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By

Carlo Salzani

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2022

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-8203-5
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-8203-3

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Early versions of Chapters One, Two, and Three have already been published as follows:

- Chapter One: "Beyond Human and Animal: Giorgio Agamben and Life as Potential." In *Animality in Contemporary Italian Philosophy*, edited by Felice Cimatti and Carlo Salzani, 97-113. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.
- Chapter Two: "Outside of Being: Agamben's Potential Beyond Anthropocentrism." In *Etica & Politica / Ethics and Politics,* special issue on *L'ontologia del soggetto agambeniano*, edited by Carlo Crosato, XXII.3 (2020), 71-86.
- Chapter Three (in Italian): "L'umano come segnatura." In *I quaderni di poesia* 7, special issue on *Lo scrigno delle segnature: lingua e poesia in Giorgio Agamben*, edited by Jacopo D'Alonzo and Lucia Dell'Aia. Amsterdam: Istituto Italiano di Cultura (2019), 37-51.

All texts were reworked for the present publication.

I want to thank all those who contributed to the writing of this book by inviting me to write the above-mentioned texts, by reading, commenting, and discussing with me some of the chapters or sections, by offering critiques and suggesting improvements and modifications, by reviewing the texts for the previous publications, or by supporting my project in any other way: in no particular order, thanks to Ermanno Castanò, Felice Cimatti, Carlo Crosato, Jacopo D'Alonzo, Lucia Dell'Aja, Ilit Farber, Adam Kotsko, and Kristof Vanhoutte. A very special thanks to Zipporah Weisberg, who not only copyedited the final manuscript but also offered invaluable criticisms, comments, and advice. Thank also to the anonymous reviewers of the published texts and to the colleagues of The Paris Institute for Critical Thinking (PICT) and of the unit of Ethics and Human-Animal Studies at the Messerli Research Institute of Vienna, in particular Herwig Grimm, its director, and Martin Huth, who welcomed me first as guest scholar and then as postdoctoral research fellow.

INTRODUCTION

POINTING BEYOND

1. *Entwicklungsfähigkeit*

In various interviews over the years, and more famously in the preface to his methodological treatise, *The Signature of All Things*, Agamben cites a peculiar tenet by Ludwig Feuerbach to define his relation to the authors who have marked his life and career: the methodological principle he follows, Agamben writes, is to identify in every work its "capacity for elaboration," which Feuerbach defined as *Entwicklungsfähigkeit* (Agamben 2009a, 8). In the preface to his *Darstellung, Entwicklung und Kritik der Leibnitz'schen Philosophie* (*Presentation, Development and Critique of Leibnitz's Philosophy*, originally published in 1837), Feuerbach in fact called the "essential" task of philosophy "immanent elaboration": "the capacity for elaboration" (*Entwicklungsfähigkeit*), he wrote, is "the very mark of what philosophy is," and elaboration means the "decipherment of the true *meaning* of a philosophy, the unveiling of what is *positive* in it, the *presentation* of its *idea* within the historically determined and finite conditions that have defined this idea." Hence, "[t]he possibility of elaboration is the idea itself" (Feuerbach 1969, 3-4, emphases in the original).

The source of elaboration for Agamben, as for Feuerbach, is what has been left "unsaid" in the original work: "the germ, what has been left unsaid and can thus be developed, resumed" (Andreotti and De Melis 2006, 2). This "germ" is the "potentiality" of a work that, while present, remains unstated and undeveloped, and is therefore left for others to unveil and elaborate in different ways. For Agamben as for Feuerbach, this germ, this potentiality, is what marks the true "idea" of a work (Agamben 2009a, 7-8). This essential element of a text can be taken in unforeseen (and perhaps undesired) directions by others and thereby transformed into something no longer attributable to the original author. Agamben frequently engages in this pursuit himself—to the point of making controversial 'corrections' of other philosophers' ideas. In so doing—that is, in radically redirecting other thinkers' ideas to destinations they would

not have foreseen—Agamben demonstrates his remarkable originality. For Feuerbach, this process of elaboration is the true task of philosophy: "Elaboration is difficult, whereas critique is easy. […] True critique lies in elaboration itself, because the latter is possible only through the separation of the essential from the accidental, of the necessary from the contingent, of the objective from the subjective" (Feuerbach 1969, 4).

Authors must be mindful of the unuttered in their own work as well. In *The Signature of All Things*, Agamben writes that archaeology "must retrace its own trajectory back to the point where something remains obscure and unthematized. Only a thought that does not conceal its own unsaid—but constantly takes it up and elaborates it—may eventually lay claim to originality" (2009a, 8). Each completed work contains something left unsaid that demands to be explored and expanded upon, perhaps by someone else. In the preface to the 1989 French translation of *Infancy and History* (also included in the English translation), Agamben reinforces this point:

> Every written work can be regarded as the prologue (or rather, the broken cast) of a work never penned, and destined to remain so, because later works, which in turn will be the prologues or the moulds for other absent works, represent only sketches or death masks. The absent work, although it is unplaceable in any precise chronology, thereby constitutes the written works as *prolegomena* or *paralipomena* of a non-existent text; or, in a more general sense, as *parerga* which find their true meaning only in the context of an illegible *ergon*. To take Montaigne's fine image, these are the frieze of grotesques around an unpainted portrait, or, in the spirit of the pseudo-Platonic letter, the counterfeit of a book which cannot be written. (1993c, 3)

Similarly, in the preface to *The Use of Bodies*, which was written twenty-five years later, Agamben paraphrases the Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti and warns the reader that they will not find a "conclusion" in his work: "every work of poetry and of thought," Agamben writes, "cannot be concluded but only abandoned (and perhaps continued by others)" (2016, xiii). The "potentiality" of a work can never be exhausted, and its true philosophical "idea" lies precisely in this inexhaustible potential.

