

ON THE BORDERS OF LANGUAGE AND DEATH

AGAMBEN AND THE QUESTION OF THE ANIMAL

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On the penultimate page of the *Gesamtausgabe* edition of Heidegger's essay "Das Wesen der Sprache" ("The Essence of Language"), we find the following brief and enigmatic passage:

Die Sterblichen sind jene, die den Tod als Tod erfahren können. Das Tier vermag dies nicht. Das Tier kann aber auch nicht sprechen. Das Wesenverhältnis zwischen Tod und Sprache blitzt auf, ist aber noch ungedacht. Es kann uns jedoch einen Wink geben in die Weise, wie das Wesen der Sprache uns zu sich belangt und so bei sich verhält, für den Fall, dass der Tod mit dem zusammenghört, was uns be-langt.

[Mortals are they who can experience death as death. Animals cannot do so. But animals cannot speak either. The essential relation between language and death flashes up before us, but remains still unthought. It can, however, beckon us toward the way in which the nature of language draws us into its concern and so relates us to itself, in case death belongs together with what reaches out for us, touches us.]¹

The unthought announced here, the "essential relation between language and death," still remains largely unthought today. In his book, *Language and Death*,² Giorgio Agamben attempts to begin to think through this relation between language and death, and to explore the implications that a thinking of this unthought might have for a new and different understanding of the ethico-political. Our task in the present essay is not simply to reconstitute the argument of Agamben's text, but to interrogate his thought concerning the essential relation between language and death from the perspective of the question of the animal. Specifically we wish to inquire about the status and the place of the animal in a thought of com-

munity that attempts to understand the relation to language and death otherwise.

Man's *Ethos* Beyond Voice and Negativity

The introductory section of *Language and Death* opens with the quotation from Heidegger's *On the Way to Language* that we have cited above. Agamben isolates one phrase from this quotation by repeating it in italics: "*The essential relation between death and language flashes up before us, but remains still unthought*" (LD xi). He then proposes a thematic investigation of this relation between language and death, not only in Heidegger's text, but also in decisive places in the history of western metaphysics, specifically in Hegel, medieval grammatical thought, and modern linguistics. The structure of Agamben's task is fitting since throughout Western metaphysics man's essence has consistently been determined through the possession of one or another distinct abilities or faculties, prominent among them being the capacity for language (e.g., man as *zōon logon echon* in Aristotle) and the capacity for death (e.g., *Fähigkeit des Todes* in Hegel). Is there any essential connection between these two specific capacities? Anticipating the method and conclusion of Agamben's argument, we can say here at the outset that this question will be investigated through an interrogation of the place of negativity in metaphysical theories of language and death, and that the problem of the Voice will be the clue that leads to the discovery of a common negativity at the core of both of these capacities.

Beginning with an examination of the place of negativity in metaphysics, Agamben looks

to Heidegger's discussion of death in paragraphs 50–53 in *Sein und Zeit*. Here, Heidegger radically reverses the common notion that death is simply an accident that befalls human beings by arguing that death is essential to Dasein's existence. Dasein is not related to death like some chance occurrence that happens to come its way; rather, Heidegger insists, death is Dasein's "ownmost possibility," and as long as Dasein exists it has an essential relation to dying in the form of Being-towards-death. The anticipation of death as the possibility of the impossibility of any existence as such is witnessed or attested to in the call of conscience (*Ruf des Gewissens*). It is in the call of conscience that Dasein comes to understand its finite being-there as the place of a *negativity*. Dasein, as being-thrown, is the basis for its possibilities. But it can never go back behind this basis and master it—Dasein exists only *from* and *as* this basis. The "never" constitutive of thrownness, the inability to go back behind one's being-thrown, is described by Heidegger as an essential negativity. Whence the origin of this negativity? For Heidegger, it is only because Dasein is *Da*, is *there*, or as Agamben would have us understand it, has its being as being-the-there (LD 5), that it exists in essential negativity. But what is it about the *Da*, this demonstrative pronoun, that introduces negativity into human being?

