

## NO LIFE IS BARE, THE ORDINARY IS EXCEPTIONAL: GIORGIO AGAMBEN AND THE QUESTION OF POLITICAL ONTOLOGY

Mathew Abbott

*Those who talk about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life ... have a corpse in their mouth.<sup>1</sup>*

In his studies of the thought of Carl Schmitt, Heinrich Meier insists on a distinction he takes to be crucial for understanding the challenge posed by the jurist's 'lesson': the difference between political philosophy and political theology. If political philosophy is the study of the political good carried out "entirely on the ground of human wisdom,"<sup>2</sup> Meier argues, then political theology is the study of the same from the standpoint of a "faith in revelation."<sup>3</sup> In a trenchantly Straussian fashion, then, Meier understands the difference as far more than simply doctrinal, arguing instead that it "concerns the foundation and assertion of an existential position."<sup>4</sup> As he puts it: "What could be less immaterial than the distinction between a thought that wants to move and conceive itself in the obedience of faith and one that is not bound by any authority and spares nothing from its questions?"<sup>5</sup>

In this paper I want to show that a third term—political ontology—can be set against both these alternatives. We could give a preliminary definition of it as follows: the study of how our ontology—our conception of the world *as such*—conditions what we take to be the ontic possibilities for human collectives. This definition is not entirely inaccurate, but it will be immediately complicated by the fact that political philosophy makes ontological claims, and that these are sometimes claims about philosophy's relationship to ontology that upset the possibility of understanding that relation as unidirectional (such that the political ontologist could uproot the naive political philosopher by showing the contingency of his claims on an ontological picture he has failed to recognise as such). And indeed, such a definition will be complicated further still by Schmitt's own understanding of his political theological project, which he takes to involve a "sociology of concepts"<sup>6</sup> grounded in the realisation that "[t]he metaphysical image that a definite epoch forges of the world has the same structure as what the world immediately understands to be appropriate as a form of its political organization."<sup>7</sup> Political ontology, then, is already part of political philosophy (though it appears there with varying degrees

## NO LIFE IS BARE, THE ORDINARY IS EXCEPTIONAL

---

of explicitness), and presupposed as part of the methodology of political theology, at least in its (arguably paradigmatic) Schmittian variant.

As such, I want to refine this definition by understanding political ontology in a way that is analogous to Meier's definition of political theology, as a form of thought that has its primary grounding not in disinterested contemplation from the standpoint of pure reason (Meier: "Moral indignation is no affair of political philosophy. It constitutes no part of philosophy"<sup>8</sup>), but rather in confrontation with an existential problem. While for Meier's Schmitt this was the problem of how to live and think in obedience to God, the problem for political ontology is the ontological question (the question raised by the fact that there are things). Political ontology is the study of the political stakes of the question of being. The political ontologist agrees with the political theologian that thinking the political means responding to an irreducible exigency—that one thinks as situated in response to a certain moral or ethical demand—yet she takes this demand to consist not in divine revelation but rather in the fact that human beings are beings for which being is at issue. Indeed this represents a real incommensurability between political theology and political ontology, as political ontology has to work in the light of a kind of atheism. This is because a proper confrontation with the ontological question requires we follow through on a certain experience of abandonment (both of the abandonment of the human after the 'death of God' and the ontological 'abandonment' of the existent by existence, what Jean-Luc Nancy will call the 'withdrawal of the cause in the thing'—I will return to this); political ontology cannot be an ontotheology. Or at least, this will be the case to the extent that the concept 'God' functions a means of staving off the ontological question, to the extent that the existence of a creator could resolve that question (which may leave open the possibility of political ontology accommodating a different image of the divine).

This definition is significantly different from two recent characterisations of political ontology. In an ambivalent piece about the relationship between neo-left ontological thought and more traditional Marxist theory, Carsten Strathausen claims authors like Nancy, Agamben, Slavoj Žižek, and Ernesto Laclau understand ontology as a "de-essentialized discursive formation."<sup>9</sup> According to Strathausen, left-Heideggerian political thought insists on the *constructed* nature of any political ontology, and so wants to engage with material political structures by working to deconstruct and rework their ontological foundations. Immediately we can see the problem here: if Strathausen is correct in his reading, then the theorists he writes about would be in danger of working from an inflated conception of the relationship between thought and its objects, such that ontological speculation could somehow stand in for, or even become identifiable with, material political change. Oliver Marchart gives a more nuanced picture, but still ends up understanding political ontological thought as stemming from a commitment to the radical contingency of political foundations, the fact that 'the political' as the ontological ground for ontic politics is in fact a groundless ground, or *Abgrund* in the terminology of the later Heidegger.<sup>10</sup> Neither of these pictures is wrong, of course (one of the guiding claims of political ontology as I understand it is that the traditional distinction between thought and politics needs to be challenged; another is that a proper thought of the ontological difference will call all attempts at 'grounding' politics into question). But the task of political ontology is not just to insist on the contingency of ontological concepts, or to think new ones for the sake of opening up ontic political possibilities (as though by itself this would constitute anything more than melancholic and/or utopian speculation). It is to think the political through the exigency of the ontological question.

As will already be obvious, I take Heidegger's work to be crucial for political ontology (both in a positive sense as one of its enabling conditions, and in a negative sense as one of its key points of critique). Of particular importance for this project is his claim that metaphysics—his term for the trajectory of Western thought since Plato—cannot think the ontological question. Now this claim is developed and restated variously throughout Heidegger's *oeuvre*: it is present in the preface to *Being and Time*, where Heidegger famously claims our time is strangely unperplexed by its inability to understand the word 'being,'<sup>11</sup> and continues right up to the last session of his final seminar at Zähringen in 1973, which culminates in a meditation on the difference between "ordinary thinking and the unusual path of Parmenides" as manifested in verse 1 of fragment 6, which Heidegger translates/paraphrases as "being *is*."<sup>12</sup> One of its clearest formulations, however, comes in

---

the “Letter on Humanism.” Here Heidegger claims that the defining characteristic of metaphysical thinking is that it “does not think the difference” between being and beings; that metaphysics “does not ask about the truth of Being itself.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, not only has metaphysics failed to enquire into the truth of being itself, but “the question is *inaccessible* to metaphysics as such.”<sup>14</sup> Metaphysical thinking simply cannot cope with the question of being; or better, being is unable to *become a question* in metaphysical thought. Metaphysical thought is entirely unsurprised by being; it takes the fact that things exist for granted.