Agamben has also left some key issues undeveloped in his work, among the most important of which is the question of the animal. Agamben devoted *The Open: Man and Animal* (originally published in Italian in 2002 and in English translation in 2004) entirely to the analysis of (human) animality. Immediately upon publication *The Open* became a major point of reference in academic debates surrounding animal exploitation and liberation. *The Open* made a particularly important

contribution to the discussion because it introduced a new vocabulary and a new conceptuality into the lexicon of many different fields, including but not limited to animal studies, political philosophy, and biopolitics. Despite the book's substantial impact, however, Agamben abruptly abandoned the question at its center. Although *The Open* makes brief appearances in later points throughout his career, Agamben ultimately left the rich potential of its core argument largely unexplored. Indeed, Agamben's entire oeuvre—especially the new conceptuality he proposed in his twenty-year-long project *Homo Sacer*—is a rich source of unsaid and unthematized issues concerning or related to the animal question that are begging to be explored further, a task this book takes up.

2. Man and Animal

In the economy of Agamben's oeuvre, *The Open* and the question of the animal play a very specific role: that of understanding and describing, on the one hand, the mechanisms through which human life is "humanized" (i.e., how the human animal *becomes* Man) and, on the other, how the human can be and has been de-humanized, "animalized," and reduced to "bare life." In a sense, *The Open* is a continuation of *Remnants of Auschwitz*, the book, published four years before, in which Agamben had focused on the biopolitical apparatuses that manage and control life—exemplified by the extreme paradigm of the concentration camp—and on the "non-human" core that endures at the very heart of the human. *The Open* widens the perspective from the camp of *Remnants of Auschwitz* to the issue of humanization and animalization as such, and also paves the way for the new paradigms of liberation Agamben will propose in the later volumes of his *Homo Sacer* project. For Agamben, the question of the animal is therefore quintessentially metaphysical and quintessentially political—it is *the* metaphysico-political question, as I will show in the proceeding chapters of this book—and provides him with powerful analytical tools for his discourse on biopolitics.

This means, however, that the "animal" Agamben focuses on is not an animal (or animals) per se but rather *human* animal*ity*, and that nonhuman animals, on the rare occasions they appear in *The Open* and in the rest of his work, are of no real import in and of themselves but are merely instruments for pursuing his investigation of the human. Moreover, the animal for Agamben remains the Animal with capital "A," or what Derrida (2008) called *animot*, a metaphysical category into which all nonhuman animals are typically confined—at the expense of their incredible diversity and heterogeneity—and against which Man is (erroneously) defined.

(Similarly, for Agamben man is Man with capital "M," an ostensibly gender-neutral—i.e., gender-blind—category that, in truth, negates the existence of women and other genders. Gender blindness and species blindness follow the same patterns and originate from the same presuppositions.) Agamben never manages (or is never willing) to go beyond these two founding categories of the Western tradition. When he speaks of Man and Animal, he is referring to the Heideggerian "essences" which are defined in contradistinction to each other. This reductive line drawing between Man and Animal is one of the greatest limitations of Agamben's thought on the animal question and the reason why, for many other, more engaged, thinkers, he is ultimately of little use for the practical cause of animal liberation.[1]

Thinkers and activists involved in practices of animal advocacy and liberation will find another insurmountable obstacle in *The Open* and in Agamben's philosophy in general: his messianic perspective. Though defined by Agamben as "the present as the exigency of fulfillment" (2005, 76), messianism does not provide concrete, "practical" solutions to urgent problems, nor does it supply readers with an ethico-political agenda to adhere to, a criticism which is often leveled at Agamben's political philosophy as a whole. Reducing engagement to the identification of the tasks of the "coming philosophy," many argue, seems to condemn his politics to a radical *passivity*. And for many critics, the religious language that marks Agamben's messianic philosophy could even be said to constitute a smokescreen, if not an outright mystification of concrete issues, that forecloses instead of paving the way to liberatory practices (cf. e.g., Oliver 2009, 238-44). Moreover, Agamben's rejection of all legal frameworks and of the question of rights (human as well as animal) precludes any immediate, concrete intervention, and his ontologization of ethics at the expense of relationality and responsibility shrouds the plural dimension of action and the inviolability of the individual (human as well as animal). In a word, no true politics of (animal) liberation can be found in Agamben's work.[2]

And yet, the new conceptuality he proposed in *The Open* and in his work on biopolitics in general has helped create a space for inquiries he

[1] Speaking of Agamben, many critics would agree with the uncharitable judgment of the continental tradition that Peter Singer delivered in his preface to a book on animal philosophy: "How much of this philosophical impetus that gave rise to a practical challenge to the way we think about nonhuman animals came from writers in the philosophical traditions of Continental Europe […]? The Answer is, as far as I can judge, none" (Singer 2004, xii).

[2] I thank Zipporah Weisberg for her clarifying comments on these points.

never pursued himself (Calarco 2015, 54-55). In his work Agamben provides important conceptual tools (e.g., bare life, the anthropological machine, the division *zoē*/*bios*, the emphasis on sovereignty and the state of exception, etc.) that call into question the anthropocentric context within which he himself remains captive. Though Agamben never manages (or seeks) to escape the dualisms of the Western tradition, in his discussion of the key concepts outlined above he gestures or points towards their overcoming. Importantly, his work contributes to the questioning of a certain orthodoxy in animal ethics and animal studies and to the opening up of different possibilities of thought. As I argue in this book, though still firmly rooted in the anthropocentrism of the Western tradition, Agamben's work points beyond the limits that he himself is unable or unwilling to cross.[3]

3. Pointing Beyond

I am "borrowing" the title of this book, *Agamben and the Animal*, from the 2018 homonymous book (in Italian) by Ermanno Castanò, but the aim and methodology of my book bears no resemblance to Castanò's. Castanò re-reads the entirety of Agamben's oeuvre in order to explore instances throughout his works when he discusses the Aristotelian paradox of the *zoon logon echon* and the *politikon zoon*, that is, the simultaneous coincidence and division of humanity and animality in the human. Castanò writes that this paradox lies at the heart of Agamben's project as a sort or *ur*-division that paradigmatically illuminates and clarifies all other divisions and the structure of Western metaphysics itself. Therefore, Castanò argues, the question of the animal is fundamental and even foundational (albeit often implicitly so) to Agamben's whole philosophical project. This thesis is also fundamental to my own enquiries, but I will proceed differently than Castanò: following the Feuerbachian principle of *Entwicklungsfähigkeit*, in each chapter I will archaeologically retrace and highlight the anthropocentric limits that constrain Agamben in some relevant aspects of his philosophy, while simultaneously looking for the capacity for elaboration that lies within them. In the end, I will not develop these points beyond the limits of Agamben's philosophy (a task I leave to others), but I will try to emphasize their *Entwicklungsfähigkeit* and to identify some directions in which they might be taken.

