AGAMBEN'S POSTHUMAN MEDIALITY: ETHICS, HISTORY, AND LANGUAGE

Emile Fromet de Rosnay (University of Victoria)

Posthumanism's abandonment of language and embrace of natural sciences can impede thinking about "selfhood, embodiment, materiality." The role of language in a posthuman context involves a triple consideration: ethics, history, and enunciation. The ethical dimension works through the biopolitical risk of determinism. Any ethical "situatedness" must account for history. Finally, working through Agamben's thought via Benvenistian linguistics (which influence Agamben), I examine the interplay of ethics and history with respect to enunciation as an alternative to the legacy of deconstruction. The claim here is that the gaps between embodiment and materiality, and the singularities of experience and ethics, involve history and language as "pure means."

L'abandon posthumaniste du langage et son tournant vers les sciences de la nature peut empêcher la réflexion sur « soi, corporéité et matérialité ». La fonction du langage dans un contexte posthumain implique trois considérations : l'éthique, l'histoire et l'énonciation. La dimension éthique travaille le risque biopolitique du déterminisme. Toute contextualité (« situatedness ») devrait se rendre compte de l'histoire. Enfin, à partir de la pensée d'Agamben et à travers la linguistique benvenistienne (qui a influencé Agamben), j'examine interaction de l'éthique et de l'histoire par rapport à l'énonciation comme alternative à l'héritage de la déconstruction. Nous revendiquons ici que les interstices entre corporalité et matérialité, et les singularités de l'expérience et de l'éthique, impliquent l'histoire et le langage comme « moyens purs ».

Opening(s)

Language, ethics, and history are ongoing problems for contemporary thought. Broadly, there has been a sense since the early 2000s that the preoccupation with the postmodern and linguistic turn is now over, especially after Derrida's death. This has corresponded with a turn to the nonhuman and the posthuman (even within deconstruction, as with biodeconstruction), but the discursive context for these in many ways emerged out of the failure of the linguistic turn, even while thinkers such as Derrida have had a decisive influence on posthumanism,[1] such as with his famous text, "L'animal que donc je suis."[2] I will argue here that we need to step back and look at the linguistic in ways other than the deconstructive heritage, the *aporias* of which have become emblematic of a large part of the linguistic turn, leading to missed opportunities, such as thinking through the proper role of language in posthuman studies. It will be argued here that the work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, through his thought on ethics, history, and language, offers an alternative point of view for posthumanism. These three terms (ethics, history, language) are intertwined insofar as language, as potentiality, open up to the other in an ethical "community," and insofar as communicating with others is to engage in the irreducibly singular experience that is history. This perspective is important today because posthumanist thinkers have not adequately looked at the problem of language (indeed, have abandoned linguistics altogether), and have even equated language and discourse with non-linguistic matter(s) and materiality. It will be concluded that the consideration of ethics, language, and history can be thought through the problem of "pure means" or "mediality," which Agamben develops from the history of philosophy as an alternative to the Kantian problem of "finality without ends." Agamben's thought manages therefore to bring together ethics, language, and history in the context of the biopolitical. Agamben, as a thinker of event and ethics, shows us how to avoid the biopolitical risks potentially in posthumanism.

---

[1] Notably in Vicky Kirby's *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) and Cary Wolfe's *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). Note that the latter does a critique of Agamben, but only superficially so.

[2] Jacques Derrida's "L'animal que donc je suis" appears in *L'Animal autobiographique*, (ed.) M. L. Mallet (Paris: Galilée, 1999). The English version appears as *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

Central to concerns of posthumanism must be the concept of "life." If a thinker of the posthuman such as Rosi Braidotti affirms a critical vitalism or *zoe* ("life") as an immanent *potentia* ("desire as plenitude and over-flowing, not as lack"), where a "nomadic vitalism [that] is neither organicist nor essentialist, but pragmatic and immanent…, [that] does not assume an over-arching concept of life, just practices and flows of becoming, complex assemblages and heterogeneous relations,"[3] for her this requires a new ethical thinking. But what is this ethics? It seems that there has been a failure in posthumanist studies—where "transversals" are to be conceived as forming associations with other material systems—to fully address ethical questions as such. In an era where system- and network-thinking provide us with our ontologies, as with Bruno Latour, Niklas Luhmann, and others, and where "everything is a network"—whereas in an age of the clock we had the music of the spheres, or in that of the steam engine we had thermodynamics and thus entropy[4]—it remains to be seen what might constitute a proper ethical posthumanism. That life, "simply by being life, expresses itself by *actualizing* flows of energies, through *codes* of vital information across complex somatic, cultural and technologically *networked systems*" (P, 190; my emphases), is an unthought ideological claim that needs to be interrogated. For can ethics really play out in "networked systems" if these latter fail to provide an (admittedly contingent or aporetic, yet open) encounter with ethics—as opposed to simply following rules, and merely "actualizing" potential?

The ethical dimension as "freedom" seems to be something that has been insufficiently addressed or brushed aside (P, 29) in posthumanism. What Karen Barad refers to as "material entangle-ments" is, as she herself says, a "beginning point for ethical considerations," insofar as "objectivity is a matter of accountability for what materializes."[5] Nevertheless, ethics involve human individuals, albeit human individuals entangled with the nonhuman. That is, as traditionally conceived, ethics does not exist in nature. Barad's affirmation of "our" ethical relation "to" nature only confirms this,

---

[3] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 137, 171. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as P. Cf. Kameron Sanzo, "New Materialism(s)," *Genealogy of the Posthuman* (April 25, 2018), [http://criticalposthumanism.net/new-materialisms/].

[4] Alexander R. Galloway, "Network Pessimism," *b2o Review* (Jan. 29, 2015), [http://www.boundary2.org/2015/01/network-pessimism/].

[5] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 160, 369, 361. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as MUH.

insofar as Barad is a human being who affirms that knowing "requires differential accountability to what matters and is excluded from mattering" (MUH, 380). For this mattering still happens "for us," however entangled we might be with nature-culture, and however porous and diffracted the boundary is between us and creaturely others. It still "matters" (ethically), and still "means" something, and meaning still happens in language—however we might define language, and however we might think of what is "outside" of it.

