pre-modern anthropological machine that Agamben postulates in *The Open*, is able to address the impasse. However, this distinction, which will not stand up to historical scrutiny, does not change the unicity of anthropogenesis and the absolutely ancient emergence of biopolitics. If anything, it leads to the convoluted conclusion that the *decisive event of modernity* was effected not by the anthropological machine of the 'moderns,' but by that of 'earlier times.'

<sup>35</sup> Erinn Cunniff Gilson, "Zones of indiscernibility: the life of a concept from Deleuze to Agamben," *Philosophy Today* 51 (Supplement) (2007): 104.

<sup>36</sup> Male witches were certainly not unknown and were indeed more frequent than female werewolves, but the two paradigms remain distinctively gendered.

<sup>37</sup> The difference between the denizen and the exilee – this distinction does not exactly correspond to the scheme Agamben adopts from Badiou. Cf. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 25.

exclusion constitutes the *possibility* of a form-of-life; <sup>37</sup> the animal is *precisely* a life form that can *never* become a form-of-life. Indeed, only human forms of life are able to converge into a form-of-life and as we saw, not ‘all,’ not ‘always,’ will do so. If a form-of-life, is defined as a life which i. is never separated and ii. cannot be separated from its form, what is sought is the kind of life that is *always inseparable from its form* – even in sleep; perhaps even in death.

This, for Agamben, ‘is a life for which what is at stake in its way of living is living itself’ and ‘in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilities* of life, always and above all power’.<sup>38</sup> This definition of ‘form-of-life’ is a direct equivalent, indeed, a translation of Heidegger’s definition of *Da-sein*, which, accounting for the Aristotelian diction that ‘being for the living is to live,’<sup>39</sup> replaces being with life. Heidegger writes: ‘The being which is concerned in its being about its being is related to its being as its truest possibility. *Da-sein* is always its possibility.’<sup>40</sup> Just like a form-of-life is distinct from all other forms of life, *Da-sein* is ‘distinctly different from other beings’;<sup>41</sup> both are the exceptional thing that we ourselves are, insofar as our being or life is at stake,<sup>42</sup> and insofar as we *assume* this stake. This, the parallel

lines draw forth, is done in both cases through thinking – what Agamben identifies as contemplation. In tandem, among other formulas, Heidegger writes: ‘*understanding of being is itself a determination of being of Da-sein.*’<sup>43</sup>

This direct and complete superimposition of life onto being, which Heidegger would not dare undertake, presents Agamben with two interconnected challenges: i. firstly, to show that their contours overlap without remainder, that this gesture achieves indeed a perfect fold, ii. secondly, to *escape* the dead-ends entailed in the logic that structures *Dasein*, the same dead-ends that lead Heidegger ever-farther from *Dasein* as the locus of the truth of Being; if the fold is perfect, Agamben should be compelled to turn from our human becoming a ‘form-of-life’ to life itself; otherwise, life, within the syntagma ‘form-of-life’ is bound to remain forever opaque. This would require an opening to a biological thought beyond biologism.

Agamben is however not prepared to open the potentiality of life to the non-human. The human exception, produced by the onto-anthropological machine is the origin and destination of all history – there is no *Lebensgeschichte* for Agamben to parallel Heidegger’s *Seinsgeschichte*. The human, emerging from a zone of indistinction or indifferentiation, not as

<sup>38</sup> Agamben, “Form-of-life,” 4.