[3] The words Agamben heard from Heidegger at one of the seminars the German philosopher held at Le Thor in the late 1960s also apply to Agamben himself: "You can see my limit; I can't" (qtd. in Agamben 1995, 59).

In Chapter One, I start with the many criticisms that *The Open* has received—mostly but not only from the animal studies camp—and, though mostly acknowledging their validity, I try to mitigate them by situating the book in the context of Agamben's whole career. This leads me to an archeological itinerary that emphasizes the lingering anthropocentrism of Agamben's early books and the necessity of a rethinking of (human) animality that his "biopolitical turn" of the early 1990s led him to—a turn which culminated in *The Open*. I then read *The Open* from the perspective of potentiality to emphasize the central category that marks Agamben's position on the animal question: a fundamental indistinction that points beyond the human/animal dualism.

Chapter Two expands on the issue of potentiality which is analyzed at the end of Chapter One, retraces its many definitions in Agamben's oeuvre, and shows how its Heideggerian origins led Agamben to restrict it to humans only: only humans are potential—that is, free—beings, while nonhuman animals are prisoners of the limited possibilities of their species. The concept of infancy, so important in the first phase of Agamben's career and a sort of forebear of potentiality, is paradigmatic in this sense, since, not only is it linked to language, but it also becomes a fundamental apparatus of inclusion and exclusion. However, the notion of "outside of being" that concludes *The Open* deactivates the contraposition between potentiality and actuality (which are categories of Being) and thus also points beyond the anthropocentrism of Agamben's concept of potentiality.

Chapter Three shifts the focus to a methodological point in Agamben's work, the question of the "signatures," the macro-indicators devoid of fixed content that make certain kinds of discourse possible. By linking the theory of the signatures to the deconstruction of the concept of "human" that is carried out in *The Open*, I propose reading the "human" not as a concept but as a signature that makes a certain kind of politico-philosophical discourse possible. This becomes evident from the workings of the "anthropological machine," which enables the recognition of the human through similarity and difference and thereby produces a series of paradigms of humanity and non-humanity. Just like the signatory machine of Western metaphysics, so too the anthropological machine is "flawed" and hence it must be stopped. The theory of signatures, therefore, supports and substantiates the project of the *désoeuvrement* of "human nature" that is proposed in *The Open* and developed through to *The Use of Bodies*.

Chapter Four attempts to elaborate the insights proposed by Agamben in a short 2005 text, "Special Being." This text does not focus on animals or animality, but rather briefly deconstructs the apparatus of "species" in

Western culture, and thus provides the archaeological tools for a critique and deactivation of human "specialness" (i.e., exceptionality). The chapter retraces the critique of "species" in Agamben's career, showing how it is to be considered a fundamental biopolitical concept that must be deactivated and rendered inoperative. The same holds for the category of "persona," which "Special Being" links to the critique of the species and is central to Agamben's critique of the law from the very beginning. At the end of the chapter, I propose an alternative to the excluding logic of species and persona that is founded on the concept of *ethos*, a concept which accompanies Agamben throughout his career and can be developed, in line with some contemporary trends of thought, into a new, inclusive, and interspecies ethology.

Finally, Chapter Five identifies in the dualisms of the (concept of) the Open, which Agamben derives from Heidegger, the greatest barrier for developing a more constructive notion of animality. The concept of the Open is intrinsically dualist insofar as it presupposes a closedness, and thus a contrast and a contraposition between two homogeneous "essences," Man and Animal. It presupposes separation and exclusion, and the elevation of the human over the rest of the living beings, and therefore remains inherently anthropocentric. The concept of boredom, which both Heidegger and Agamben place at the center of their elaboration of the Open, is paradigmatic of this dualism and of the paradoxes it generates, since it shows simultaneously the closeness and the distance between humans and nonhumans, emphasizing the divide between them precisely by showing what brings them near to each other. Only humans are said to be able to feel boredom (boredom is one of the many traits that traditionally separate Man and Animal), but on the other hand boredom dehumanizes the human subject and brings her closer to an (ostensibly) animal-like stupor. To try to overcome the troubling dualisms that are inherent to the Open, I propose abandoning the paradoxes of boredom and calling instead upon another category that is central to Agamben's philosophy: namely, shame. Shame, as it was elaborated by Primo Levi in the face of the horrors of the death camp—as a way of seeing that produces a shift in perception and can lead to critique and resistance—can also interrupt the complacency of human exceptionality and cross the abyss of the Open.

In the end, the conclusion to which I come in this book is the need to go beyond Agamben and towards a different and better understanding and politics of human-animal relations. But this "going beyond" finds firm roots in the space cleared and created by Agamben himself and is (also) the ripe fruit of seeds planted in his own work.

CHAPTER ONE

INDISTINCTION: BEYOND HUMAN AND ANIMAL

1. Deferral

The Open does not explicitly belong to Agamben's celebrated series *Homo Sacer*, although, as Adam Kotsko (2020, 105) remarks, in the final volume of the series, *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben refers to it more than to other, ignored volumes, making it almost an "honorary member." *The Open* has become nonetheless one of Agamben's most popular works, and not only in the field of animal studies, where, however, as very often happens with Agamben's work, it polarized the readers: on the one hand, his archaeology of the human-animal divide, his theorization of the "anthropological machine," and his call for the dissolution of the metaphysical difference separating human and nonhuman animals have been hailed by some as major contributions to the field and have become part of its fundamental theoretical toolbox; on the other hand, critics have emphasized Agamben's lingering anthropocentrism and his lack of a sincere and concrete commitment to bringing human domination of animals and animal suffering to an end. There is truth to both of these perspectives. Because this chapter is mainly devoted to defending the first position—that there is much to be gleaned from Agamben's treatment of the animal question—it is important to address some of the criticisms leveled against him at the outset.