Thus, the problem of language remains. However, there has been a tendency in posthumanism and its subfields such as New Materialism, object-oriented ontology, and speculative realism, to abandon language or the "linguistic turn" as a legacy of Humanism, notably by thinkers such as Barad, but also by many others, such as in the edited volume, *The Nonhuman Turn* (2015). In the latter, the editor Richard Grusin, following in the same line of thinking as Barad, for whom materiality and discourse are entangled, describes a move away from language as the centre of enquiry to placing "other nonliterary discourses" on a "level playing field."[6] This seems very valuable if we are to develop a posthumanist epistemology, yet as Caroline Braunmühl states, there is "blur[ing] into each other [of materiality and discourse] to such an extent that matter(ing)-as-doing and discursive practice become indistinguishable."[7] In order to properly think through the theme of this special section, "selfhood, embodiment, materiality," the unthought problem of language will tend to rear its humanistic head as soon as it is cast out.

While not everything can be reduced to language, how does one think or speak about the non-linguistic except in linguistic terms? This was the core problematic of semiotics, at the heart of Ferdinand de Saussure's thinking, for instance; and Barad's mischaracterization of language as representation being granted too much power in 20th-century philosophy (MUH, 133) betrays important *lacunae* with respect to the history of linguistics and what is at stake. Furthermore, the specific differences between human language and other languages cannot be elided (as opposed to all discourses being on a "level playing field"), since "[human] language is the only semiotic

---

[6] Richard Grusin, ed., *The Nonhuman Turn* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xv.

[7] Caroline Braunmühl, "Beyond Hierarchical Oppositions: A Feminist Critique of Karen Barad's Agential Realism," *Feminist Theory*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2018): 223–40, here 226. Cf. MUH, 470.

system with the help of which one can speak of other systems, and of itself."[8]

So posthumanist thinking should not imply abandoning the terrain of linguistics altogether, even if it might not turn on the same focal-points it did in the 20th century, such as intentionality and hermeneutics/deconstruction. Yet it seems that since the early part of the 21st century, the question of language has been characterized, in the wake of deconstruction, as a representational impasse, and thinkers like Vicky Kirby seem to follow in that line. There are precedents to a new, "material" view of language in the posthuman and/or New Materialism.[9] For instance Barthes, following the linguist Émile Benveniste's "Sémiologie de la langue,"[10] expressed this same idea of language being able to speak of other systems and of itself in "Le grain de la voix," an essay where the physical dimensions of language come to the fore, at the level of physiology, anticipating posthuman ways to think matter and language. For Barthes therefore, a "posthuman" materiality was not distinct from the problem of semiotics. But *signifiance*, where language meets voice (but the same logic can be applied to other physicalities), the friction of music with language, goes beyond signification as meaning: the "'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs."[11] This constitutes an example of where posthumanism might go. However, the connection between matter/materiality and language reveals some complex problems that have not been resolved with New-Materialist posthumanism—indeed, they have only been intensified. In this Barthesian example, we remain at the level of theory, and this perspective cannot be tested in the scientific sense, except in very contingent ways, which in a sense encapsulates or further intensifies the problem of language and meaning that

---

[8] Oswald Ducrot and Tzvetan Todorov, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), 121; my translation. Ducrot's original: "le langage est le seul système sémiotique à l'aide duquel on peut parler d'autres systèmes, et de lui-même." Ducrot refers to Augustine without directly quoting him.

[9] I am aware here that I might be eliding the difference between posthumanism and New Materialism. New Materialism is a prominent and productive field within posthumanism, and provides cases in point here of posthumanism.

[10] Émile Benveniste, "La sémiologie de la langue" in *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974).

[11] Roland Barthes, "Le Grain de la voix," in *L'Obvie et l'obtus* (Paris: Seuil, 1992 [1982]), 243, tr. by S. Heath as "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 188. We can also see such a perspective in the life-long work of other Benveniste-inspired theorists like Julia Kristeva and Henri Meschonnic, for both of whom enunciation was profoundly embodied.

preoccupied 20th century language theory. Further, accounting for such an embodied experience requires human language (as Barthes points out at the beginning of his essay), which occurs in time, thus history.

An essential *lacuna* thus emerges out of the gap that exists between the material world and language, and the difficulties of accounting for such a gap through New Materialism. Indeed, New Materialism, insofar as it engages with matter—*e.g.*, in Barad's sense of "a specific material configuration of the world" (MUH, 379)—by definition cannot account for this gap. This is because, as Saussure understood, the linguistic sign is not a *substance*, and linguistics thus cannot be compared to the natural sciences in the way Barad does (for whom materiality and discourse are enmeshed). As Saussure states,

> [T]he absolutely final law of language is, we dare say, that there is nothing which can ever reside in *one* term, as a direct consequence of the fact that linguistic symbols are unrelated to what they should designate, so that *a* is powerless to designate anything without the aid of *b*, and the same thing is true of *b* without the aid of *a*.[12]

The relational nature of language, the "plexus of eternally negative differences" (PLG, 41/36), cannot therefore be the same as what is meant by relationality in New Materialism, characterized by intra-actions that "collapse hierarchical dualisms and insist on the materializing force of broadly circulating ideas."[13] Rather than a hierarchy between human language and nonhuman matter, we are dealing with a more complex set of differences, which Benveniste's work tried to articulate. Firstly, that human language has the above-mentioned specificity of being the only semiotic system capable of accounting for other systems, even if arbitrarily so. Secondly, that the difference between human language and other semiotic systems (*e.g.*, computer code, single-cell signals, bee dances, mathematics) is that human language requires metasemanticity, which is indeed

---

[12] Saussure, as quoted in Émile Benveniste, "Saussure après un demi-siècle," in *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 40–41, tr. by M. E. Meek in *Problems in General Linguistics* (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1973), 36. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as PLG. Page references, separated by a slash, will be first to the French original, then to the English translation.

[13] Rebekah Sheldon, "Form / Matter / Chora: Object-Oriented Ontology and Feminist New Materialism," in *The Nonhuman Turn*, 196.

what gives it the capacity to describe other semiotic systems. Thirdly, that human language, as speech or *parole*, enters into enunciation—that is, discourse and a world, which means that enunciation is historically situated in a specific way.