As Heidegger always insisted, metaphysical thought is perfectly equipped to inquire about beings. Depending on its founding concepts, it can think the causes of beings (Aristotle), the mathematical/geometrical structure of beings (Descartes), the conditions for our knowledge of beings (Kant), the phenomenological qualities of beings (Husserl), and so on. But the being of beings is presupposed by these modes of thought, and for an essential structural reason: these philosophies, arising as they do in the wake of the Platonic equation of being with the Idea (which Heidegger takes to have been decisive for the development of Western thought), are trapped in various versions of a representational paradigm.<sup>15</sup> In this paradigm, which obviously needs to be defined very broadly if it is to apply to thinkers as different as (say) Descartes and Aristotle, there is a model of truth at work in which it is a property of statements that correspond to (or correctly represent) how it is with the world. A statement, then, is a means of pointing out things about the world (including of course affective or mental states and other ‘interior’ events): in Aristotle’s terms it is a ‘saying something of something’ [*legein ti kata tinous*]; in Heidegger’s it is “a presentation and representation of the real and unreal.”<sup>16</sup> And the problem with representational models is that they cannot possibly point out the fact that ‘existence exists,’ because as Kant showed in his attack on the ontological proof of God, existence cannot be a property of existence (it is not a “real predicate”<sup>17</sup>). This is the root of Heidegger’s history of being as metaphysics, under which the question of being cannot even pose itself as such. As Heidegger puts it in the third volume of his *Nietzsche*, “within metaphysics there is nothing to being as such.”<sup>18</sup> The history of being as metaphysics is a history of a blindness before the question of being, of representational understandings of truth repeatedly passing over its very status as a question.<sup>19</sup>

At this point, it should be clear that political ontology is (or is intended to be) post-metaphysical. This means that it will be concerned with thinking our political situation in terms of its metaphysical heritage, working from the premise that the blindness before the ontological question characteristic of metaphysics has real consequences for ontic politics. To engage in political ontology, then, means thinking from out of the idea that our conceptual systems have a deep and deeply problematic blind spot; that our representational models miss the fact of being because of a constitutive structural flaw. The claim, in other words, is that political thought has inherited the basic flaw of metaphysics, coming as it does from out of the very tradition that Heidegger worked to undermine. Yet to the extent that I am able to defend this premise here it will not be through the kind of engagement with the history of philosophy that occupied him for so long. Rather I will work to show the political problems a mode of thinking grounded in it can illuminate (foundational premises are often hard to defend in a purely argumentative mode; sometimes their value will depend more on whether and how they can be set to work philosophically).

Paradigmatic in this regard is the work of Giorgio Agamben, which is impossible to understand except as a form of political ontology. For if we take Agamben to be a political philosopher (or as a critical theorist) in anything like the traditional sense(s) then we are already at risk of misunderstanding the nature of the claims he makes. And indeed, this can help account for the ambivalent reception of his thought in English speaking ‘continental’ philosophy. After all, if the political events since the beginning of the so-called ‘war on terror’ have made the investigations in *Homo Sacer* seem more urgent since its publication in 1995, it is arguable that they have also become more problematic and in many ways more opaque to us. The easiest criticism of Agamben’s political writings is that they are marked by a deep haphazardness: important distinctions are blurred and concrete examples sublated into an essentialist, ahistorical argument that is potentially paralysing because it passes over the situational specificities that characterise real politics. My claim is that such criticisms depend in large part upon a category mistake; that Agamben’s most important concepts will remain unintelligible to us until

## NO LIFE IS BARE, THE ORDINARY IS EXCEPTIONAL

---

we understand their grounding in a political ontology that turns on an attempt to think the question of being.

Let me explain this by turning first to the important concept of the inclusive exclusion, which Agamben invokes in order to map the paradox he finds at the heart of the Western polis. In this aporia, the natural life of human subjects is excluded from the city as something extraneous to political life, and yet constitutive of the city as that which must be presupposed for the construction of political life to be possible. Agamben traces this paradox as far back as the classical world, citing the Aristotelian distinction between *zoē*, as the simple fact of living common to gods, plants, animals and humans, and *bios*, or the qualified life that is the distinct property of human beings qua political creatures. He argues it “would have made no sense”<sup>20</sup> in the classical world to speak of the *zoē politikē* of a citizenry, as politics was defined at the time in terms of an ‘additional’ (but crucially important) capacity of human existence, indeed as that which separates it from animal existence. *Zoē*, as the simple fact of living, was not considered a part of the Greek polis, which was concerned with the particularity of various ways of life and the relations among them. Crucial here is a movement of presupposition, in which the fact of living is presupposed by the polis as its unthinkable ground. For Agamben, this exclusion, in which the political subject is divided from its non-political natural life, represents the original political relation. He finds, however, that the exclusion can never quite reach completion, because it was always an “implication... of bare life in politically qualified life.”<sup>21</sup> He goes on:

What remains to be interrogated in the Aristotelian definition is not merely—as has been assumed until now—the sense, the modes, and the possible articulations of the ‘good life’ as the telos of the political. We must instead ask why Western politics first constitutes itself through an exclusion (which is simultaneously an inclusion) of bare life. What is the relation between politics and life, if life presents itself as what is included by means of an exclusion?<sup>22</sup>