To begin with, Andrew Benjamin (2010, 120, 125) contests Agamben's view of the separation between human and animal as a zone of indistinction and a state of exception and talks rather of "porosity" and "negotiation," which are more attuned to a "relational ontology." But the main criticism to *The Open* is that nonhuman animals are absent from the book and from Agamben's reflections on animality: *The Open*, Dominick LaCapra writes, "has virtually nothing specific to say about other-than-human animals or their lives" (2009, 168; cf. also Gustafsson 2013, 16). Matthew Calarco notes that *The Open* focuses "entirely and exclusively on the effects of the anthropological machine *on human beings* and never explore[s] the impact

the machine has on various forms of animal life" (2008, 102, emphasis in the original). For Fayaz Chagani (2018), this inattention amounts to a "deferral" or "suspension" of the question of the animal outside the human and is therefore indicative of a "performative anthropocentrism" (Calarco 2008, 98; Chagani 2018). In fact, the only animal mentioned in *The Open*, Chagani notes (2018), is the tick, whose relationship with its environment is meant to stand in for that of all animals. Overall, Agamben is guilty of the "flattening" of all animal individuals into the macro-category "Animal," a move typical to traditional anthropocentrism and humanism (cf. Wolfe 2013: 27).[1] In *The Open* animals remain a mere figure of the limit of the human. Moreover, insofar as animals are included only by way of exclusion (since they are not mentioned in the discussion of animality), Agamben "reproduces the very logic he seeks to undermine" (Chagani 2018). For Leonardo Caffo and Ernesto Sferrazza Papa, Agamben "does not talk about animals; he uses them": in his discourse, animality is merely a "political-ontological operator" used to problematize the categories of humanity and inhumanity (2015, 135), or, in LaCapra's words, it only functions as an "abstracted philosophical topos" (2009, 166). In the end, Agamben's critique of traditional humanism does not really question anthropocentrism as such but only aims at renegotiating a certain form of anthropocentrism: a "local or weak anthropocentrism." That is, Agamben's redemptive proposal in fact seeks to horizontalize hierarchies within the human, leaving, however, untouched humans' power relations with the other living beings (Caffo and Sferrazza Papa 2015, 137-38). This seems confirmed by the fact that, as Krzysztof Ziarek points out, after its deactivation the anthropological machine might stop working, but the terms constituting it would remain unchanged, thereby prolonging human domination over animals (2008, 197; cf. also Chrulew 2012, 58). For Cary Wolfe, this means that within Agamben's system the "political" (or biopolitical) dimension of the plight of living, breathing nonhuman animals in contemporary society remains unthought, or even "unthinkable" (2013, 27).

Finally, an important criticism of Agamben's work is that, in his analysis of the human/animal dichotomy, he completely elides the position of women. As Kelly Oliver remarks (2009, 230-31), the binaries man/animal

[1] Actually, other animals are also briefly mentioned in *The Open*, for example the bisected bee in the experiment described by Uexküll and also mentioned by Heidegger (2004, 52-53) or the lark that cannot see the Open (2004, 58-59), but the point Chagani wants to make is that the tick takes a paradigmatic and central place. That insects become the "paradigmatic" animals is a (telling) point that Kelly Oliver (2009, 197-98) also remarks in Heidegger's work.

and man/woman are virtually inseparable in the history of Western thought, whereby femininity has always been linked to animality as a less-that-human or sub-human category not fully qualifying as human (or, better, "Man")—and the violence women have been, and are being, subjected to is very similar to the violence against nonhuman animals (cf. also Wadiwel 2004). That is why Emma Jones (2007, 36) argues that the anthropological machine is also intrinsically an "androlological machine" and the logic of the division man/animal is complicit with that of the division man/woman. The stopping of one machine cannot therefore be accomplished without the stopping of the other, an issue Agamben never contemplated anywhere in his work.[2]

These criticisms are well-founded and difficult to counter. However, it appears that Agamben's critics mostly read *The Open* as a stand-alone book, isolating it from his corpus of writings, and approach it from theoretical perspectives extraneous to it, such as posthumanism, antispeciesism, or animal rights theory. Agamben's interest in writing this book lies elsewhere (cf. Attell 2015, 168; Colebrook and Maxwell 2016, 103) and, to really assess and appreciate it, one needs to situate it within his unique philosophical project. From this perspective, Claire Colebrook and Jason Maxwell argue that "there is a sense in which all of Agamben's work concerns animality" (even though his work differs from contemporary vitalisms and materialisms in that "it still grants language supreme importance") (Colebrook and Maxwell 2016, 103, 35), which is also the central claim of the already-mentioned book by Ermanno Castanò (2018). This chapter will adopt this latter perspective and put forward the argument that *The Open* and the animal question are pivotal to the comprehension of Agamben's entire philosophical project. The rift dividing human and animal represents and constitutes in fact the main structure of Western metaphysics, which always presupposes an unknowable and unnameable substrate (from time to time *physis*, animal "voice," nature, natural life, animality…) that supports a knowable and nameable "substance" (*nomos*, *logos*, culture, politics, humanity). This presuppositional structure always leads to the subjection and dominion of one part over the other and to the deadly production of "bare life." The

[2] I will not engage with or "elaborate" Agamben's gender insensitivity in this chapter or the book as a whole because it is not so much an *entwicklungsfähig* point as a point of weakness in his work. I will try nonetheless to draw attention to it whenever it comes up, for example in his preference for the (not so) neutral or universal term "Man" over the (truly neutral and universal) term "human." While drawing attention to it here, I will not "correct" Agamben's heteronormative and patriarchal vocabulary in my analysis of his works.

overcoming of this structure is what Agamben calls "form-of-life,"[3] a life of "potential," that would therefore deactivate the caesura dividing human and animal and open both to a new "use," that is, to a new understanding and a new relationship. In what follows, I will first analyze Agamben's "early" work (produced prior to his so-called "biopolitical turn") to highlight his lingering anthropocentrism. Next, I will read *The Open* as a constitutive part of his *Homo Sacer* project as a whole. Finally, I will conclude with a brief overview of the link between indistinction and potentiality in his work.