This is not to say that nonhuman systems don't have these or that the relation human-nonhuman must be framed according to these oppositions, but that we, as humans talking about nonhuman and/or nonlinguistic systems or phenomena, only have access to our linguistic systems, and that those systems set the limits of articulability, of (thinking) (our) non-humanity. Indeed, this exclusive conception of language risks falling into what Agamben calls "anthropogenesis," one which (and based on a critique of Martin Heidegger's description of the animal as "poor-in-the-world") would reproduce the metaphysics of the West, where "Man [*sic*]" needs the animal in order to reproduce itself.[14] Nevertheless, a language is what we (human animals) work within, and yet it is unstable and indistinct from animality, materiality, contingency, and so this problem needs to be rethought in light of posthumanist debates. Further, anthropogenesis is "the becoming human of man [*sic*]"[15] through language, where

> [t]he decisive element that confers on human language its peculiar virtue is not in the tool itself but in the place it leaves to the speaker, in the fact that it prepares within itself a hollowed-out form that the speaker must always assume in order to speak— that is to say, in the ethical relation established between a speaker and his [*sic*] language. (SOL, 71)

That is to say, the "place" (not only a *topos* or *locus* but also a "taking-place," an event of language) left to the speaker is an open one, involving a paradox of communication; in which there is a presupposed "common," yet where each individual speaker brings their own presupposition, the very "hollowed-out form" of a "sayable" potentiality. This creates a condition in which the human being must always be constructed through language (hence anthropogenesis), because of this very fallibility of human language, which distinguishes it from other semiotic systems like birdsong or the dance of bees, and yet which binds it to them in an indistinction, where the

---

[14] Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, (tr.) K. Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 79.
[15] Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath*, (tr.) A. Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 68. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as SOL.

human being is "*the living being whose language places his life in question*" (SOL, 69; emphasis in the original).

Where there are limits placed on the non-linguistic by language, which is in the end performative rather than representational (SOL, 55), how do we think about the role of language in a posthuman context? I argue here that there is a triple consideration. Firstly, the ethical dimension needs to be reconsidered, insofar as posthumanism takes a biopolitical risk when it falls prey to determinisms, whether this is in utilitarian or game-theory decisionism, biological positivism, ontotheological fatalism, and even linguistic constructivism. To what extent can the ethical dimension inform discursivity, and to what extent do these determinisms betray the categories of reason to which representation has itself been bound? How can a New-Material language contribute to a New-Materialist ethics, or do these New Materialities merely reproduce anthropogenesis? Secondly, while we are encouraged to think about irreducible singularity and "situatedness" (Haraway), these conceptions have no currency if they cannot account for history (or experience), which is the representation of singularity itself. (Inversely, if all is merely general, natural, biological, fatalistic, then history is not needed, because a general system manages to explain everything.) Thirdly, thinking about the contours of a more solid epistemology of context is required. Working around ideas developed by Agamben, and partly through Benveniste's notion of enunciation, what is the interplay of ethics and history with respect to the problem of language? This requires exploring the notion of the gap between embodiment and materiality on the one hand, and the singularities of experience and ethics on the other.

Overall, if thinking is attentive ethically and historically to singularity, language must emerge as in itself a singular modality. This analysis tends toward language not as a means to an end or an end in itself, but as what Agamben calls (after Benjamin) a "pure means"[16]—or a "pure mediality" that opens up an ethical relation to (animal) others, placing in the realm of politics the experience of gesture and performance, one that could act as a response to recent

---

[16] Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," in *Means without Ends*, (tr.) V. Binetti and C. Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 57. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as MWE. Also, more recently, he has developed his notion of gesture in the fourth chapter of Giorgio Agamben, *Karman: A Brief Treatise on Action, Guilt, and Gesture*, (tr.) A Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as K.

notions of "affordance" or "networks" that risk falling into the trap of the biopolitical. If for Agamben *"gesture is the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such.* It allows the emergence of the being-in-a-medium of human beings and thus it opens the ethical dimension for them" (MWE, 58; emphasis in the original), which is that open "place" of language, then thinking about the posthuman might involve a new way to think about ethics through mediality.

Ethics towards the Open

In what must be considered his key statement on ethics, insofar as it directly contests much of what passes for ethics today, Agamben (in the "Ethics" chapter of his *Coming Community*) states,

> The fact that must constitute the point of departure for any dis-
> course on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spir-
> itual vocation, no bio-logical destiny that humans must enact or
> realize. This is the only reason why something like an ethics can
> exist, because it is clear that if humans were or had to be this or
> that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would
> be possible—there would be only tasks to be done.[17]

According to the immediate claim here, we can argue that ethics cannot be based on determinisms, that there is no destiny or goal, and we are further tasked with deducing what cannot constitute ethics. For Agamben, ethics must be based on openness and a con-
tingency that focuses on singular experience, and what he calls "potentiality" throughout his writings, one that would problematize Braidotti's notion of *potentia* insofar as the latter is "desire as pleni-
tude and over-flowing, not as lack" (P, 137). For Agamben, this model of potentiality is problematic in that it implies an interior energy that is "expressed," much like Nietzsche's "will"[18] that overflows, that gets

---

[17] Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, (tr.) M. Hardt (Minneapolis: Uni-
versity of Minnesota Press, 1993), 42. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CC.

[18] Agamben's recent work takes on this ultimately theological and Christian concept: see K, 43–59; and Giorgio Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*, (tr.) A Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 51–65. However, he had already critiqued Nietzsche's conception of will in his first book: Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, (tr.) G. Albert (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999 [1970]). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as MWC.

exhausted in the act, thereby reproducing an erroneous notion of potentiality that has characterized the West's notion of potential and actual. On the contrary, Agamben proposes a concept of potentiality as "lack" that breaks apart this potential-actual dyad that has influenced the Western tradition.

In deducing what cannot constitute ethics, firstly, ethics cannot be based on decisionism, such as utilitarian principles where a higher-order principle determines decisions all the way down, or in game-theory principles. For such thinking is overdetermined by strict modalities and *in principle* limits one's capacity to act ethically, becoming merely a following-through, "only tasks to be done." John Rawls's "veil of ignorance" follows such a logic, albeit indirectly, for it conceives of ethics in abstract terms based on a utilitarian subject position, reproducing a subjective self-interest as in game-theory (which is also based on a naturalism—see below), evacuating any authentic and contingent encounter with the other. Judith Butler, following Hannah Arendt in part and Emmanuel Levinas in particular, with the latter's notion of the "face," proposes the idea that the other impinges upon us, and that the contemporary focus on contracts and rights as the expression of our will impedes a proper encounter with that other. We are addressed by others (and this can include animal others). This impingement constitutes us against our will and emerges even "prior to the formation of our will,"[19] and is involved in discursive functions. Yet one must not underestimate that this encounter with the other is *contingent*, which means that, as Agamben asserts, we must have the capacity to *not* act, to *not not* be, which gives us our lack or fault, a "debt" (CC, 42). In other terms, what might have been is an "other," a remainder, something that is very real insofar as it is a potential to have been, and which is contained in the now: that is, the actual of the now cannot be the full expression of a potential into a hypostasis, but the pointing toward a dynamic relationship, which opens it up to ethics and politics.