Agamben finds that the fact of living, as the unthought presupposition of the polis, is never successfully banished, and by the time of modernity reappears as an ambiguous political object. This can be framed in terms of the split exemplified in the title of the 1789 French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Agamben makes very much of the equivocal status of the use of two terms for what is supposed to be a single referent here, arguing that the introduction of the term ‘man’ shows what was really at stake in this founding document of political modernity: the return of natural life from the polis from which it was excluded and its subsequent inscription within it. This, for Agamben, represents the source of the nihilism characteristic of modernity, which he follows Foucault in defining as the period in which the life of the human being (and of human populations) takes on an unprecedented political significance.<sup>23</sup>

While Foucault’s work plays an important role for Agamben here, this whole schema is deeply indebted to Heideggerian ontology. Consider the following from the closing pages of *Homo Sacer*, which I cite at length because it makes the extent of Agamben’s debt so clear:

In the syntagm ‘bare life,’ ‘bare’ corresponds to the Greek *haplōs*, the term by which first philosophy defines pure Being. The isolation of the sphere of pure Being, which constitutes the fundamental activity of Western metaphysics, is not without analogies with the isolation of bare life in the realm of Western politics. What constitutes man as a thinking animal has its exact counterpart in what constitutes him as a political animal. In the first case, the problem is to isolate pure Being (*on haplōs*) from the many meanings of the term ‘Being’ (which, according to Aristotle, ‘is said in many ways’); in the second, what is at stake is the separation of bare life from the many forms of concrete life. Pure Being, bare life—what is contained in these two concepts, such that both the metaphysics and the politics of the West find their foundation and sense in them and in them alone? What is the link between the two constitutive processes by which metaphysics and politics seem, in isolating their proper element, simultaneously to run up against an unthinkable limit? For bare life is certainly as indeterminate and impenetrable as *haplōs* Being, and one could say that reason cannot think bare life except as it thinks pure Being, in stupor and in astonishment.<sup>24</sup>

As this passage indicates, the crucial Agambenian concept of bare life has to be understood as beginning from a transposition of Heidegger's ontological difference onto classical biological categories, where *zoē* (the fact of life) is equated with the fact of being *as such*, and *bios* (politically qualified life) with the ontic level of particular beings. This transposition allows Agamben to read the distinction between natural and political life in fundamental ontological terms, and sparks his move into the field of political ontology. As he puts it:

[I]t may be that only if we are able to decipher the political meaning of pure Being will we be able to master the bare life that expresses our subjection to political power, just as it may be, inversely, that only if we understand the theoretical implications of bare life will we be able to solve the enigma of ontology.<sup>25</sup>

When Heidegger claims there is nothing to being *as such* within metaphysics, then, Agamben takes him one step further to claim that there is nothing to life *as such* within our politics. Like Heidegger, Agamben finds something like an ontological law here: that which is presupposed and passed over by a system of thought will return to that system as its unthinkable (such that any exclusion of being/life is always already an inclusion).

This explains some of the idiosyncrasies of the philosopher's style. It explains Agamben's switching of registers between concrete politics and ontology, and his tendency to finish his books with allusive gestures toward Heidegger and/or Benjamin, which may otherwise seem indicative of an inability on his part to properly cash out the real political claims of his texts, as an attempted evasion of the political quandaries into which he likes to write himself. If we read Agamben as a political ontologist, however, it will become clear that this is the natural register of his thought, the very place in which he does his thinking (and so an obvious place to return). The discussions of concrete politics, like the one that takes place in the first part of *State of Exception*,<sup>26</sup> will from here appear as secondary to his real aim, as functioning to illustrate an ontological point (Agamben is often read the other way around, as speciously invoking ontology as a way of bolstering his sweeping political claims). Finally, it will help explain the characteristically hyperbolic tone that marks his political writings. One could find many instances of hyperbole in Agamben, such as when he writes that "[a]ll societies and all cultures today (it does not matter whether they are democratic or totalitarian, conservative or progressive) have entered into a legitimation crisis in which law... is in force as the pure 'Nothing of Revelation,'"<sup>27</sup> or when he pushes the argument of Benjamin's "The Storyteller" until he arrives at the claim that experience has been destroyed in modernity.<sup>28</sup> Agamben's hyperbole, his tendency to pass over historical nuance ('*all* societies and *all* cultures today'), is the result of his ontological method; hyperbole, we might say, is simply what becomes of ontological thought when it bleeds into the ontic. Sociologically (that is *ontically*), Agamben's claims are exaggerations at best; ontologically however their status is yet to be properly grasped. Any fair analysis of them will have to take place on their proper ontological terrain.

If we embark on such a resolutely ontological reading of Agamben, it will not only emerge that 'bare life' cannot function as a properly sociological category, but also that it could never be a concrete ontic potential for human beings. Instead, it is the unthought ground of the metaphysics underpinning our political systems, a presupposition that, after the failed attempt to exclude it in the classical world, has returned to haunt us in modernity. Bare life, in other words, is a metaphysical figure of (a failure of) thought, and not a category of ontic politics. This is to say that *no life is bare*: that (and indeed despite some of Agamben's own apparent suggestions to the contrary) no human form-of-life has ever been reduced to bare life. Bare life, like pure being, can never exist (has never existed). But this is not to say that it plays no role in ontic politics. On the contrary, this figure is a metaphysical condition of the possibility of those ontic spaces of domination that Agamben calls 'camps,' whether they be death camps, concentration camps, refugee camps, refugee 'detention centres,' Guantanamo Bay, or whatever. Ontically, these spaces are all very different; however they are ruled by the same metaphysical logic. The conditions of the possibility of the inclusive exclusion of the bare life of human beings are the same as those that allow for the presupposition of pure being in metaphysics. Cancelling these metaphysical conditions, then, will require a politicised rethinking of the ontological category of pure being, and a properly *thinking* politics.