<sup>39</sup> Aristotle, *De anima* 415b: *to de zen tois zosi to einai estin*.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 40.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>42</sup> ‘The being whose analysis our task is, is always we ourselves. The being of this being is always mine. In the being of this being it is related to its being. As the being of this being, it is entrusted to its own being. It is being about which this being is concerned.’ *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>44</sup> Agamben adopts and adapts Deleuze’s term ‘zone of indiscernibility’. In his configuration, this zone signifies a generative field of tension. Cf. ‘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. The state of exception is one of those zones.’ Giorgio Agamben, “Life, a work of art without an author: the state of exception, the administration of disorder and private life,” *German Law Journal* 5, no. 5 (2004):



the opposite of animality, but as a field of tension inclusively excluding it,<sup>44</sup> preserves this field within itself as ‘gap’, ‘a central void’.<sup>45</sup> The onto-anthropological machine exploits this void from the immemorial past to the decisive biopolitical event of modernity. The messianic hope of Agamben is in truth not to eliminate the void, but to attend to it through language and thought, in order to deactivate the machine, ‘so that an inseparable life, neither animal nor human, can eventually appear.’<sup>46</sup> This *always* inseparable life is a ‘form-of-life.’

#### IV. The camp in the monastery: form-of-life as messianism and perdition

Attending to the void of the anthropological machine, as Agamben solicits, is not a ban of animality, either through its extraction and concealment, or through its mastery, but an abandonment to thought, an abandonment pronounced capable of a non-dialectical ‘appropriation’ of animality.<sup>47</sup> This pronouncement is the messianic moment of Agamben’s thought of life, its annunciation. Drawing on Benjamin, Agamben understands the constitution of a ‘form-of-life’ as the *destitution* of all other social and biological forms of life, the merely partial conditions into which life is ‘thrown’ and whence it must be assumed. ‘The multifarious forms of life abstractly recodified as social-juridical identities (the voter, the worker, the journalist, the student, but also the HIV-positive, the transvestite, the porno star,

the elderly, the parent, the woman) that all rest on naked life,<sup>48</sup> can only be redeemed in the destitution or inoperativity of a form-of-life, a ‘revocation of all factual vocations, which deposes them and brings them into an internal tension in the same gesture in which it maintains itself and dwells in them.’<sup>49</sup> Form-of-life does not arrive to forms of life from a beyond as ‘a better or more authentic form of life, a superior principle,’ but rather ‘coincides completely and constitutively with their destitution, with living a life.’<sup>50</sup>

The destitution of the social-juridical which Agamben calls also a zone of ‘irresponsibility,’<sup>51</sup> is at one and the same time a destitution of the biological – for both, equally messianic. Perhaps nowhere does the bio-messianism of the potentiality and potentialisation of destitution<sup>52</sup> become clearer than in Agamben’s discussion of sexuality against the background of Titian’s *Nymph and the Shepherd*. One reads:

To be sure, in their fulfillment the lovers learn something of each other that they should not have known – they have lost their mystery – and yet have not become any less impenetrable. But in this mutual disenchantment from their secret, they enter, just as in Benjamin’s aphorism, a new and more blessed life, one that is neither animal nor human.<sup>53</sup>

And:

In their fulfillment, the lovers who have

610.

<sup>45</sup> Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 265.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

<sup>47</sup> Gilson, “Zones of Indiscernibility,” 102; Quote: Agamben, *The Open*, 80.

<sup>48</sup> Agamben, “Form-of-Life,” 6-7.

<sup>49</sup> Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 277.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>52</sup> Destitution constitutes a potentiality, insofar as it potentialises, that is, opens the potential of all forms of life by rendering them inoperative.

<sup>53</sup> Agamben, *The Open*, 87.

lost their mystery contemplate a human nature rendered perfectly inoperative – the inactivity {*inoperosità*} and *desoewrement* of the human and of the animal as the supreme and unsavable figure of life.<sup>54</sup>

Blessed life is unsavable. So is the world. Its redemption amounts to its becoming the ‘supreme good’, not through a material transformation, but through its being *experienced* as ‘inappropriable’.<sup>55</sup> Whether in language, in the body, or the landscape, destitution redeems by rendering idle [It., *girare a vuoto*], a potentiality that Western philosophy discovers in contemplation and inoperativity – ‘the metaphysical operators of anthropogenesis [...]’.<sup>56</sup> The absolutely ancient event of becoming human, the decisive event of modern biopolitics and the messianic redemption of social and biological life are all localised within one and the same structure of Western *logos*. Agamben’s greatest aspiration vis-à-vis the anthropogenic, archi-political instrumentalisation and weaponisation of *logos*, is to render it idle, like a broken Heideggerian tool.