Before offering an answer to this question, Agamben turns to another philosopher who finds the origins of negativity in a demonstrative pronoun, not in *Da* but in *Diese*, Hegel's *Diese*, the "this" of sense-certainty. The *Aufhebung* of sense-certainty in the first chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* proceeds by way of a realization that what sense-certainty believed to be pure and immediate contact with being is always already mediated and shot through with negativity. This negativity is discovered when the natural consciousness of sense-certainty attempts to delimit or define its object with demonstratives ("This," "Here," "Now," etc.). What sense-certainty wants to grasp, its object, is *this* specific thing in its pure

being, the object in its "perfect entirety." But as soon as the natural consciousness of sense-certainty attempts to *say* this truth, the universal, mediated, and negative character of language prevents the presentation of this object in its pure being. What Hegel calls "taking the This" can thus only be accomplished if it is recognized that every "This" contains an essential negativity, a not-This, within it (LD 14–15).

Might there be a nodal point common to the essential negativity that Heidegger discovers in being-the-*Da* and Hegel finds in taking-the-*Diese*? Further, what is the link between the demonstrative pronouns *Da* and *Diese* and negativity? Agamben suggests that we can begin to understand the commonality of taking-the-This and being-the-there if we understand both phrases as attempts to indicate the taking place of language. But how might pronouns be capable of indicating the fact of language? As Agamben notes, the exact status and function of pronouns has long been a point of contention among grammarians, beginning with Greek grammatical thought and extending up through medieval grammarians and contemporary linguists. It is not until we reach modern linguists such as Emile Benveniste and Roman Jakobson that pronouns are explicitly understood to function as indicators of the taking place of language. This progression was able to be accomplished, Agamben suggests, because modern linguistics begins with the starting point of the modern philosophy of Descartes, Kant, and Husserl: the status of the pronoun "I" (LD 23). Against substantialist definitions of the "I," Benveniste for example suggests that the pronoun "I" does not refer to any objective referent as do nominal signs, rather "I" simply indicates a "reality of discourse," or the instance of discourse in which the pronoun "I" is uttered.³ As such, pronouns do not mark the naming of an entity that exists beyond or outside language, but rather the taking place of language itself. In other words, pronouns serve to enact the transition between mere voice and meaningful words, language

and discourse, *langue* and *parole*, or, in a Heideggerian register, beings and being.

The core of Agamben's argument in *Language and Death* is that the manner in which this transition is made remains unthought within Western metaphysics, and consequently, that a negativity pervades all attempts at indicating the taking place of language. Where modern linguistics would be quick to collapse the moment of passage between mere sounds and meaningful discourse, Agamben insists on thinking through this transition. In many ways, this marks the peculiar style and rigor of Agamben's thought. He is a thinker of transitions, of the in-between, of what remains unthought in the negative ground of metaphysics, whether it be the transition from *zoe* to *bios*, or *dumanis* to *energeia*. Here, in *Language and Death*, it is a matter of marking the transition between *phone* and *logos*, animal voice and meaningful discourse. Agamben suggests that the traversal of the gap between *phone* and *logos* in western metaphysics has always occurred in the form of a Voice. Voice (which is capitalized by Agamben to distinguish it from voice as mere sound) is the ground that secures the transition from voice to meaning, but is itself neither voice nor meaning. Agamben explains the negativity of Voice in the following way:

inasmuch as this Voice . . . enjoys the status of a *no-longer* (voice) and of a *not-yet* (meaning), it necessarily constitutes a negative dimension. It is *ground*, but in the sense that it goes *to the ground* and disappears in order for being and language to take place. (LD 35)

Agamben's critical task is to think an experience of language that is not marked by this negativity characteristic of the Voice, a task that would presumably lead to the possibility of an ethics beyond nihilism (LD xii–xiii). Although this project might appear to be quite close to those of Derrida and Levinas in many respects, Agamben faults both Derrida and Levinas for not being able to do anything more than radicalize this negative ground (LD 39–40). In brief, Agamben wants to argue that

the pure and simple repetition of the negative ground of metaphysics does little in the way of overcoming it or bringing us to an *ethos* beyond nihilism. Although I will not argue for this point here, I would suggest in opposition to Agamben that it is precisely in the way that both Levinas and Derrida repeat this ground *otherwise*, and in affirmation of something other, that they offer us the possibility for just such a thought of language and ethics beyond nihilism.