## NO LIFE IS BARE, THE ORDINARY IS EXCEPTIONAL

---

Of course, this reading of Agamben will produce its own set of problems, not the least of which is how to square it against the philosopher's own occasional tendency to invoke the category of bare life in such a way that it does in fact appear as a real ontic potential. The only strategy available is immanently critical, arguing that Agamben himself sometimes appears to make the category mistake that causes so many of his critics to miss the philosophical point. Exemplary in this regard is Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz*, in which the philosopher occasionally seems in danger of identifying the Muselmann (the 'drowned' of which Primo Levi wrote) with bare life, speaking for instance of "the bare life to which human beings were reduced..."<sup>29</sup> The danger in this sort of talk, as Andrew Benjamin points out, is one of "generalising,"<sup>30</sup> such that an abstract philosophical figure comes to dominate our interpretation of the meaning of the violence and suffering of the camps. In his review of Agamben's text, Jay Bernstein makes a disturbing comparison between the "aestheticization of horror"<sup>31</sup> presented in the 'atrocities photographs' of James Nachtwey and Agamben's book. He cites a review of Nachtwey's *Inferno*: "[Nachtwey] makes it far too possible for the information-deprived viewer to fall into an anguished yet impotent hopelessness: in the absence of knowledge, all starving people, all massacred people, all degraded, defeated, abject people begin to look sort of the same..."<sup>32</sup> And could one not, as Bernstein implies, make precisely the same criticism of Agamben's own text, in which all the horrors of the camps are reduced to manifestations of the (in)human "gorgon" that is bare life?<sup>33</sup> Is he not, then, in danger of collapsing the particularities of the testimonies of survivors into a monolithic narrative of an encounter with *nuda vita*? That there is an ethical danger here should be clear enough, but this is also another version of the political problem I invoked earlier, namely that Agamben's analysis may sublimate the particularities and situational specificities that are the stuff of real politics. These are the two aspects of a problem that will emerge if we accept that the Muselmann and bare life are two names for the same referent.

Which is precisely what a resolutely ontological reading of Agamben will foreclose. No life is bare in the ontic sense: rather, bare life is the figure of the return of a repressed metaphysical problem, a metaphysical image or even fantasy that haunts our politics. Nothing more, but nothing less either. Here it is worth citing Nancy: "[T]he concentration camp... is in essence the will to destroy community. But even in the camp itself, undoubtedly, community never entirely ceases to resist this will. Community, is, in a sense, resistance itself: namely, resistance to immanence."<sup>34</sup> Here I would argue that Nancy's term 'immanence,' which he uses to designate the metaphysical image that underlies the specific communal fantasy at work in totalitarian states, can be understood as another name for what Agamben calls 'bare life.' The concentration camp is a machine for its production, but because of the fantasmatic nature of the object in question, it is a machine that can never complete its task. Respecting this fact is not only to do justice to the victims, but carries a further recognition of the extremity of the violence: the very impossibility of creating bare life, one could say, is at the heart of the real insanity of the camp, such that the impossibility of its success is also what drives and exacerbates the whole process. The claim 'no life is bare' does not imply a commitment to the idea that there is something irreducibly human or moral that remains alive in us even in the most extreme circumstances. The claim does not say humanity is indestructible; it says there is something inhuman in it that remains. It is not identity, which can be destroyed, but the impersonal core of singularity. Someone in the late stages of Alzheimer's, for instance, can lose his very subjectivity, but not his idiosyncrasy: he may have forgotten his position in society, his name and the name of his wife, but he remains (painfully) himself; he may lose his ability to speak, but he retains something of his characteristic manner, the small gestures that make him the singular being he is. Desubjectification happens *to* someone. The unbinding of the human, the loss of identity and of linguistic capacities, makes it infantile and undignified, but it does not reduce it to the pure subsistence of naked life. That is part of what is terrible about it. "Man is the indestructible that can be destroyed."<sup>35</sup>

It is instructive to compare Agamben with Foucault here, an ostensibly crucial influence on *Homo Sacer*. The first thing to ask is this: where could a concept like 'bare life' possibly fit within Foucault's discourse? The answer, of course, is nowhere: the concept is too unwieldy, too abstract, too *metaphysical* to work in a properly Foucauldian register. If Agamben can be understood as continuing Foucault's project in *Homo Sacer* (bearing in mind that the basic problem of the text turns up in Agamben as early as *Language and Death*, which is framed in terms of the conflict between "animal voice" and "human language"<sup>36</sup> and in which

Foucault is never even mentioned), then it is only via the importation of a quasi-Heideggerian concept that irrevocably changes the rules and outcomes of the game. Indeed it is telling that in “What is a Paradigm?”—a characteristically fragmentary recent piece in which Agamben shows how important the Foucauldian concept of the paradigm (which Agamben takes as “the most characteristic gesture of Foucault’s method”<sup>37</sup>) has been for his own work—he does not list bare life as an example of a paradigm. While paradigms like the *homo sacer*, the *Muselmann*, and the state of exception refer to real historical objects, and are used by Agamben in order to “make intelligible a series of phenomena whose kinship had elude or could elude the historian’s gaze,”<sup>38</sup> bare life is something very different. It is precisely *not* a paradigm: rather, it is the metaphysical problem that prompts the construction of Agamben’s paradigms, which are the exemplary ontic figures that bring it to light. A rough but useful way of framing the difference between Agamben and Foucault would be to say that while the latter is concerned with the ontic biopolitical field, and the myriad concrete practical problems that arise in it, Agamben is more primarily concerned with the historically contingent quasi-transcendental conditions<sup>39</sup> of the biopolitical *as such*. This is why Foucault’s work is so compelling in its specificity, yet so opaque when it comes to questions of social transformation; this is why Agamben’s work is so compelling in its radical questioning of the very grounds of the political as we know it, yet so sweeping in its claims. It is only by recognising this difference between the ontic and ontological levels of Agamben’s discourse that we can make sense of, or extract any real philosophical or political value from his philosophy.