Secondly, ethics can't be subject to any sort of fatalism, theological or otherwise, for then ethics would be impossible because any "destiny" would pre-determine agency. While we are all born with "fault," or "debt," this isn't in a moralistic sense, but rather a necessary part of potentiality (to not be, to not not be). In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben asserts that, following Walter Benjamin's critique of Karl Schmitt, law is residual of a state of demonic existence: law must be overcome if humanity is to be liberated from guilt, "which is nothing other than the inscription of natural life in the order of law and

---

[19] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (London: Verso, 2004), 130.

destiny." Benjamin's critique of Schmitt's juridical reduction of guilt is not the freedom of ethics, "but only the controlling force of a sovereign power (*katechon*), which can, in the best of cases, merely slow the dominion of the Antichrist."[20] What this means is not the affirmation of a theological enterprise, but the understanding of how theological forces play out in politics, and also how law and religion are themselves attempts to suture the fundamental gap between life and language.[21] The figure of the Antichrist becomes the inevitability of law as guilt under the controlling force of sovereign power that predestines us to break the law (and here we see an overlap with the Foucaultian-Butlerian discursive notion of subjection, as well as with Althusser's notion of interpellation).[22]

The juridico-political and theological dimensions of sovereignty are imbricated in a logic of the animal other that constitutes the human, as a kind of anthropogenesis. But that is precisely why, thirdly, ethics cannot be based on any naturalism, or biological/evolutionary "substance," in which language as representation starts to suture the split of language and life. In this process, there is an overlap with game-theory and utilitarian decisionism, which assume the self-interested subject as essence. This sort of naturalistic determinism generalizes experience to the point of evacuating it of any historical specificity, or "form of life." Indeed, for Agamben, the ancient distinction between biological life, what he calls "bare life," based on *zoē* (the simple fact of living common to all life forms), and political life or *bios* (the particular form of life of individuals or groups, which doesn't exclude the nonhuman), is an opposition that has gradually disappeared in modernity, reduced to one term only,

---

[20] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (tr.) D. Heller-Rozen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 28.

[21] "And it is in the attempt to check this split in the experience of language that law and religion are born, both of which seek to tie speech to things and to bind, by means of curses and anathemas, speaking subjects to the veritative power of their speech" (SOL, 58).

[22] I don't want to enter here into a discussion of the Messianic at play in Benjamin and Agamben, but point to scholars such as LaCapra, highly influential, who haven't adequately considered the ethical dimensions of Agamben's analyses, reducing them to "the immanent sublime." See Dominick LaCapra, "Approaching Limit Events: Siting Agamben," in *On Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, (ed.) M. Calarco and S. DeCaroli (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 129. For more on this question, see Matthew Abbott's book that develops a strong notion of "political ontology," *The Figure of this World: Agamben and the Question of Political Ontology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), in particular, the introduction (*e.g.*, 10, n. 7) and chapters 4 and 6. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as FW.

"life," "the opacity of which increases in proportion to the sacraliza-tion of its referent—[which] designates that naked presupposed common element that it is always possible to isolate in each of the numerous forms of life" (MWE, 2). This indistinction carries with it an unthought "sacred" aspect, and it would serve us immeasurably if we kept this in mind when thinking about the biopolitical aspects of posthumanism, for in a sense we run the risk of reproducing theolog-ical and even juridico-political risks common to biopolitics. For the stakes are high, and these naturalisms are in fact more often than not secularized political concepts. Thus Agamben is critical of Georges Bataille who, similarly to Braidotti, mistakes bare life "as separate from its form, in its abjection, for a superior principle—sovereignty or the sacred—[which constitutes] the limit of Bataille's thought" (MWE, 7). When Donna Haraway, in her "Camille" stories in *Staying with the Trouble*, suggests a version of population control in face of environmental collapse, this is at best wishful thinking, at worst a modern-day "speculative fabulation" (SF) of Malthusian population control, and neglects its own complicity with biopolitics.[23] It also seems worthwhile to interrogate the juridico-political and theologi-cal aspects of such fictions insofar as they are complicit in "the in-scription of natural life in the order of law and destiny" (see above).

Fourthly, an epistemological limit with regard to ethics in the context of posthumanism is the latter's tendency towards theories of affordance or network-based conceptions, which seem a return of sorts of systematic thinking or a form of neostructuralism. These cannot account for the singular, insofar as modes of affordance or networks constitute bare life as separate from their unique form of life, and are thus non-ethical in the above sense. Regarding networks, Alexander Galloway is critical of how their historical and material aspect is unthought (in the 19th century, we thought about thermo-dynamics because steam was the industrial paradigm; in the 21st century we're preoccupied with networks because that is the domi-nant paradigm). Furthermore, this gets into questions of "being" and the status of event, very much along the same lines as Agamben's around ethics:

---

[23] This is no doubt unfair to Haraway. She is alert to the biopolitical danger, insisting that she would never codify this at the level of state policy, but rather find ways to create social space/acceptance for people to make "diverse kin" rather than have human babies. However, it is still a notion inescapably bound to a normative problem, state policy or not. While Haraway's work has always been attentive to specificity and "situatedness," or "forms of life," this is likely a biopolitical blindspot in her thinking—which is beyond the scope of this essay, but something I will be taking up elsewhere.

> In Badiou's terms, if networks are the natural state of the situation and there is no way to deviate from nature, then there is no event, and hence no possibility for truth. Networks appear, then, as the consummate "being *without* event."[24]

"Event" here is almost synonymous[25] with what I will be calling "history" in the next section, and is inseparable from the irreducible singularity of experience, while network thinking plays out the way "nature" does, cut off from specific forms of life, "being *without* event." Likewise, affordance becomes a mere thinking about dispositions and apparatuses, and cannot account for experience which deviates from nature as it is understood in the scientific and/or biological paradigms of modernity. Nor can affordance and networks resolve the contradiction that was also at play in Pythagorean thinking, for which numbers were the origins of all things, which is, as Aristotle pointed out, an *aporia*. Here we can substitute numbers for the modalities of affordance, insofar as these function in mutually dependent totalities, like a system/structure. A sort of infinite regress happens when you try to think the whole from the parts.[26] While Barad's quantum physics is nothing like Pythagorean numbers (quantum phenomena are spatially and temporally discontinuous, foundationless, onto-epistemologically unsettled, contingent on the apparatus with which it is engaged, etc.) and vexing for Enlightenment thought generally, modern quantum physics, structuralism, and now network thinking such as Latour's ANT and affordance theory merely reproduce such a contradiction between the whole and the parts. While this is not the place to examine this problem,[27] the difference between semiotic and semantic discussed in the final part of this paper represents a way to think past this contradiction.