Now, if it is indeed true that in Western metaphysics meaningful language takes place only in the removal of the voice by the Voice, then we should be able to find an analogous structure of the Voice in both Hegel and Heidegger (assuming that both belong to this tradition, as Agamben does). Hegel's Jena manuscripts from 1803–04 and 1805–06 present us with a description of voice and language that follows this structure precisely. Here Hegel describes the emergence of spirit into the light of consciousness after being submerged in the concealedness of nature. It is not until spirit passes from the senses and imagination into consciousness that this progression is complete. The reality of consciousness in these lectures is acquired through the process of *naming* whereby the relation with what is exterior to consciousness is negated in its empirical existence and made into an ideal object for consciousness (this is the "curious right" that Blanchot recalls for us in his discussion of these lectures in his "La littérature et le droit à la mort").⁴ The function of the name is to remove the object from its immediacy by negating it and turning it into a memory rather than a present entity. When Hegel describes the movement that makes naming, i.e., meaningful language, possible, he makes recourse to the transition that Agamben has made familiar for us: the transition from the empty animal voice to full and meaningful human language, a transition secured by a certain negativity or Voice. For Hegel, human language is the articulation of the *unarticulated*, empty animal voice. Although the animal eventually finds a meaningful voice in its "violent death," it is unable to

experience this death *as* death since it lacks the power of the negative and memory. Because human language has the power of the negative and memory through Voice, the human being is able to articulate this voice of death in the death cry of the animal and preserve it in language and consciousness (LD 46).

An attentive reader of Heidegger will realize that no such relation between animal voice and human language can be found in his writings. While a philosophy of the Voice might still be found at the heart of Heidegger's philosophy, it will not be reached through an examination of the transition from animal to human language. Heidegger's determination of the essence of human language is formulated so as to strictly distinguish and delimit it from the "language" of other living beings and animals. Dasein is not simply *zōon logon echon*, the animal possessing language, nor is it *animal rationale*. For Heidegger, human language—or rather, the possibility for language that belongs together with Dasein's ek-sistence—is not rooted in the preservation and articulation of animal voice, but marks the advent of Being and the essential dignity of man. Only man as Dasein, the being who is "freely placed" into the "clearing of Being" and who consequently has world, is capable of having language and being in the place of this advent. Within the scope of Heidegger's understanding of language, man as Dasein ek-sists-as-thrown in the place of language without the ground of any voice. Read back into the context of *Sein und Zeit*, it is the *Stimmung* of anxiety that reveals to Dasein that it is consigned to the place of language without choosing to be-there. But at the very moment at which Dasein finds itself without a voice in the place of discourse (and this abandonment, close to what we might call human in-fancy, is very near to the "site" that Agamben is trying to recover in his analysis), Heidegger tells us that Dasein finds another Voice: a silent voice, the Voice of conscience which says nothing determinable but only points in the direction of Dasein's death. The Voice of conscience is

what calls Dasein toward its guilt-laden finitude and allows for the resolute decision to assume the "negative foundation of its own negativity." On Agamben's reading, the "double negativity" of the Voice of conscience in Heidegger replicates the function (if not the precise structure) of the negative Voice of metaphysics as it is at work in Hegel and the rest of the tradition. Instead of leaving Dasein exposed in the place of language without a voice, the Voice of conscience assures the transition to a place from which it is possible to think death *as* death, death *as such*. Able to think death as such, Dasein's death is consequently characterized by dying (*sterben*) rather than merely ceasing (*ableben*).

The function of the philosophy of the Voice as Agamben presents it in his reading of Hegel and Heidegger's work thus offers us a possible formulation of the unthought "essential relation between death and language" in Western metaphysics. Agamben's suggestion is that Voice is the common and essential element in the unthought relation between death and language. The ability to think death *as* death, i.e., death *in* language, is only possible on the basis of a negativity, an unthematizable ground, a Voice. "To experience death as death signifies, in fact, to experience the removal of the voice and the appearance, *in its place*, of another Voice," which in Hegel is the Voice of death and in Heidegger is the Voice of conscience (LD 86). It is this Voice, this seemingly essential, but unthinkable and unthematizable, negative Voice that assures man in his traversal of the space between voice and meaningful discourse.

