

for thought is to think the limits between “extortion and exposition,” and also between Marx’s revolution and the “one in which we are perhaps underway without our knowledge” (53).

Readers of this work will greatly benefit—not often the case with Nancy’s works—from an excellent translation and introduction by François Raffoul and David Pettigrew. The introduction sets the stage for Nancy’s essays by casting them against his work on the deconstruction of Christianity and the more general concerns in recent Continental thought with deconstructing the history of onto-theology. The original text is, at parts, all but untranslatable, but Raffoul and Pettigrew manage to keep the tone of Nancy’s style without rendering the work unreadable and unclear in English—quite a challenge given the work at hand.

“How you engage the world?,” Nancy asks, a refrain that Raffoul and Pettigrew take up in their introduction. Abandoned to it and from it, Nancy’s thought marks a need for another thinking of creation, another thinking of the world than that bequeathed by the onto-theological tradition.

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Profanations

Giorgio Agamben

Tr. Jeff Fort, New York: Zone Books, 2007; 99 pages

Agamben’s central concerns in *Profanations* are happiness and the problems lying in wait for the future political task of securing it. It can be read as a sequel to *The Coming Community* (1990; tr. 1993) for the proximity of concerns and manner of their constellation. Although there is no topic here that Agamben has not touched upon elsewhere in a different way, this collection is singular among Agamben’s books for its personal and congenial tone. Agamben begins the first essay with the topic of *Genius*, the Latin name for that divine and most personal part within every person that is also the most impersonal, something that exceeds the ego; that pre-individual element that accompanies us from birth to death; a residue that is part of “a certain non-individuated share of reality” (12).

“Indulging the *Genius*” constitutes the secret in the secret relationship each person must maintain with his own *Genius*; and it is not a matter of claiming or pretending to be one, but a matter of ‘having a relationship with’

and ultimately, of ‘submitting to’ because His happiness is really our happiness; and that if we are to be happy, we must know how to consent and abandon ourselves to the implacable demands of our own *Genius*, no matter how unreasonable. This strange, paradoxical relationship of intimacy and separation between one’s ego and one’s *Genius* founds the value and purpose of “profanation” that is at the core of the Roman practice of *religio*, which is the name, Agamben shows, for the structure of separation and removal, not of binding as the “insipid and incorrect” etymology would have it. The word, he claims, does not derive from *religare*—to bind and unite the human and the divine—but from *relegare*, “which indicates the stance of scrupulousness and attention that must be adopted in relation to the gods, the uneasy hesitation (the ‘rereading [*rileggere*]’) before forms—and formulae—that must be observed in order to respect the separation between the sacred and the profane. *Religio* is not what unites men and the gods but what ensures they remain distinct” (74–5).

By way of *religio*, then, Agamben explains profanation: a politics that allows for the returning of things that once belonged to the gods to the free use of men. If Agamben is insistent on the possibility of a politics that is “profane,” it is because he is opposed to one that is “secular” (*pace* Schmitt); because unlike secularization, which is a form of repression that merely shifts around while leaving intact all the theological concepts—God as sovereign power, for example—profanation neutralizes what it profanes. That is to say, that which was once unavailable for common use, as soon as it is profaned, loses its aura of separateness and is returned to use. In seeking a profane politics against one that is secular, Agamben is trying to champion the cause of a special kind of negligence.

Unhappily, from this point on, the line of inquiry regarding profanation as play begins to become more segmented and progressively less convincing. The examples Agamben uses to elaborate his point, which remains vague without any poetry, only further aggravate the lack of clarity. Agamben imagines by way of Kafka through Benjamin, that “(j)ust as the *religio* that is played with but no longer observed opens the gate to use, so the powers (*potenze*) of economics, law, and politics, deactivated in play, can become the gateway to a new happiness” (76).

Agamben claims that because of capitalism, all things, including ourselves, are caught between spectacle and consumption and, therefore, nothing is available to true use, which, he emphasizes, is strictly a matter of relationship. Agamben opines that capitalism, or rather the religion of capitalism, in its extreme phase aims at creating something absolutely unprofanable. That is,

something that cannot be used but only given over to spectacular exhibition or to consumption. In attempting to force the issue of how profanation would allow for a new use so that we may play with whatever it is that is supposed to profaned, Agamben cites several examples, ranging from the irrelevant to the bizarre. To wit: a cat playing with a ball of yarn “liberates the mouse from being a prey and the predatory activity from being necessarily directed toward the capture and death of the mouse” (86).

As we could have expected, pornography (and by extension, fashion shows) take the pride of place in Agamben’s indictment of capitalism for its abominable creation of the unprofanable as such. But this is a rhetorical gesture that is so sweeping as well as swiping that it is unusable in the long run. Agamben’s argument, despite its learned references, is so segmented in addition to being weird, it is difficult to make sense of the reasons Agamben gives for choosing, of all things, pornography as the paragon of the unprofanable created by the religion of capitalism.

To be sure, this work remains vulnerable to objections and criticism at multiple points. Not only can Agamben’s argument be readily countered by liberatory examples of profanation currently underway in popular culture, but for Agamben to insist so narrowly that profanation is a political task for some future generation only weakens what is potentially convincing about it. The possibility of anything, including profanation, holds sway only to the extent that its own impossibility does; and it is between these two poles of potentiality that the ethics of *bios politikos* gets vectorized *vis-à-vis* the *nomos* of politics—whether as the *polis* or the camp. There is much pleasure to be had in reading *Profanations*, but, ultimately, Agamben is not persuasive as to why or how the task of profanation should be held as a more fundamental political objective over that of any other ideal that also has a claim on the possibility of *eudaimonia*.

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The Philosophy of Edith Stein

Antonio Calcagno

Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007; 151 pages

In the Introduction, Calcagno contrasts his text with many other works available on Stein. He says that his aim is not simply to present Stein’s ideas but to