So what value *can* we extract from Agamben on this reading of his work? What *political* value is there in ontology and metaphysical critique? The obvious danger here is that political ontology will end up qualifying as neither a real politics (because it is not primarily concerned with ontic political matters) or as a valid ontology (because it imports political ‘values’ into what is meant to be disinterested philosophical speculation—think of how strange, even preposterous, the very idea of ‘political ontology’ would sound to contemporary metaphysicians working in the analytic tradition). In relation to the first worry (I will return to the second in the conclusion to this paper), in which we face the problem of whether extracting Agamben’s claims about bare life from a sociological register will deprive them of whatever critical theoretical relevance and concrete political purchase they may have had, I would like to turn to his essay “Form-of-Life.” Here Agamben attempts to think the conditions of a life that would escape the metaphysical image of bare life. The concept form-of-life, which is actually a strategic ontological intervention, designates a life that can never be separated from its form, a life that exists not as faceless bare life but rather as the intelligible singularity that makes each of us ourselves. The individual, on this account, is not poised above (and therefore reducible to) the abyssal ‘gorgon’ of bare life, but is rather a contingent structure overlaid upon a kind of excess. The face of the individual is composed of properties (brown eyes, gold hair, large mouth, full lips, etc.), and can be constructed with an identikit in a police station. The face of form-of-life, on the other hand, is the face that the state can’t see (because it can’t represent it): it effects the dissolution of the face of the individual and the temporary shattering of its representational logic (it is the face of someone making a gesture, of someone laughing, or of someone at the point of orgasm). The concept form-of-life designates the impersonal (because it is pre-individual) and yet most intimate part of each of us (it is what surprises us when we surprise ourselves). If we follow Agamben in his claim that “political power as we know it always founds itself—in the last instance—on the separation of a sphere of naked life from the context of forms of life,”<sup>40</sup> then the intended political import of this concept should be obvious: form-of-life is meant to function as a spanner in the works of the modern political machine, rendering inoperative every attempt to divide the human from its being. Form-of-life is unrepresentable (for it disrupts predicative logic) and yet intelligible (for we can get to know it, recognise it, and fall in love with it); it is a figure of pure equality (for it is impossible to judge or place in any hierarchy) that does not sublimate difference (for it is singular, absolutely unrepeatable). The concept form-of-life, then, is designed to disrupt the metaphysical logic of presupposition, in which being *as such* can only appear as a brute, ‘bare’ presence. Form-of-life thus functions as a tool for bringing the intelligibility of pure being to light, for redeeming the object banished in the inclusive exclusion from the nothingness to which it was consigned. In this sense, form-of-life is an exemplary Agambenian concept, operating as it does in two registers at the same time, functioning to disrupt both the inclusive exclusion of bare life in metaphysical politics and the unthinkability of being *as such* within metaphysics. Agamben’s wager, and the wager of political ontology, is that these two operations

## NO LIFE IS BARE, THE ORDINARY IS EXCEPTIONAL

---

are inseparable (which is not to say they are identical).

This can help absolve Agamben from the repeated charges of extreme political pessimism that have marked his work. First of all, it is worth recognising that Agamben does not consider himself to be pessimistic at all, saying in an interview that “I don’t see myself as pessimistic... I am sure you are more pessimistic than I am.”<sup>41</sup> We may wonder if this statement was made in good faith, coming as it does from a philosopher who gained international notoriety with his assertion that the camp is the *nomos* of the modern.<sup>42</sup> Here it is worth comparing Agamben to Adorno, who presents an apparently similar set of claims regarding the historical trajectory of modernity, and the potential for absolute domination that it contains (a potential unleashed in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century totalitarian states). Adorno is infamous for his political pessimism, which reaches an almost lyrical height in his late book *Minima Moralia*. To pick out a striking passage:

The admonitions to be happy, voiced in concert by the scientifically hedonist sanatorium-director and the highly-strung propaganda chiefs of the entertainment industry, have about them the fury of the father berating his children for not rushing joyously downstairs when he comes home irritable from his office. It is part of the mechanism of domination to forbid recognition of the suffering it produces, and there is a straight line of development between the gospel of happiness and the concentration camps of extermination so far off in Poland that each of our countrymen can convince himself that he cannot hear the screams of pain. That is the model of an unhampered capacity for happiness.<sup>43</sup>

What strikes the reader of Adorno is a sense of the philosopher’s own increasing horror at the political situation of modernity: he seems to grow ever more appalled at, but also ever more convinced of the inexorability of, the dialectical movement of his thesis. It is difficult to imagine Adorno supporting, as Agamben does, Marx’s 1843 statement that the “desperate situation” of the present “fills me with hope.”<sup>44</sup> I would argue that the key to accounting for this difference is methodological: Adorno remains partially wedded to a quasi-Marxist, quasi-Weberian social scientific approach, while Agamben, with his Heideggerian/Foucauldian genealogy, does not. While Agamben ends up with a critique of modernity that is perhaps as trenchant as Adorno’s, he avoids the despair with which the latter flirts because his critique aims not primarily at the structure of rationality underpinning its institutions but rather at its metaphysical basis; perhaps surprisingly, the ontologicality of Agamben’s philosophy makes him more receptive to the possibility of radical change. Agamben’s invocation of the concept form-of-life, for instance, *would not even be intelligible* if the figure of bare life is taken to be necessary. Part of the value of an ontological approach, then, is that it can show up the radical contingency of ontic political structures, and in doing so, help illuminate the ontological figures that will play a role in a thinking politics.