---

[24] Galloway, "Network Pessimism."

[25] In *K*, Agamben critiques Badiou and contemporary French thought for substituting "action" with "event" (K, 42). Event here can also be history, and not necessarily action, which Agamben critiques in the final chapter of *K*. Note also that elsewhere, Agamben critiques Badiou for thinking the subject as an encounter with truth, "leaving aside the living being as 'the animal of the human species,' as a mere support for this encounter." Giorgio Agamben, "Absolute Immanence," in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 221.

[26] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I, 990a. See MWC, 95–97.

[27] This problem will be examined in a forthcoming book project, *We Keep Being Modern*, that responds to Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, (tr.) C. Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

Finally, there is a fraught resistance to what, after Michel Foucault and Butler, has been described as discursive formation, something that gets falsely reduced to an opposition between nature and culture, one which itself reproduces an overdeterministic logic—something Foucault and Butler themselves sought to get past. Whether it is biology or discourse that "form" us is actually an unproductive opposition, and thinkers such as Barad have tried to think past this. Yet as I will try to show in the final section here on language and enunciation, we cannot get past language, and must find a new way to think the relation of language and discourse in a posthuman context, particularly since it is integral to anthropogenesis (and post-anthropogenesis, *i.e.*, posthumanism).

All these reflections therefore point to ethics as open, as focused on specificity and history. Ethics as contingent, as a possibility of being or doing and of not doing and not being, but even more so, as the possibility of "not not" being or doing, which is the experience of potentiality. That potentiality is a debt or lack because of its contingency. Agamben distinguishes this original lack from the blameworthy sin that "shackles…potentiality, turning it back toward the past" (CC, 43), which is echoed in his analysis of Benjamin's critique of Schmitt on guilt. The experience of potentiality is "exposing, that is, in every form one's own amorphousness and in every act one's own inactuality," whereas morality always regards potentiality as something to be repressed (CC, 43), which "merely slows the dominion of the Antichrist."[28] This is why a model of *potentia* like Braidotti's, while in spirit seeking an open-ended relationality, cannot allow for a truly open ethics if it doesn't conceive of "actuality" as simultaneously inactual, or what Agamben elsewhere calls "impotentiality,"[29] potential as inexhaustible. The final part of this essay will look at how "pure mediality" enacts such "inactuality," suspension and inexhaustibility: that is, potentiality.

History, Language, and Enunciation

How does one think about history from a posthuman perspective? I want to think about history as witnessing, as something human. If language is the basis of history (in the sense of accounting for events and past states), how do we account for experience in common with

---

[28] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 28.
[29] Based on Aristotle's *adynamia* (literally, non-possibility, *Metaphysics*, 1046e, 25–32). See Agamben, "Absolute Immanence," 180–84.

the animal or inanimate except through language? This creates a circularity. The non-human, post-human, animate, etc. invariably revert to the human. "Human history," writes Damiano Roberi,

> even though it represents an insignificant time lapse compared to that of the whole planet, requires nonetheless philosophical reflection able to recognize the radical interference of Man [*sic*] in Nature, now more than ever. This is precisely one of the political tasks (or, rather, the political task) of our times, indeed a "new axial age."[30]

Yet the notion of history as "species isolation" or "ecological niche" has a certain limit and doesn't get us any closer to grasping the problems I've highlighted. For, moreover, as Roberi states, we can't talk about a "niche," as "Nature is not properly 'outside' History, nor is History 'within' Nature,"[31] and this requires us to think a two-way relationship. (Roberi hints to Agamben's constitutive exclusion of the sovereign exception as a possible way.) Yet this is hardly new, and doesn't take into consideration language; and the problem of history in the nature-culture dynamic has been reflected upon by Agamben himself as early as the late 1970s, in *Infancy and History*.[32]

The problem of history amounts to the following: history is witnessing, accounting for events or states of being in the past, yet involved in this witnessing is the problem of language, which can be a barrier insofar as we cannot speak of non-linguistic phenomena except in linguistic terms. History is itself an event, inseparable from its taking-place. Furthermore, the relative importance of history to our experience is a constant problem, because the past is constantly arriving from the future. This problem has been noted in most articulations of Western thought in the last 200 years, whether in phenomenology, deconstruction, epistemology, or historical materialism. Since G. W. F. Hegel, the problem of experience has acquired a new importance because human subjectivity was considered to be subject to time, and thus to multiple histories of the present. Yet we are unable to communicate our experiences with the non-human except in very basic or highly contingent ways, mostly as related to necessity; and since we have no way of confirming through mutual

---

[30] Damiano Roberi, "History as an Ecological Niche Beyond Benjamin's Nature," in *Philosophy After Nature*, (ed.) R. Braidotti and R. Dolphijn (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 141.
[31] *Ibid.*, 143.
[32] Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*, (tr.) L. Heron (London: Verso, 1993 [1978]). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as IH.

communication whether the non-human is capable of experience or of history, an important challenge for posthumanism is to determine what precisely the role of history is in a posthuman context, particularly since history is the mark of irreducible experience.

History gives us our specificity, and assumes that our individual experience requires an account, however difficult that might be, insofar as our experience cannot be reduced to a general law or essence. If our experience were thus reducible, history would not be required because all experience would be explained by laws, essences and determinations more generally speaking—and this is how the non-human has been conceived: as deprived of history or specificity. The humanist point of view can be summed up in some ways by Hannah Arendt's description of the human as mortal, which evokes Hegel's *Tod als Tod kennen* via Heidegger's "Tod als Tod erfahren können": to be mortal is the experience of knowing/being capable of experiencing death as death (the translation inadequately reproduces it as "Mortals are they who can experience death as death").[33] Where the gods and nature are immortal, humans are mortal precisely insofar as their history dies with them, whereas animals are uniquely involved in regeneration (and have therefore no specificity).[34] Whether we agree with this distinction (from animals) of the human as knowing death as death, the frame it provides for understanding the human is valid insofar as each individual human being has a specific history that dies with them, and their immortality can be attained through an account, or history, which involves language. Indeed, stated inversely, as Benjamin describes it, "The work is the death mask of its conception."[35] That is, that which was irreducible can no longer be said, because language poses an essential blockage to individual life. The question thus is whether history is a proper framework for thinking the posthuman, in view of its limitations.

For Benveniste, history involves discourse insofar as discourse is involved in a world, a situation of enunciation that is unique and irreducible. Benveniste is an important thinker for the problem of language, for while Heidegger proposed an ontological point of view with respect to *Dasein* and thus specificity and the need for a better

---

[33] Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, (tr.) P. D. Hertz, (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 107–108. Quoted by Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death*, (tr.) K. E. Pinkus with M. Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xi.