That this Voice operates as the original *ethico-political* ground of metaphysics can be glimpsed in the well-known passage from the opening pages of Aristotle's *Politics* (a work which as we know communicates with the vast majority of subsequent metaphysical determinations of the grounds of ethics and politics) in which man is separated from animals based on his possession of *logos* (1253a7–18). According to Aristotle, animals possess *phone* (voice)

and thus are able to indicate pain and pleasure, but *logos* (speech), which is used to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, what is right and what is wrong, is reserved for man alone. This unique capacity for *logos* and its concomitant conceptual distinctions are what makes man fit for living in a state. Indeed, for Aristotle, it is “partnership in these things that make a household and a state.” But here in Aristotle, as elsewhere in the metaphysical tradition, precisely *what* it is that allows for the transition from *phone* to *logos* is left undetermined. Agamben would have us understand that this ground must remain undetermined and unthematized because it is ultimately nothing other than a non-ground, a silent Voice, a sigetics. This Voice serves as the negative ground of man’s experience of language and *ethos* in western metaphysics. For Agamben, it is this negativity which has traditionally characterized man’s specific being and essence that we must move beyond if we are to conceive of an *ethos* for human beings beyond nihilism.

Agamben’s name for this space beyond the negativity of the Voice is “infancy” (from *in-fans*, literally without speech, or in the context of Agamben’s discourse, without Voice). To think and affirm infancy, a time in which human beings undergo an experience of language without the assurance or guarantee of a Voice, is the task that Agamben leaves for thought at the end/limits of a philosophy grounded in negativity. To move beyond negativity toward a thought of infancy can be accomplished only in a rethinking of language, death, and man’s *ethos* beyond any pre-established essence or nature. Agamben powerfully depicts the contours of this thought with the following words:

with the disappearance of the Voice . . . [the] “essential relation” between language and death . . . must also disappear. Man, as a speaking being, is no longer necessarily the mortal, he who has the “faculty for death” and is reaffirmed by death; nor, as a dying being, is he necessarily the speaker, he who has the “faculty for language” and is reaffirmed by this. To exist in language without being called there by any

Voice, simply to die without being called by death, is, perhaps, the most abysmal experience; but this is precisely, for man, also his most *habitual* experience, his *ethos*, his dwelling. (LD 95–96)

Man, deprived of his necessary connection to the faculties of death and language, is thus deprived of the common ground of human community. Once this common ground and its attendant negativity are no longer relied upon as a foundation for community, man is able to begin to experience the radical poverty of his being-in-common.

Perhaps man—the animal who seems not to be encumbered by any specific nature or any specific identity—must experience his poverty even more radically. Perhaps humans are even poorer than they supposed in attributing to themselves the experience of negativity and death as their specific anthropogenetic patrimony, and in basing every community and tradition on this experience. (LD 96)

Future thinking concerning the ethico-political, if it is to occupy a place devoid of the nihilism and negativity of western metaphysics, must take as its starting point—and without nostalgia for a ground—this poverty and infancy of man.

Human Figures of Community

Clearly it cannot be a matter here of a simple “critique” of Agamben’s thesis and ethico-political task for thought. His analyses and diagnoses of negativity in western metaphysics are exceedingly rigorous; the determination of Voice as the essential link between language and death is marked by an unmatched rigor and precision; the directions for future thinking on community are incredibly suggestive and rich—in the face of such intricate and fecund problematics, there is little point engaging in mere critique. But perhaps a space can be found for raising some questions, specifically concerning the status of the animal in Agamben’s subsequent thought.