Here I would like to turn to another key Agambenian concept: the exception. If it is right to say that bare life is the metaphysical figure at work in the camp, then properly thinking it will require us to understand the exception, which is the metaphysical ground of the specific legal structure of the camp (as the ontic site in which “the exception starts to become the rule”<sup>45</sup>). Schmitt’s equation of the exception in politics with the miracle in theology makes this clear: he writes that “the exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology”<sup>46</sup>; for him, the sovereign capacity to decide on the state of exception, which he takes to be constitutive of the normal functioning of the legal order, is the “zenith” of the sovereign’s power, who acts as “God’s highest representative on earth.”<sup>47</sup> As Miguel Vatter puts it: “...Schmitt shows that the analogy must be taken literally: the state of exception is a state in which miracles happen, and sovereignty belongs to the one who decides on the state of exception, that is, who decides on what counts as a miracle.”<sup>48</sup> Crucial for us here is the metaphysical status of the miracle which, following Hobbes and Spinoza, Schmitt understands as an event that contravenes the laws of nature (taking the falling away of the belief in miracles characteristic of Enlightenment rationalism as paving the way for the kind of political nihilism—liberalism—that he abhorred). Schmitt, who insisted that liberalism must face up to the problem of sovereignty if it is to resolve its political dilemmas, took the metaphysics of the miracle to have a real political significance. In these respects, he is quite close to political ontology as I am defining it. But where Schmitt critiqued liberalism for its failure or

indeed constitutive inability to recognise the metaphysically necessary status of the miracle/exception, political ontology works in the opposite direction.

As Nancy (who could be seen as the other major contemporary philosopher working in the political ontological field I am working to clarify) shows in *The Experience of Freedom*, a proper following through on the ontological question results in a problematisation of the very idea of metaphysical necessity. “That there is existence...” as Nancy writes, “can only be given, freely given...”<sup>49</sup> This is to say that the very fact of existence, which is unrepresentable and therefore properly *unknowable* (at least if knowledge is taken to consist of sets of true propositions),<sup>50</sup> comes to surprise us in and as a kind of groundlessness. The ontological question uproots all foundationalisms, precisely insofar as it doesn’t (can never) lead to an answer. It is the very gratuity of existence that makes it surprising, the fact that being emerges as *unnecessary*. This is what Nancy means when he refers to a “*surprising generosity of being*.”<sup>51</sup> For Nancy, the ‘fact of freedom’ is nothing other than the fact of being itself, the very “freedom of being”<sup>52</sup> that is being *as such*. When Nancy writes that “[t]he fact of freedom is this *de-liverance of existence from every law and from itself as law...*”<sup>53</sup> and describes freedom as “the withdrawal of the cause in the thing,” then, we need to understand this in all its ontological radicalism: it is a claim about causality which, though left untouched at the ontic level (the level of billiard balls), can no longer be understood as ontologically necessary.<sup>54</sup> A proper following through on the ontological question as has become possible since Heidegger shows that there is no *reason* for being: no causal principle underlying the fact of the existence of things, which instead emerges as a pure gratuity (it is worth thinking here of the project of theoretical physics: if a ‘theory of everything’ is one day established, such a theory would nevertheless contain an explanatory gap—knowing exactly *how* the universe emerged does not mean knowing the reason for the fact *that* it emerged). Against Schmitt, then, the miracle is not a name for an exceptional event that contravenes the laws of nature, but rather a name for the very fact of being as that which is irreducible to any causal law. We must in other words *generalise* the Schmittian position on miracles, taking the very *existing of the world* to be miraculous, depending as it does on no law, no foundation.

The political ontological stakes of this have their beginning in the fact that truly leaving open the ontological question (which is the key condition for ontological thinking) would mean owning up to the absolute gratuity of the world. The exception is the metaphysical residue of an inability or refusal to accept this; it emerges out of a failure to acknowledge the real exceptionality of existence *as such*.<sup>56</sup> So the camp, as the ontic site in which the metaphysical figure of bare life is exposed through the fantasy of exceptionality, also has certain of its conditions of possibility in this failure of thought. As with bare life, the exception represents the return of the unthought presupposition of being; as with bare life, thinking beyond it will require a political ontological shift whereby its metaphysical conditions are cancelled. For if the ontological question is properly confronted—if, that is, we are able to own up to the ungrounding force of it—then the miraculous will be simultaneously neutralised and generalised such that *the ordinary is acknowledged as exceptional*. This explains Agamben’s references to the Benjaminian idea of a *real* state of exception that could be set against the (presumably somehow fictitious, or perhaps fantasmatic) states of exception in which we live.<sup>57</sup> Political ontology shows that the real state of exception would be a state in which being *as such* is collectively lived as exceptional, which of course is logically identical to there being no exceptions (if being *as such* is exceptional, then nothing *in particular* is). Here we see how political ontology will require us to turn not to theorising the exceptional event *a la* Alain Badiou, but rather to the ordinary and the everyday, and in particular toward an idea of the exceptionality of the ordinary as a potential political *achievement* (I note in passing—a sustained account will require another paper—that this is to place political ontology in the tradition of the politicised aesthetics of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century’s avant-gardes, with their various programs for overcoming the distinction between art and everyday life).<sup>58</sup> To achieve the ordinary in this way (which of course would be extraordinary) would mean reclaiming the very fact of the world from the metaphysical logic that presupposes and excludes it, allowing it to become something more than a nothingness or banality. Part of my claim, in other words, is that there is a certain thought of the good available in political ontology. It is the kind of good that Nancy identifies when, in the context of an argument about the necessary relativity of all values, he writes that “it is existence itself which is without price.”<sup>59</sup>

## NO LIFE IS BARE, THE ORDINARY IS EXCEPTIONAL

---

In a critique of Agamben that would be devastating if it didn't make the category mistake I am trying to identify, Andrew Norris writes the following:

If the Bush-Cheney administration is simply providing the sovereign decisions that are metaphysically necessary to maintain public order in the United States, one cannot fault it for acting tyrannically. Conversely, if it is indeed acting tyrannically, this is something that requires not metaphysical analysis and political theology, but practical, political resistance and institutional change.<sup>60</sup>