[34] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

[35] Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, (tr.) P. Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1986), 81.

consideration of situatedness, he did not provide a linguistic theory as such for situatedness. What Benveniste contributes is, in linguistic terms, a discursive and meta-enunciative way to think the Saussurian distinction between *langue* and *parole*; that is, between general language systems and specific instances of enunciation. If for Saussure *langue* was a system of signs (any language), *parole* was its specific usages across history and place. Yet the story is much more complicated. For Saussure, the barrier between the *langue* and *parole* was insurmountable because *parole* is arbitrary: the signifier in *parole* is cut off from the signified to which it refers, because the signifier "floats," has an arbitrary relation to its signified. As a consequence, language was seen to be an impossible problem, of which deconstruction was perhaps the most significant expression: if the signifier and signified have an arbitrary relation, then words always carry *différance* and supplementarity.

Yet there was a missed opportunity in Benveniste's thought about language, and the opportunity provided by Benvenistian enunciation might have steered posthumanist theory down a different path; insofar as much of the latter appeared in the "wake of deconstruction" with its focus on indeterminacy and undecidability against reductionist desires for meaning.[36] For while deconstruction was right to steer interpretation away from reductionism and overdetermination as essentially *phallogocentric*, it took the risk of presupposing a transcendental signified in a negative mode.[37] That is, while we might not have access to the signified, it is still presupposed to exist, even if it might forever slip from our grasp. That is, the essential structure of signifier/signified is still presupposed. This aporia has not been accounted for in posthuman thinkers in the deconstructive tradition such as Vicki Kirby. Benveniste's work in the Saussurian tradition represents a fundamental shift in the conception of the sign in its relation to the world, one that has been largely ignored, but which might thoroughly shift the debates about posthumanism and the problem of history. For once we can bring the question of history back into the terrain of linguistics, yet one free of the Western domination of the signified, then we might be able to begin to account for experience as fundamentally situated. For Benveniste,

---

[36] Barbara Johnson, *The Wake of Deconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

[37] Agamben's most important early intervention on this is in *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, (tr.) R. L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993 [1977]). See also Kevin Attell's important study of Agamben and Derrida, *Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

the problem of *langue* and *parole* was not one of general and particular, but of a fundamental gap between two systems of analysis, and the difficulty of bridging the gap between semiotics and semantics.

Language and/as History

I have discussed the double problem of semiotics: firstly, that human language is the only semiotic system that can speak about itself; secondly, that there is an impossibility of speaking of the non-linguistic except in linguistic terms. These two aspects depend upon language as relational, with its "plexus of eternally negative differences" (PLG, 41/36). This characterized the starting point of the problem of difference in the 20th century. Yet the negative ground of difference isn't by necessity nihilistic. It is only nihilistic when it is submitted to the categories of reason and, in linguistic terms, representation. *Différance*, supplementarity, trace, and other terms in the Derridean canon all signal a conception of the sign that uphold the eternal/metaphysical signified, even if in negative terms. However, Benveniste modified the arbitrariness of the signifier-signified relation to describe an arbitrary relation between sign (that includes the signifier and signified) and the world or reality. Signs function quite well within a given language system. For example, the function of traffic lights can eventually be explained to an imaginary extra-terrestrial (the red signifier directly corresponds to the "stop" signified). Signs function within systems (are thus negative), and there are differing degrees of play within given systems (emojis have much more play than traffic lights). But language cannot be simply reduced to code and semiotic systems, because it happens in a "world," in a discursive context. That is why Benveniste's distinction between semiotic (reception) and semantic (understanding) is important. Machines, single-cell organisms, DNA/RNA, bees etc. all involve code, just as human language does (and just as human language would not exist without DNA). While the latter is context-dependent and flexible, code is fixed: a bee's dance always signifies particular instructions/directions (although miscommunication is possible); software malfunctions if there are encoding errors. As we've seen, history is about individual experience, and this is where semantics become important because semantics requires understanding the very specific, discursive circumstances of enunciation. Yet since history as experience is singular, the problem becomes one of experience as separate from scientific understanding; communication as being involved in that experience, as history, the paradoxical need to relate/communicate a presuppositional form that is singular.

For Agamben, in *Infancy and History* (1978), "infancy" is a solution to the problem of the gap between semiotic and semantic. Contrary to the usual assertion that humans are *homo loquens*, humans don't speak from birth (they need to learn language), and thus they don't enter into semiotics without radically transforming language into discourse.

> It thus becomes clear in what sense Benveniste's "double signification" should be construed. Semiotic and semantic are not in substance two realities but are, rather, the two transcendental limits which define and simultaneously are defined by man's [*sic*] infancy. The semiotic is nothing other than the pure pre-babble language of nature, in which man [*sic*] shares in order to speak, but from which the Babel of infancy perpetually withdraws him. The semantic does not exist except in its momentary emergence from the semiotic in the instance of discourse, whose elements, once uttered, fall back into pure language, which reassembles them in its mute dictionary of signs. Like dolphins, for a mere instant human language lifts its head from the semiotic sea of nature. But the human is nothing other than this very passage from pure language to discourse; and this transition, this instant, is history. (IH, 55–56)

So we have a radically different notion of history here, one that is situated in the immanence of transition ("the instance of discourse"), and in which the semiotic and semantic are fundamentally unbridgeable, but which nevertheless occurs. This occurrence is itself history, what Agamben frequently calls the "taking-place of language," or "experiment of language" (*experimentum linguae*).[38] Agamben:

> The moat between voice and language (like that between language and discourse, potency and act) can open the space of ethics and the *polis* precisely because there is no *arthros*, no articulation between *phone* and *logos*. The voice has never been written into language, and the *gramma* (as Derrida fortuitously demonstrated) is but the very form of the presupposing of self and of potency. The space between voice and *logos* is an empty space, a limit in the Kantian sense. Only because man [*sic*] finds himself cast into language without the vehicle of a voice, and only because the *experimentum linguae* lures him [*sic*], grammarless, into

---

[38] See IH, 3–10. But this was already at play in *Stanzas*, and continues even into his most recent work, such as Giorgio Agamben, *What is Philosophy?*, (tr.) L. Chiesa (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018 [2016]); and *K*.