Later texts such as *Homo Sacer*⁵ and *The Coming Community*⁶ explore in more depth the

path for ethics and politics that was merely indicated in *Language and Death*. In these works, Agamben argues that we ought to begin thinking through community not on the basis of any common essence among human beings (whether this be a common experience of language, death, nationality, subjectivity, etc.), but instead through figures such as the *refugee*. Agamben goes so far as to say the following:

It is even possible that, if we want to be equal to the absolutely new tasks ahead, we will have to abandon decidedly, without reserve, the fundamental concepts through which we have so far represented the subjects of the political (Man, the Citizen and its rights, but also the sovereign people, the worker, and so forth) and build our political philosophy anew starting from the one and only figure of the refugee.⁷

For Agamben, the figure of the refugee marks the radical crisis of essentialist community as it takes form in the sovereign power of the Nation-State and its discourse on citizenship. The refugee offers us the (un)common possibility of marking the transition from *zoe* (bare life) to *bios* (political life) insofar as refugees occupy the no-man's land that lies between these two concepts and realities. Modern political thought on community, by overlooking the bare life that precedes any belonging to sovereignty, uncritically finds itself on an essential, common citizenship among human beings and is thus unable to think the political beyond these limits. The task of politics—as Agamben understands it in the face of the breakdown of the Nation-State, and the increasing number of permanent refugees—is to think the coming community as a place of permanent transition between naked life and sovereign power, *zoē* and *bios*.

Even where Agamben ventures a figure beyond the refugee in order to rethink community (such as “whatever singularity” in *The Coming Community* or the “sacred person” in *Homo Sacer*), these “concepts” remain analogous in form to the refugee. Whatever singularities, sacred persons, and refugees all find their being in impropriety, in expropriation,

in a form of existence that is irreducible to *bios* and the State. What is troubling about these figures as they function in Agamben's discourse is that they are all to a certain extent limited to human beings alone. While we do not mean to imply here that Agamben relies on a humanist subject to ground his politics, we do want to suggest that his rethinking of the ground of the coming community remains anthropocentric. And it is this anthropocentric limit to which we are responding in forming our question.

If one accepts Agamben's argument that man's essence is not to be found in his experience of language and death as such, then does not this displacement of man's essence simultaneously work to disrupt the strict binary that excludes the animal from man's essence? That is to say, if man's proper essence and the ground for human community can no longer be found in an experience of language and death as such, then how can a thought of another, coming community not lead to a rethinking of the place of animals in community? Beginning at least with Aristotle and traversing all the way to Heidegger and beyond, animals have consistently and repeatedly been excluded from human community based on their inability to experience language and death in the manner that humans do, that is, *as such*. “The animal,” as is abundantly clear from the passages that Agamben cites from Heidegger, Hegel, and Aristotle, has served as one of the dominant motifs for marking the outer limit of man's proper being. To disrupt this determination of human essence (man's essence as the capacity for death and language as such in contrast to the animal) is at the same time to unsettle an entrenched binary opposition between man and animal. If the critical promise of Agamben's thought is to be found in its ability to disrupt classical notions of human community based on this distinction, we would argue that it is equally suggestive in its displacement of the classical border that separates the animal from human community. Yet the consequences of this disruption are nowhere, to our knowl-

edge, taken up at any length by Agamben. He seems unaware of, or at least unwilling to pursue, the question of the animal with respect to the coming community. Our question to Agamben thus takes the following form: Even if “Man” has been historically determined as a “Citizen” of the State over and against refugees, sacred persons, and whatever singularities, these strictly human figures nonetheless cannot be the only impetus for a rethinking of the political. The Citizen’s other(s) include more than the refugee or *homo sacer*: among these others is “the animal”—and the list of Man’s others does not, and cannot, end there. Is not the task for thought concerning the coming community to pursue the implications of these other exclusions in their historical specificity

also, and at the same time, insofar as this is possible? Our suggestion is that a certain anthropocentrism still lingers in Agamben’s characterization, or rather de-limitation, of the coming community, and it is this anthropocentrism which has prevented a more thorough consideration of the place of animals, and other others, in community. It is with respect to the question of the animal that these borders and limits can perhaps best be approached—and it is also from within the space of this question that other delimitations and determinations can be raised for thought.

ENDNOTES

1. Martin Heidegger, “Das Wesen der Sprache,” in *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, vol. 12 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1985), p. 203; *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 107–08.
2. Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus with Michael Hardt (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. xi; henceforth cited in the text as LD.
3. Agamben is discussing Benveniste’s “La nature des pronoms,” in his *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), pp. 251–57, esp. pp. 252–53.
4. Maurice Blanchot, *La Part de feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949); *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).
5. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt ((Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
6. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
7. Giorgio Agamben, “Beyond Human Rights,” in Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, eds., *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 159.

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