A political ontological approach, which undermines the very idea of 'metaphysical necessity,' will dissolve the terms of this dilemma. For if bare life and the exception are not metaphysically necessary, then we should respond to it with a *both/and* rather than an *either/or*. In other words: Guantanamo Bay is metaphysically contingent, and that is part of why it is tyrannical (it is not only a political, juridical, and ethical monstrosity; it is also based on a violent metaphysical logic). As such we can agree with Schmitt when he writes that "metaphysics is the most intensive and clearest expression of an epoch"; that monarchy was "self-evident" as a form of political organisation in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century because it was "in accord with the structure of metaphysical concepts" in play at the time.<sup>61</sup> The mistake, however, would lie in underestimating the complexity of the relationship at work here, refusing to recognise the real intertwining of politics and ontology that it represents. Political ontology does not mistake theory for practice, falling into a kind of magical thinking where the former is somehow taken to have the capacity to change the world; rather it insists on the mutually determining relation between ontology and politics, on the claim that truly radical change in one area means change in the other (there is no vulgar claim of one-way causality at work here). The practise of thought and the critique of metaphysics have political stakes, just as properly revolutionary political action is not only concerned with ontic political change, but also with challenging the very figure of the world as we know it.

"Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things."<sup>62</sup> Political ontology does not hold up another world as an ideal to which the present one should be made to conform; instead it demands the abolition of the present metaphysical scheme of things, in which the natural sweetness of life, the sharing of the gratuity of the world, are voided. A political movement cognisant of this would be one that insists on—indeed one that demonstrates in practise—the truth of the claims that *no life is bare* and *the ordinary is exceptional*. These are ontological laws, but they are also ethical laws; they are real ontological claims, but they also make a normative demand on us. Gershom Scholem writes that "[m]etaphysics is a legitimate theory in the subjunctive form. This is the best definition I have found so far; it says everything."<sup>63</sup> Though Scholem uses the term 'metaphysics' here, exchanging it for 'political ontology' will see his point sit perfectly with this project. Political ontology is a mode of thought in which the distinction between fact and value collapses, such that what is shown to be valuable is the *fact* of existence itself. As such, a politics in-keeping with political ontology would be a *subjunctive* politics,<sup>64</sup> a politics informed by an exigency. As Nancy puts it:

[T]his means to conduct this struggle precisely in the name of the fact that this *world* is coming out of nothing, that there is nothing before it and that it is without models, without principle and without given end, and that it is precisely *what* forms the justice and the meaning of a world.<sup>65</sup>

Such a struggle would not be carried out in the name of another world, but in the name of this one. Life's 'beautiful day' is mundane and held in common.

MATHEW ABBOTT is lecturer in philosophy at the University of Ballarat. His PhD thesis, submitted last year to the University of Sydney, develops a fundamental re-reading of the work of Giorgio Agamben, giving a defense and development of his philosophy.

---

NOTES

1. Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. London: Rebel Press/Left Bank Books, 1994, 26 (translation slightly modified).
2. Heinrich Meier, *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt: Four Chapters on the Distinction between Political Theology and Political Philosophy*. Trans. Marcus Brainard. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, xv.
3. Meier, *The Lesson*, xiii.
4. Meier, *The Lesson*, xiii.
5. Meier, *The Lesson*, xv.
6. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Trans. George Schwab. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, 44.
7. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 46.
8. Meier, *The Lesson*, 1.
9. Carsten Strathausen, "A Critique of Neo-Left Ontology." *Postmodern Culture*, 16: 3 (2006).
10. See Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, 11-34.
11. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. New York: State University of New York Press, 1996, SZ 1; 1e
12. Martin Heidegger, "Seminar in Zähringen 1973." Trans. Andrew Mitchell and Francois Raffoul. *Four Seminars*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003, 79.
13. Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism." Trans. Albert Hofstadter. *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell. San Francisco: Harpercollins, 2003, 226.
14. Heidegger, "Letter," 227 (my emphasis).
15. While the category of *Vorstellung* is usually associated with Heidegger's critique of modernity as the age of *Gestell* and the world-picture, he nevertheless finds its roots in Platonism. As Veronique Foti puts it:

Although Heidegger considers representation and the representative world-picture to be proper to modernity and to the history of metaphysics, Plato's understanding of the being of beings as *eidōs*, as their quasi-visible aspect or image, constitutes for him, as Derrida emphasizes, the mediation and hidden presupposition of the emergence of representation (Veronique Foti, "Representation and the Image: Between Heidegger, Derrida, and Plato." *Man and World*, 18 (1985), 67).

16. Martin Heidegger, "Language." Trans. Albert Hofstadter. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Harper and Row, 192.
17. Kant writes: "'Being' is obviously not a real predicate; that is, it is not a concept of something which could be added to the concept of a thing" (Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Norman Kemp Smith. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, A598; 504e).
18. Heidegger, *Nietzsche* (vol 3). Trans. David Farrell Krell. San Francisco: Haper & Row, 1991, 202.
19. Heidegger writes:

Metaphysics thinks beings as beings. Wherever the question is asked what beings are, beings as such are in sight. Metaphysical representation owes this sight to the light of Being. The light itself, i.e., that which such thinking experiences as light, no longer comes within the range of metaphysical thinking; for metaphysics always represents beings only as beings. Within this perspective, metaphysical thinking does, of course, inquire about the being that is the source and originator of this light. But the light itself is considered sufficiently illuminated through its granting the transparency for every perspective on beings (Martin Heidegger, "Introduction to *What is Metaphysics*." Trans. Walter Kaufmann. *Pathmarks*. Ed. William McNeill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 277).

20. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, 1.
21. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 7
22. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 7
23. Foucault writes: "But what might be called a society's 'threshold of modernity' has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies" (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume One*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1980, 143).
24. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 182
25. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 182
26. See Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005, 1-31.