2. Lingering Anthropocentrism

It can be and has been argued (Calarco 2008, 79; Prozorov 2014, 151) that a certain discontinuity characterizes Agamben's thought in regard to animality and anthropocentrism, which is analogous (and related, as we will see) to the discontinuity between his so-called pre-political and bio-political phases: whereas from the 1970s to the early 1990s his (Heideggerian) critique of humanism (as per Heidegger's critique) never questioned anthropocentrism as such, his "biopolitical turn" of the mid-1990s led him to see the traditional human-animal divide as ultimately untenable. His early phase can be characterized as the quest for a "post-metaphysical definition of the human" (Calarco 2008, 79), which was articulated within the traditional (and metaphysical) formula "unlike the (other) animals, man is/has/can…"—as, for example, in his first book, *The Man Without Content*, where Agamben rehearses (in passing) the Western metaphysical *vulgata* that nonhuman animals are subordinate to necessity and only human beings are free and capable of free action (1999a: 69, 79-80; admittedly, he was only quoting Aristotle and Marx, but since he does so uncritically, he implicitly endorses their position).

It is however in his third book, *Infancy and History*, where the metaphysical divide is the basis of his argument: what opens up the human to the experience of history and culture, Agamben argues here, is, as for the whole Western tradition, language; but, unlike this tradition, Agamben does not hold that language separates human and nonhuman animals because the former possess it and the latter don't. Quite the opposite: "Animals are not in fact denied language; on the contrary, they are always and totally language," whereas "man" (sic) "is not the 'animal possessing language', but instead the animal deprived of language and obliged,

[3] This concept presents its own anthropocentric limits, which will be analyzed in Chapter Two.

therefore, to receive it from outside himself" (1993c, 52, 57). Man must learn language, must receive it from the outside, and is therefore split in his nature ("the split between language and speech, between semiotic and semantic") (1993c, 52).[4] This founding split is what distinguishes animal "voice" (animal vocalizations and communication) from human language, which allows for human historicity and culture; Agamben names it, etymologically, *infancy* (from the Latin *in-* that negates the verb *fari*, to speak). Agamben seems to be attuned to the recent findings in animal cognition when affirming that animal communication is fully linguistic and that animals are linguistic beings, but he is empirically wrong when categorically denying some forms of language acquisition at least in some animal species (cf. Calarco 2008, 85-86; Watkin 2014b, 262).[5] And he is certainly wrong when extracting "man" from the evolutionary continuum and singling him out as *deprived* of language. The point he wants to make, however, is that animals communicate *immediately*, that is, without the mediation of the sign, and that as such animal language is one with nature, just like the chirp of the cricket or the braying of the donkey (cf. 1993c, 3); human language is instead conceptualized as a *lack*—a lack that, in a move typical of the whole Western tradition, is then turned into the very condition of the possibility of freedom.[6]

"Experimentum linguae," the preface added to the 1989 French translation (and also to the 1993 English translation) of *Infancy and History* adds a fundamental point, which will return also at the very incipit of *Homo Sacer*: Agamben quotes the famous (and central for his whole project) passage from Aristotle's *Politics* (1253a 10-18) about the difference

[4] "It is not language in general that marks out the human from other living beings—according to the Western metaphysical tradition that sees man as a *zoon logon echon* (an animal endowed with speech)—but the split between language and speech, between semiotic and semantic (in Benveniste's sense), between sign system and discourse" (Agamben 1993c, 51-52).

[5] In a "gloss" (1993c, 56), Agamben cursorily cites the ethologist William Thorpe and his findings that in certain birds the "song" is not entirely written in the genetic code and must therefore be "learned," but for him this is definitely the proverbial exception that proves the rule.

[6] The founding myth in this sense is that of Epimetheus, who, according to Plato (*Protagoras* 320d–322a), gave all natural gifts to nonhuman animals at the expense of human beings, and forced his brother Prometheus to steal fire (arts and technology) from the gods and give it to humans, thereby making them *free*. As Derrida notes, it is "paradoxically on the basis of a fault or failing in man that the latter will be made a subject who is master of nature and of the animal" (2008, 20). Roberto Marchesini has analyzed and demystified this myth in a number of books (cf. for example 2014, 84-112).

between animal "voice," which is merely an expression of pleasure and pain, and human speech, which is able to indicate "what is useful and what is harmful, and so also what is right and what is wrong" (Agamben 1993c, 7-8). This difference is what opens up for humans the space of ethics and politics (beside the already mentioned historicity and culture). And it is central to the seminars collected four years later in *Language and Death*, where Aristotle's passage is again quoted and commented on (cf. 1991, 87) and "voice" becomes the mark of the very workings of Western metaphysics: here the voice epitomizes the negative structure of Western metaphysics insofar as it constitutes the "*ground* [*fondamento*], but in the sense that it goes *to the ground* [*va a fondo*] and disappears in order for being and language to take place" (1991, 35). For human language (and all that comes with it) to emerge, the argument goes, the animal voice (and animality with it) must disappear and become a negative "ground" or foundation. Animal voice is therefore the very place of negativity that marks our entire tradition with a negative presupposition: the structure of Western metaphysics is for Agamben that of a caesura, of a separation between an unknowable and unnameable substrate which "goes to the ground" in order for a knowable and namable "substance" to emerge. The suppression of the animal (voice) is therefore the condition of possibility for the emergence of the human (language), and this dichotomous structure will recur in many founding paradigms throughout Agamben's career, as in the couplets *physis/nomos*, nature/culture, silence/witness, *zoé/bios*, etc. More precisely, the suppression of the animal *constitutes and establishes* this very structure: the book and its title are in fact based on a quotation from Heidegger's essay "The Nature of Language" according to which "Mortals are they who can experience death as death. Animals cannot do this. But neither can they speak" (1971b, 107; qtd. in Agamben 1991, xi). Language, negativity, and anthropogenesis are tightly intertwined—in a deadly embrace.