It could not be otherwise – only a beast or a god is *apolis*. Only a beast or a god is able to dwell uninterruptedly in the open, in the plentitude of the world. The animal, forever given over to its environment, is *unable* to render destituent its disinhibitors; God does not *need* to. Destitution belongs to and constitutes the human as human. As such, destitution is constitutively intermittent. Accordingly, Agamben’s call for an ‘emancipation’ from the metaphysical definition of humanity through a ‘conception of the human that not only does not add anything to animality but does not super-

vene upon anything at all,’<sup>57</sup> folds back upon a messianism that wishes to make man divine through the permanent actualisation of the destituent potential that the animal lacks. This is the desire for a ‘form-of-life’, a life *always inseparable from its form*.

It is thus little surprise that for his most sustained examination of the potentiality of ‘form-of-life,’ Agamben turns to the monastery.<sup>58</sup> But even here, in the most divine and least animal of lives, cracks appear. In his examination of the notion of the ‘rule,’ the instability of the permanence of form, becomes apparent. Not only does the actualisation of a ‘form-of-life’ prove dubious, but ultimately becomes questionable whether the perfect fold of life into a form is desirable. At this point, the monastery becomes a zone of indistinction between utopia and dystopia.

This elision of the utopian and the dystopian becomes apparent in the realisation that the monastery is the inverted image of the camp, a place where the ‘form-of-life’ as the messianic counterpart of bare life, is played out. Moreover, insofar as the same onto-anthropological machine offers the poison, the diagnosis and the cure, ‘form-of-life’ seems to offer a redemption of bare life as much as its theoretical presupposition. The camp is built on a monastic foundation. It becomes thus clear how it was possible for the Nazi appropriation of *logos* to construe the Jew as an always inseparable ‘form-of-life,’ in which cultural and biological antisemitism could perfectly fold upon one another, rendering all critique and all empirical efforts to indicate the separability of this form of life, inoperative.<sup>59</sup> Certainly, the habits and rules that formed this life were not

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>55</sup> Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 81.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 277–78.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>58</sup> Agamben, *The Highest Poverty*.

<sup>59</sup> In Nazi ideology, no matter what he does in life, no matter what his ancestors did or heirs will do, a Jew will always be a Jew, wholly a Jew and nothing but a Jew; his life can never be cleaved away from its Judeity.

one's own, but were imposed by a nation in the throes of paroxysm and later by an apparatus of labour and extermination. Yet, if a habit precedes, indeed *makes*, a self, the distinction cannot be sustained.

### Conclusion: beyond the onto-anthropological machine

The foregoing analysis has demonstrated that the 'form-of-life' that renders the onto-anthropological machine inoperative is at one and the same time the condition of its operation. Messianism remains *internal* to this machine; it is implicated in its function and fate. This does not amount to a relinquishing of the strategic uses of destitution, nor does it determine the question of inoperativity *tout court*, configured differently in thinkers such as Blanchot. What, however, remains inescapable, what Derrida gleaned, is that no amount of salutary auto-deconstruction of the machine will succeed in breaking with the occidental logocentrism of life. As long as the effort to render the onto-anthropological machine inoperative persists, the machine will continue to function, for this very effort is appropriated as energetic potential.

If, however, the function of the onto-anthropological machine consists in determining which life can be formed, what forms it can assume and subsequently under which conditions it can do so, it may be possible to reduce this machine to a barnacled relic, by inviting a biological thought which does not veer into biologism. If the indistinguishability of *bios* from *zōē* is the condition of all biopolitical violence and their inseparability the hope of its abiding abolition, it may be possible to explore the creases of the perfect fold, by exploring the countless way in which *all zōē* strives towards *bios*. A biological thinking commensurate to its name must celebrate the virtual formability of life, its drift and plenitude. This celebration is the task of thought.

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