## NO LIFE IS BARE, THE ORDINARY IS EXCEPTIONAL

---

27. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 35

28. Agamben writes:

Today, however, we know that the destruction of experience no longer necessitates a catastrophe, and that humdrum daily life in any city will suffice. For modern man's average day contains virtually nothing that can be translated into experience (Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: the Destruction of Experience*. Trans. Liz Heron. London: Verso, 2007, 13–14).

29. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: the Witness and the Archive*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Rozen. New York: Zone Books, 1999, 69.

30. Andrew Benjamin, "Spacing as the Shared: Heraclitus, Pindar, Agamben." *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer*. Ed. Andrew Norris. London: Duke University Press, 166.

31. Jay Bernstein, "Bare Life, Bearing Witness: Auschwitz and the Pornography of Horror." *Parallax*. 10:1 (2004, 11).

32. Bernstein, "Bare Life," 13

33. Agamben, *Remnants*, 52–54

34. Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Inoperative Community." Trans. Peter Connor. *The Inoperative Community*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993, 35.

35. Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hason. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 135. Agamben puts it similarly: "The human being is the one who can survive the human being" (*Remnants*, 133).

36. Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: the Place of Negativity*. Trans. Karen Pinkus. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, 44.

37. Giorgio Agamben, "What is a Paradigm?" Trans. Luca D'Isanto with Kevin Attell. *The Signature of All Things*. New York: Zone Books, 2009, 17.

38. Agamben, "What is a Paradigm?" 31

39. See my "The Poetic Experience of the World" for an account of historically contingent quasi-transcendental conditions (Mathew Abbott, "The Poetic Experience of the World." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*. 18: 4, 2010).

40. Giorgio Agamben, "Form-of-Life." Trans V. Binetti and C. Casarino. *Means without End*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, 4.

41. Giorgio Agamben, "'I am sure that you are more pessimistic than I am...' An Interview with Giorgio Agamben." *Rethinking Marxism*. 16: 2 (2004, 124).

42. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 166-80

43. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*. Trans. E. F. N. Jephcott. London: Verso, 2005, 63.

44. Karl Marx, quoted in Agamben, "I am Sure You Are More Pessimistic Than I Am," 124

45. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 38

46. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36

47. Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*. Trans. George Schwab. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008, 55.

48. Miguel Vatter, "Strauss and Schmitt as Readers of Hobbes and Spinoza." *The New Centennial Review*. 4: 3 (2004, 185).

49. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Experience of Freedom*. Trans. Bridget McDonald. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993, 53.

50. I deal with this idea more systematically in "The Poetic Experience of the World."

51. Nancy, *The Experience*, 120

52. Nancy, *The Experience*, 13

53. Nancy, *The Experience*, 30

54. Nancy, *The Experience*, 101

55. As Oliver Marchart shows (see Marchart, *Post-Foundational*, 15-18), this kind of thinking is *both* historical *and* properly ontological: it is based on a real ontological claim, and as such should apply to any epoch of being, but is also cognisant of the fact that the possibility of a proper confrontation with it has only opened up because of particular historical (that is, ontic) forces.

56. Sergei Prozorov writes:

One may... reverse the commonsensical image of a stable order, traversing history in its empty sameness, only being punctured momentarily by acts of exception, and instead conceive of order itself as a momentary stabilization of generalized exceptionality of existence: every form of order is the veil that conceals precisely that there is nothing behind it to conceal, that it enfolds the void (Sergei Prozorov, "X/Xs: Toward a General Theory of the Exception." *Alternatives*. 30: 1 (2005, 98).

57. As Leland de la Durantaye writes, the basic task of Agamben's philosophy is to establish a "distinction between [the] state

of exception ravaging our political landscape and ‘a *real* state of exception’ that would spell its end” (Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: a Critical Introduction*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, 351). To quote him at length:

The question that Agamben asks then endeavors to answer is the question that every one of the theses’ interpreters has endeavored to answer: What did Benjamin mean by calling for a “*real* state of exception” (in an earlier version of the theses Benjamin himself underlined the word *real* [*wirklichen*])? It is difficult to imagine that Benjamin is welcoming here a state of legal exception or emergency like the one that, at the time of his writing, had already reigned in the country of his birth for seven years. His use of the simple adjective *real* implies, however, that a clear distinction is to be made, and that the state of exception in place—which threatened to become the rule—was in one manner or another a *fictive* one. It was of course not fictive in the sense of imaginary—that state of exception was real enough—but its recourse to law and justice, its all-encompassing suspension of individual rights and incorporation of the personal sphere of the state’s citizens, seemed to be based on a juridical *fiction* that was at the same time a fiction of justice. Benjamin’s intention then appears to have been to stress the falseness of that fiction through the idea of a ‘real’ state of exception that would give the lie to the one that, for him, had become the rule... How this ‘*real* state of exception’ is to be distinguished from a ‘state of exception’ increasingly in effect is a dilemma that no commentator has yet succeeded in solving... (343–44)

58. As Stanley Rosen writes (though with a very different intent): “The ordinary is something we pursue” (Stanley Rosen, *The Elusiveness of the Ordinary*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002, 2). In Simon Critchley’s words, “the ordinary is an achievement, the goal of a quest...” (Simon Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature*. London: Routledge, 2004, xxiv).

59. Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Insufficiency of Values and the Necessity of Sense.” *Journal for Cultural Research*. 9: 4 (2005, 439).

60. Andrew Norris, “Sovereignty, Exception, and Norm.” *Journal of Law and Society*. 34: 1 (2007, 46).

61. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 46.

62. Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*. Trans. C. J. Arthur. New York: International Publishers, 2007, 56–57

63. Gershom Scholem, quoted in Eric Jacobsen, *Metaphysics of the Profane: the Political Theology of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, 5.

64. I intend this not in opposition but as a potential supplement to Peter Hallward’s ‘prescriptive’ politics (see Peter Hallward, “A Politics of Prescription.” *South Atlantic Quarterly*. 104: 4, 2005.

65. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World, or, Globalisation*. Trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007, 54–55.