That is why, for Castanò (2018), the question of the animal is central to, and foundational for, Agamben's whole philosophy, not just the limited and partial intervention of *The Open*. And this is also why, as Prozorov argues (2014, 151-52), the discontinuity between his anthropocentric and non- (or less) anthropocentric phases should not be overstated: the overcoming of Western metaphysical negativity, which starts with the exclusion of the animal (voice), has always constituted the core of his soteriology. That is, to make the divide between human and animal (or between voice and *logos*, etc.) inoperative *has always been* (though perhaps only implicitly) the main item on Agamben's agenda. The negative structure of Western metaphysics is what makes it so deadly and

so doomed, and the overcoming of the division has always been the goal of his messianic philosophy. The primacy of language itself, so fundamental to anthropocentrism's self-image and self-justification, is for Agamben not so much a troubling presupposition as the key philosophical problem to address, as he concisely shows in a short, poetic text, *The End of Thought* (*La fine del pensiero*, 1982):[7] here Agamben reaffirms traditional human exceptionalism in his thesis that only human beings are not one with their animal voice (properly speaking, *there is no human voice*) and that this is precisely the origin of thought; but, he argues, this disunity calls for a recomposition, for a healing of the fracture, whereby the fulfillment of thought would therefore mean simultaneously *the end of thought*.[8] By the same token, and in a very consistent way throughout his entire career, Agamben sees in poetry the messianic *désoeuvrement* of the communicative and informative function of language (of the caesura between semiotic and semantic) and thus the fulfillment (and the end) of language itself.[9]

Agamben's "biopolitical turn" of the early 1990s will move the focus from language to life, have important repercussions on his anthropocentrism, and bring the question of the animal explicitly to the foreground. But the structure of Agamben's analysis and, most of all, his proposed path out of the deadly metaphysical tangle of the West, will remain the same.

3. Animal Again

The whole *Homo Sacer* project rests on the Foucauldian biopolitical premise that "For millennia […] man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics calls his existence as a living being into question" (Foucault 1978, 143, qtd. in Agamben 1998, 3). This means that

[7] This short text was initially published in a bilingual edition (Italian-French) in the same year the first Italian edition of *Language and Death* appeared (1982). It was subsequently included as the "Epilogue" in its 2008 Italian reissue, but it is not included in the English translation.

[8] For an overview of this topic in Agamben's later work, and especially in *The Use of Bodies* (2016), see Cimatti 2015.

[9] This long itinerary of *désoeuvrement* culminates in the conclusion of *The Sacrament of Language* (2011, 71): "It is perhaps time to call into question the prestige that language has enjoyed and continues to enjoy in our culture, as a tool of incomparable potency, efficacy, and beauty. And yet, considered in itself, it is no more beautiful than birdsong, no more efficacious than the signals insects exchange, no more powerful than the roar with which the lion asserts his dominion."

(human) animality takes a radically new political role, since political life becomes increasingly indistinguishable from the (animal) life of the body. And it also means therefore that, in modernity, the ontological abyss[10] separating humans and animals has narrowed to a babbling brook, or, in Chagani's words (2018), that, "inasmuch as the 'total management' of biological life has become the 'last historical task' […], humanity has already become animal again." Under biopolitics, Wolfe rightly remarks, the human/animal distinction becomes a "discursive resource, not a zoological designation" (2013, 10), a "floating signifier in a second-order operation, one that can be deployed as needed to supplement the first-order political work" of managing life (2003, 7). The animal question, therefore, necessarily imposes itself on biopolitical thought "from within" (Calarco 2008, 87), and that is precisely what happened to Agamben's philosophy—even though this recalibration never removed the human from the center of his thought (cf. Colebrook and Maxwell 2016, 167).

The continuity in his thought[11] is however marked by the fact that Agamben begins *Homo Sacer* with the very passage from Aristotle's *Politics* (1253a 10-18) that was so central to *Infancy and History* and *Language and Death*: now the "going to the ground" and the disappearance of animal voice is related to (and made to coincide with) the exclusion of mere (animal) life from political life that constitutes the very foundation of the *polis* and of Western politics (cf. Agamben 1998, 7-8). Here, however, the Heideggerian logic of the *Ab-Grund* that structured Agamben's previous readings of the voice is subsumed in, and effectively replaced by, the Schmittian logic of the exception[12]: the "going to the ground" of voice

[10] The term "abyss" is used by Heidegger to characterize the human/animal divide, and (the notion that there is a metaphysical abyss separating humans and animals) epitomizes the view of the whole Western tradition (cf. e.g., Heidegger 1995b, 264 and passim).

[11] Adam Kotsko (2020) contests placing excessive emphasis on continuity, and compellingly shows how Agamben's biopolitical turn did indeed constitute a rupture and an evolution in his career. I would nonetheless insist on a moderate sense of continuity and consistency throughout the different phases of Agamben's work.

[12] In German *Abgrund* means simply "abyss," but the term is construed by Heidegger as the absence (negative *ab-*) of a foundation (*Grund*): that its logic characterizes Western metaphysics means for Heidegger (and also for Agamben) that metaphysics lacks a positive foundation in Being. The logic of the exception is instead the inclusion of something via its exclusion, as in Carl Schmitt's state of exception which includes the law by suspending (i.e. excluding) it. I have analyzed the passage from the Heideggerian to the Schmittian logic in *Homo Sacer* in Salzani (2015a).

and life is here an exclusion that simultaneously includes them, an "inclusive exclusion," which is for Agamben the very "logic of sovereignty" at the base of Western metaphysics. The exclusion of animal voice and animal life (i.e., of animality as such) is what allows for the birth of the human *polis*, but also of humanity as such, and thus coincides with what Agamben will later identify as the process of "anthropogenesis."[13]

Politics remains here a prerogative of humanity and a mark of its difference from animality. As Prozorov notes (2014, 152-53), the distinction between *zoē* and *bios* makes sense only for human life, and the same holds for the notion of "bare life," which is precisely the product of the inclusive exclusion of *zoē* from *bios* and is thus "species-specific" (Shukin 2009, 10). It is true that in *Homo Sacer* the "werewolf" is made to represent bare life as the outside of sovereign protection, and thus as a zone of indistinction between human and animal (cf. Agamben 1998, 104-111), but as a stand-in for the *homo sacer* the werewolf is still human—albeit reduced to an animal. The true paradigm of bare life is in fact the Muselmann, whose animalization is so horrific precisely because it exposes humans *as humans* "in their constitutive capacity not to arrive at their (supposedly) essential humanity" (Colebrook and Maxwell 2016, 44). The relentless de-humanization of the Muselmann is never a complete degradation into an animal, whose *a priori* exclusion is precisely what founds the human as such, and that is why in *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999b) animals enter only figuratively, as the "lice" to which Hitler compared the Jews, or the "stray dogs" to which the guards compared the Muselmann (Prozorov 2014, 153). Nevertheless, Castanò (2018, 194-97) proposes here an interesting thesis: he sees *Remnants of Auschwitz*, which is labeled as "volume III" of the *Homo Sacer* series, as a sort of threshold between the *pars destruens* of the volumes I and II of the project and the *pars construens* of volume IV. By showing the workings of the "anthropological machine" in all its deadly purity, Auschwitz represents the apex of metaphysics and as such unveils the nature of the originary metaphysical rift. The book would thereby be a preparatory work that opens up a space for the messianic proposal of *The Open*.