> that void and that *aphonia*, do an *ethos* and a community of any kind become possible. (IH, 8–9)

This ethical community comes about because communication is impotential: that is, the other of communication can never be presupposed, and the difference between life, gesture, performance, the material, and language as a taking-place cannot be overcome, and indeed contains the negation at the heart of the West's anthropogenesis.[39] And it must always be attended to as irreparable, with things "just as they are, in this or that mode, consigned without remedy to their way of being" (CC, 89). Properly speaking, this irreparable is

> neither an essence nor an existence, neither a substance nor a quality, neither a possibility nor a necessity. It is not properly a modality of being, but it is the being that is always already given in modality, that *is* its modalities. It is not *thus*, but rather it is *its* thus. (*Ibid.*, 91)

Language as taking-place is also therefore an enunciative irreducibility, beyond qualities and substance, categories to which language of representation has been bound.

Many contemporary thinkers fail to see the specific difference of what characterizes human language. History after ethics in this sense of the irreparable is the irreducible singularity of history, which hitherto must include the animal. But as I've tried to assert here, it cannot be from the point of view of a determinism, an essence, natural law, etc., which are forms of violence on the body and an erasure of experience. Thinking the animal cannot be a reproduction of biopolitical paradigms, as form-of-law or natural law. The failure to recognize the distinction between semiotic and semantic occurs in Michel Serres, for instance, when he says that humans are not

> the only ones endowed with the capability to count or remember; the trees calculate their years, crowned in their wood. Nor are we the only ones endowed with the capability to code; everything ultimately gets spelled out in the language of mathematics. I have

---

[39] This is one of the central concerns of *Language and Death*, a pivotal text between the early works (*Stanzas*, *IH*) and the later work on biopolitics, in particular *SOL* and more recently in *What is Philosophy?* This negative capability at the heart of language (the human capable of dying and of language—see Agamben, *Language and Death*, xii) makes us "groundless" in the Heideggerian sense.

already said that we think like the world; now I am saying that the world thinks like us.[40]

Again, at a basic linguistics level, this fails to recognize that we cannot reduce human language to code. Braidotti: "We are becoming *posthuman ethical subjects* in our multiple capacities for relations of all sorts and modes of communication by codes that transcend the linguistic sign by exceeding it in many directions" (P, 190; my emphasis). Absolutely, yet computer code or DNA code cannot provide a medium capable of *accounting* for this.

Such posthuman thinkers assume an easy notion of language and discourse, yet fail to differentiate between semiotic systems and semantics. This leads to seeing language on the same level as nature, which is false, as I've tried to show. Language still needs conceptualization when considering ethics. We cannot think ethics without the other, and this other is discursive/historical and irreducible to the general. History is witnessing (*hístōr* in Ancient Greek means "witness"[41]), which can be the "face" in Butler (after Levinas). Also, language is history in that we can only account for it *post facto*. Language is itself an event, the "taking-place of language."

Furthermore, while we try to abandon subjectivity, which is the goal for a philosopher like Agamben, one cannot rethink agency if one is still within the logic of the subject, even if it is rocks, as in Mel Y. Chen's example of "the hikers that rocks crush,"[42] and still falls into the logic of passive and active.[43] Whereas if we look at the logic of enunciation, the logic of what we consider to be in modernity as Subject+Verb+Object was not the case in Ancient Greece, for instance, and is truly reflective of modern representation based on the subject. For instance, Agamben has discussed the use of the verb *chresis* ("use"),[44] the use of which depends upon the context, to thus think otherwise than in subjective terms. This is because it puts the subject in relation to their body (UOB, 28–29), at once acting and being acted upon, making it no longer "possible to distinguish be-

---

[40] Michel Serres, "Information and Thinking," in *Philosophy After Nature*, 16.

[41] Cf. IH, 94: "*Hístōr* is in origin the eyewitness, the one who has seen."

[42] Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 2.

[43] See for instance the critique of Barad's active vs passive logic in Caroline Braunmühl, "Beyond Hierarchical Oppositions: A Feminist Critique of Karen Barad's Agential Realism," *Feminist Theory*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2018): 223–40.

[44] Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, (tr.) A. Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015 [2014]), 24–30. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as UOB.

tween agent and patient but also subject and object, constituent and constituted" (*ibid.*, 29), thereby offering "a Mater form of human praxis" (*ibid.*, 30). In this way, the enunciative can actually provide a better model for postsubjective/posthuman agency.

Finally, Sean Meighoo, discussing Benveniste's and Lacan's distinction between language and code[45] as diverging from Heidegger's distinction between comportment and behavior, characterizes the structuralist distinction between the human and the animal as being flexible to both accommodate any evidence of the capacity for language among nonhuman animals and to maintain the presupposition of human exceptionalism at once. Meighoo repeats the logical fallacy that affirming the distinction between human and nonhuman implies not being attentive to the nonhuman; or conversely, that if we managed to "posthumanize" theory somehow we'd have a better ethical relationship with the nonhuman world. To which we could jokingly reply that "not all posthumanists are vegans," which signals that purely ethical behaviour towards the nonhuman is impossible, and that therefore this is a case of merely reproducing Schmitt's logic of guilt. Besides this, there are too many logical *aporia* for a hard and fast posthumanism to hold water. Feminism, to use but one example, is an eminently "human" problem: feminism does not exist in "nature" (not that culture is outside nature) and indeed is an ethical relation against a supposed naturalism of gender normativity. These problems are by-products of discourse and social apparatuses, as well as resistances to it, and can evolve into open ethical relations to the other[46] in a political context. They have their truth as a "taking-place of language," but that taking-place is irreducible to constructivism or naturalism, and actually attempts to break the bind of apparatuses and system-thinking.

---

[45] Sean Meighoo, "Human Language, Animal Code, and the Question of Beeing," *Humanimalia*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2017), [https://www.depauw.edu/humanimalia/issue%2016/meighoo.html].

[46] In this sense, I would disagree with Wall's framing that the difference between Agamben and Levinas is that Agamben "distances himself from Levinas since his is closer to *ethos* or *habitus*—way of or manner of living—than to Levinas's obligation, responsibility, gravity, hostage, and substitution." Thomas Carl Wall, "Emmanuel Levinas and Giorgio Agamben: Ethics, Aesthetics, Poetics, Politics," in *A Companion to Literary Theory*, (ed.) D.H. Richter (Hoboken: Wiley, 2018), 252. Actually, deeply inscribed in Agamben's notion of communication is an open ethics of the other.