What changes in *The Open* is indeed not only the fact that the animal question is here tackled directly and explicitly as a problem (or rather as *the very problem* founding Western metaphysics[14]), but also that the

[13] As Kelly Oliver argues (2007, 1), "the human-animal divide, then, is not only political but also sets up the very possibility of politics."

[14] Agamben writes in fact (2004, 16): "What is man, if he is always the place—and, at the same time, the result—of ceaseless divisions and caesurae? It is more urgent to work on these divisions, to ask in what way—within man—has man been

messianic way out is identified in the de-position of the human-animal divide itself, that is, in the overcoming of the very anthropocentrism that has structured not only the Western tradition but also Agamben's thought so far. The shift is minimal but important: the issue is here, again, that of investigating the "practical and political mystery of separation" (Agamben 2004, 16) that shaped Agamben's previous analyses of metaphysics. The Aristotelian passage around which this investigation is construed this time is not the (logocentric) one about the voice, but a passage from *De Anima* (413a, 20—413b, 8) in which Aristotle identifies and defines "nutritive life" as separated from, and articulated with, the other levels of life. Nutritive life is identified as the "foundation" of any form of life, but, as we know by now, as such it must "go to the ground" and disappear in an inclusive exclusion (2004, 14). This apparatus is what structures the workings of what Agamben calls the "anthropological machine," which from time to time "construes" the human by separating its vegetative and animal parts as the excluded-included foundation of its superior and proper "human" part. The first half of the book is devoted to an archaeological description of the workings of the anthropological machine aimed at showing how its final product is, every time, "neither an animal life nor a human life, but only a life that is separated and excluded from itself—only a *bare life*" (2004, 38). In fact, the collapsing of the difference between animal and human in biopolitical modernity—when the "total humanization of the animal coincides with a total animalization of man" (2004, 77)—and the consequent "running idle" of the anthropological machine, is no "salvation" from its deadly workings; rather, it signifies on the contrary the universalization of the state of exception that the machine always produces—even when it is working "well." The only salvation, the only way out, is therefore to stop the machine itself.

The second part of *The Open* is constituted by a series of chapters that propose a vigorous reading of Heidegger's take on animality, in particular of the 1929-30 lecture course later published as *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. These chapters reiterate Agamben's Heideggerian understanding of Western metaphysics; however, they ultimately show how Heidegger's Dasein is also predicated on the inclusive exclusion of the animal's particular mode of relation (Calarco 2008, 99) and thus that, despite Heidegger's uncompromising rejection of humanism, his take on animality is the culmination and the ultimate expression of the anthropological machine of humanism. Ziarek, in turn, accuses Agamben

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separated from non-man, and the animal from the human, than it is to take positions on the great issues, on so-called human rights and values."

of misreading Heidegger's core intention: Heidegger decisively refuses to inscribe Dasein and the human into the horizon of living beings—and thus of animality—as the humanist tradition has done for centuries (where *anthropos* has always been understood as *zoon* + *x*), and, by framing once again the definition of the human around the concepts of "life" and "living being," Agamben would remain *humanist* and fully *metaphysical* (2008, 189-90, 198; on this point see Chapter Five). Agamben's reading of Heidegger here is in fact *biopolitical*—a stance that Heidegger himself would never have taken—and cannot but turn Heidegger's hyper-anthropocentric anti-humanism on its head.

Be that as it may, in a move typical of his *modus operandi*, Agamben turns at the end from Heidegger to Benjamin in order to find a messianic circumvention of the deadlock of metaphysics.[15] Benjamin provides him with the possibility of thinking humanity and animality beyond the dominant logic of traditional metaphysical categories and also beyond the traditional *oikonomia* of "salvation." The way out is not the Heideggerian exacerbation of the human-animal divide, but rather its de-position, in a messianic "jamming" of the metaphysical apparatus of humanism:

> To render inoperative the machine that governs our conception of man will therefore mean no longer to seek new—more effective or more authentic—articulations, but rather to show the central emptiness, the hiatus that—within man—separates man and animal, and to risk ourselves in this emptiness: the suspension of the suspension, Shabbat of both animal and man. (2004, 92)

Only this deposition—beyond any possible reconciliation (Abbott 2011, 94, 96), and unlike the deconstructive multiplying of differences—can undermine the logic of inclusive exclusion. Only the deposition of this logic will overcome the presuppositional structure of metaphysics that relates two terms (*bios* and *zoē*, language and voice, human and animal, actual and potential, etc.) by positing one as the submerged and negative foundation of the other. Despite all the unquestionable limits of his discourse, this is definitely Agamben's most important contribution to the contemporary debate on animality.

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[15] Leland de la Durantaye (2009, 331) has cleverly called this recurring path *Benjamin ex machina*, "where at the end of an essay or work the contradictions uncovered or problems posed are, if not resolved, placed in a new—and more hopeful—light thanks to insights culled from Benjamin's thought."