Conclusion: Language as "Pure Means"

"Pure mediality," through Benvenistian enunciation, enacts inactuality, suspension, and inexhaustibility: that is, potentiality. This is against any notion of language as information, as in the model of information theory, where language is a mere means to communicate information (and where the goal is to inhibit parasites and interruptions), or where animality is the "mere support" for the encounter with truth.[47] It is also resolutely opposed to thinking about the modalities of language in agential terms, such as in Latour or Barad. Rather, it seeks to think how language might create the space of a "pure means" or "mediality," which means the revealing (in the Heideggerian sense) language's mediality in itself. Thus language can be a model for how to enter into a dialogue with nature, rather than being a fool's errand of "representing" nature. Language therefore is experience, a going-through. It is a utopic space, the type of space we might generate to reveal immanent historical unfoldings which are inexhaustible, which are not expression and actualization/exhaustion of some energy, but rather the laying bare of an inexhaustibility, suspension and ἐποχέ (*epokhē*, MWC, 101); that is, an irreducible time and moment in which is suspended and given our historical dimension (*ibid.*, 100).

If "for Barad relations precede relata, which then alter relations. And properties, which we commonly understand as the possessions of individuals, are instead emergent features of entangled phenomena,"[48] for Agamben, the problem of relata becomes the essential problem of language, which thus is on an entirely different plane, because language and the world do not overlap, and we cannot relate relata, except through "the unrelated with which language has established its relation."[49] It would seem that, in this division, Agamben would fall squarely on the side of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), insofar as Agamben sees the immanent object as isolated and unrelatable, yet "sayable." Yet that would be too hasty. If, for Derrida, language is a correlational limit, for Agamben following Benjamin and Foucault, where relations are the product of discourse, semantics, world, and the presuppositional nature of language which engenders apparati, resistance implies decreation. This implies an open ethics, based on potentiality and contingency, on the irreducibility of historical experience. And it is an opening. Poetic language,

[47] Agamben, "Absolute Immanence," 221.
[48] Sheldon, "Form / Matter / Chora," 202.
[49] Giorgio Agamben, *What is Philosophy?*, 35.

for instance,[50] is an experience of materiality that opens us rather than closing us in the way OOO describes it.

As with Barthes' "grain of the voice," there is a fundamental contingency when we hear a singer or read a text, or encounter language more generally. Materiality is contingent and depends upon a specific taking-place that can never be confirmed. This means at once that posthumanism in this sense is highly theoretical without being able to justify itself in a material way. For no general semiotics exists. While semiotics might be entangled with materiality (as in the New-Materialist sense), this cannot be an analytical tool because it cannot be proven or reproduced, only speculated upon, as in statements by Serres and Braidotti. We don't know how an enunciation is "entangled," nor can we prove anything with this knowledge. If someone said "the humanist project, with 'Man' [*sic*] at its centre, excludes the animal other," this statement would be made to fellow humans, not to animals. There is no way of determining how this statement is neo-material, nor how it "matters" to actual debates about animal others. The only way of analysing this statement is in its discursive and historical-material contexts. Agamben, drawing on Beneviste's theories, shows a way to think about language as event without our being forced into the trap of human subjectivity. This is because we think of linguistic events as positional or situated, and as having an historical intelligibility (implying epistemology, ontology and the onto-political[51]).

It might be more helpful to work in the other direction: because encounters with life are in essence contingent, our attempts to account for experience force us to encounter language, and language as such cannot be struck out of this encounter. Language is the most dangerous presupposition, especially in its instrumental, representational and designative function (FW, 35). If we assume that our posthuman thinking needs to be transformed in order to enter into a better relationship with the nonhuman, then we need to think about how language plays a role in that. Language is entangled with thought, but both of these are entangled with gesture:

---

[50] See in particular Abbott's discussion of poetic language in Heidegger and Agamben (FW, 33–53). However, Abbott surprisingly neglects to discuss Benveniste when talking about the difference between language and discourse (*e.g.*, FW, 42), especially considering how important Benveniste is to Agamben, throughout his career.

[51] For the onto-political, see "The Question of Political Ontology" in FW, 13–29.

> [I]t is an activity or a potential that consists in deactivating hu-
> man works and rendering them inoperative, and in this way, it
> opens them to a new, possible use. This holds both for the opera-
> tions of the body and for those of the mind: gesture exposes and
> contemplates the sensation in sensation, the thought in thought,
> the art in art, the speech in speech, the action in action. (K, 84)

In the same way that he describes *epokhē*, Agamben here sees a
suspension, an unfolding, and a breaking down of the work. Gesture
is for him an alternative to the false opposition between *poiēsis*,
productivity, on the one hand, which has resulted in humanity's most
violent relationship to nature, and to praxis on the other, which is
action without end.[52]

Perhaps it is useful here to end with the problem of use, which is
connected to pure mediality. If mediality allows us to render inoper-
ative the work of contemporary culture which has had devastating
anthropogenetic effects on the planet, the connection to the problem
of ethics and potentiality should be clearer. Rather than beings with
a "will" to express (or any of the ethical determinisms), there is the
possibility of an open relationship to nature to the extent that our
gestures allow for new possible uses that evade the instrumental and
culture can enter into a new experience. Agamben's inoperative
potentiality is a neutralising of work similar to Heidegger's equip-
mental breakdown (Cf. FW, 44–45), but one in which the meaning is
dissolved, thereby freeing language, gesture, performance, mediality
to appear as such, which opens us up to a new way of being. And it is
what Marielle Macé (inspired by Agamben) calls "individuation"—
that is, individuals without properties or identity. Rather than an
impasse of method which prevents us from grasping the common
(and we can connect this to Agamben's theory of communication), it
is "a call to recognize the reserve of *individuation* which is at work in
all of our gestures, and the encouragement towards a practice of
thinking as individuation, which chooses in the multiple singularities
of literature its proper measure and milieu."[53] While this is about

---

[52] The chapter "Beyond Action" (K, 60–85) develops a genealogy of the
means/ends problem, taking as a starting point Arendt's notion of action, and
moving from Ancient Greece via, notably, Marcus Terentius Varro and Immanuel
Kant to Benjamin, whose "pure means/mediality" is the philosophical core of the
chapter.
[53] My translation of "c'est l'appel à la reconnaissance de la réserve
d'individuation qui est à l'œuvre dans tous nos gestes, et l'encouragement à une
pratique de la pensée elle-même comme individuation, qui choisit dans les

literature, it can (so the claim has been made here regarding the relationship between language and the posthuman) also be said about our relationship to nonhuman multiplicities and "forms of life," which is an ethically and irreducibly singular experience of history.

derosnay@uvic.ca

---

singularités multiples de la littérature sa bonne échelle et son milieu." Marielle Macé, *Façons de lire, manières d'être* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016), 18.