4. Indistinction and Potentiality

Matthew Calarco (2015) has proposed a very useful tripartite categorization of contemporary animal philosophy into what he calls the "identity approach," the "difference approach," and the "indistinction approach." The first approach (which represents the first, and perhaps the largest, wave of the animal liberation and animal rights movement and is epitomized by the philosophies of Peter Singer and Tom Regan) focuses on evolutionary history and the fundamental similarities between human and (some) nonhuman animals and argues for "treating likes alike"; the second approach (epitomized by Derrida's deconstruction) emphasizes instead radical singularity and difference and pursues an increased differentiation that would acknowledge and respect animal singularity and difference; finally, the "indistinction approach" (represented, among others, by philosophers such as Deleuze, Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, and Val Plumwood) rather tends to deflate the emphasis on human uniqueness and destabilize the human/animal distinction with the aim of pursuing ways of life in which both human and nonhuman animals could flourish. According to Calarco, Agamben is a major influence on this third approach,[16] not least because what biopolitics first and foremost makes clear is that the traditional human/animal distinction has already completely and irreparably collapsed (cf. also Calarco 2020, 30). In this final section I want to elaborate Agamben's indistinction approach through the concept of potentiality. This is actually the topic of the next chapter, but here I want to anticipate part of the argument (at the risk of some inevitable repetitions) and show already how the deposition of the human/animal distinction can be profitably linked to the emphasis on potentiality and developed into an anthropo*de*centric opening to different forms of life.

In *The Open*, "outside of being" is the title of the last chapter of the book and is the phrase Agamben uses to identify the messianic overcoming of the anthropological machine (and of metaphysics as a whole). This concept is an evolution that goes far beyond that of "whatever being" Agamben proposed in *The Coming Community* (1993b), which, insofar as it was modeled on the experience of language, was restricted to humanity (Prozorov 2014, 171). And it also goes beyond the Heideggerian concept of potentiality that Agamben embraced early on and that has otherwise constituted the core of his philosophical proposal. If potentiality can be said to be the "central term of his philosophy" (de la Durantaye 2009, 3), it

[16] Independently from Calarco and from the animal question, William Watkin (2014b) has placed this central trait of Agamben's philosophy under the label not of "indistinction" but of "indifference."

must be pointed out that it also underwent an evolution parallel to, and intertwined with, that of his critique of humanism. Potentiality is the mode in which Heidegger's Dasein exists, and as such it informed Agamben's philosophy from the very beginning, if only implicitly at first. If the term entered Agamben's vocabulary only in the mid 1980s, it nevertheless already comprises the logical structure of the experience of infancy, which is in fact not the actuality but the potentiality of speech (cf. Prozorov 2014, 71-72). And it already marked, in Heideggerian fashion, human exceptionality: if only human beings have infancy, it is because only humans have the potentiality *not to* speak, that is, to remain in *in-fancy*. This is, for Agamben, the very essence of potentiality—not only the potentiality to do or be something, but also the potentiality *not to* do or be something—and it is what accords humans a freedom denied to nonhuman animals.

The link between infancy and potentiality is made explicit in "The Idea of Infancy," a text Agamben wrote in the mid-1980s and which appears in the *Idea of Prose*. Here Agamben takes the axolotl, a neotenic salamander that is native to Mexico, as a paradigm of infancy and as a key to interpreting human evolution: the axolotl is characterized by neoteny, that is, the retention of larval (or infantile) traits in adulthood, that according to some theories also played a pivotal role in human evolution. Human beings, it is argued, evolved not from individual adults, but from the young of primates who had acquired, like the axolotl, the capacity for reproduction. What interests Agamben is that this "eternal child" is "so little specialized and so *totipotent* that it rejects any specific destiny and any determined environment"; unlike the other animals, who "develop only the infinitely repeatable possibilities fixed in the genetic code" and thus "attend only to the Law," humans—and only humans, though many other animal species display neotenic traits and behaviors—are "able to pay attention precisely to what has not been written, to somatic possibilities that are arbitrary and uncodified" and are thus "free from any genetic prescription" (1995, 95, emphasis added).

Prozorov (2014, 73) rightly notes how paradoxical it is that the example Agamben chooses to illustrate the exclusively human phenomenon of infancy is a nonhuman animal[17]: the axolotl is seen as the exception among animals (though this is empirically untrue), while this exceptionality is considered the rule for human beings. Or, in Chrulew's words, "Agamben's anti-biologism here relies, in fact, on a biologism of animals"

[17] By the same token, in "In Praise of Profanation," the cat who plays with a ball of yarn as if it were a mouse is taken as a paradigm of profanation, which deactivates the usual behavior and opens it up to a new, possible use (Agamben 2007a, 85).

(2012, 56).[18] This exceptionalist pattern returns in a seminal 1986 lecture, published only in 1999 as "On Potentiality":

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

Human exceptionality consists in the potential *not to* adhere to the species' limited set of possibilities, and this "not to" is what bestows on humans an exceptional freedom. After all, this is a very traditional and unoriginal argument, which Agamben merely adopts from the Western philosophical tradition, and which he uncritically repeats without giving it much thought, even after the publication of *The Open*.[19]

In *The Open*, however, this argumentative line reproduces Heidegger's position on the human-animal divide (or rather "abyss"), which Agamben reads precisely as the culmination of the metaphysical tradition. In *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* Heidegger famously adopted Jakob von Uexküll's notion of the *Umwelt* as the species-specific, spatio-temporal, subjective frame of reference of animal life, which ultimately restricts animality to a limited set of possibilities—what Heidegger referred to as "disinhibitors." "Captivation" (*Benommenheit*) is how Heidegger characterized the animal's limited and deterministic relation with its disinhibitors. For Heidegger, it is the impossibility of escaping the limits of its captivation that constitutes the animal's "poverty in world." The Dasein in profound boredom can experience instead "the disconcealing of the originary possibilitization (that is, pure potentiality) in the suspension and withholding of all concrete and specific possibilities" (Agamben 2004, 67). This is how Agamben formulates Heidegger's thesis:

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[18] This point will be taken up and expanded in Chapter Two.

[19] For example, in another important essay from 2004, "The Work of Man," he states again (admittedly citing Dante): "While the intelligence of the angels is perpetually in act without interruption (*sine interpolatione*) and that of the animals is inscribed naturally in each individual, human thought is constitutively exposed to the possibility of its own lack and inactivity: that is to say, it is, in the terms of the Aristotelian tradition, *nous dunatos*, *intellectus possibilis*" (2007b, 9). That is why man (sic) has no proper "work", no *opera* (in the sense of the Aristotelian *energeia*), and is thus, in his essence, *inoperative*, that is, a *potential being*, open to all possibilities.