Homo profanus: Giorgio Agamben's Profane Philosophy

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Giorgio Agamben's work first achieved international recognition—and notoriety—through his study of the sacred in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (first published in 1995, and translated into English in 1998). This recognition and notoriety grew with the subsequent installments in this still ongoing series, *Remnants of Auschwitz (Homo Sacer III)*, *State of Exception (Homo Sacer II.1)*, and *The Kingdom and the Glory (Homo Sacer II.2)*.[1] Agamben's recent work *Profanations* is, however, not a part of that series. As its title indicates, it turns from the sacred to the profane, and in so doing reveals the most profound intentions of Agamben's philosophy.

Agamben's naming the profane rather than the sacred in the title of this work does not, for as much, represent a turn to a new topic. Beginning

Where available, I provide both the reference for the English translation as well as the original. The first page number will refer to the English; the second will refer to the original. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

1. These volumes were published anachronistically, with *Homo Sacer III* appearing in 1998 (translated in 2002), *Homo Sacer II.1* in 2002 (translated 2003), and *Homo Sacer II.2* in 2007 (untranslated). The English translation of *State of Exception* does not note the work's subtitle (*Homo Sacer II.1*).

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with his first books in the 1970s, he has shown himself profoundly interested in the idea of the profane, in significant part through terms and concepts employed by Walter Benjamin such as "profane illumination" and "the order of the profane." In his *Homo Sacer* project, this idea of the profane has followed Agamben's studies of the sacred like a shadow. With this new work, however, it has moved to the center of his reflections and in so doing offers his reader a glimpse of hitherto unseen elements in his personal trajectory, his philosophical vocation, and his political project. The works in the *Homo Sacer* series have compellingly and persuasively argued that the creating of sacred and sovereign states of exception has often been responsible for the dire states of political affairs we find ourselves in. *Profanations* seeks to offer a solution.

The central chapter of *Profanations* is programmatically entitled "In Praise of Profanation [*Elogio della profanazione*]." Its point of departure, like that of *Homo Sacer*, is both juridical and historical. "Roman jurists knew perfectly well what it meant 'to profane,'" he begins.[2] The *homo sacer* that gave the series its name was a juridical figure from ancient Rome. *Homo sacer* designated an individual in archaic Roman law who, in response to a grave trespass, was cast out of the city-state. From the moment of his pronouncement as a *homo sacer*, he could be killed with complete impunity but not employed in sacrificial rituals that required the taking of a life. This "sacred man" was thus isolated from the continuum of social activity and communal legislation. The only law that could be said to apply to him was the one that irrevocably cast him out of the communal sphere. After noting in the first volume of the series that "the protagonist of this book is bare life," Agamben offered a gloss of what he meant: "that is, the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), who *may be killed and yet not sacrificed*, and whose essential function [*funzione*] in modern politics we intend to assert."[3] As his readers learned over the course of the books to come, this "essential function" is, for modern politics, an ominous one.[4]

2. Giorgio Agamben, *Profanazioni* (Roma: Nottetempo, 2005), 83. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *Profanazioni*.
3. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 8. *Homo Sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita* (Torino: Einaudi, 1995), 11–12; Agamben's emphasis. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *HS*.
4. Though it was in this book and those to follow that this figure was principally studied, Agamben had, in fact, long been interested in this *homo sacer*. After analyzing the logic of sacralization, whereby an object is removed from the profane realm and raised to the sacred, Agamben evokes at the end of his *Language and Death* (1982) the figure of the

Turning to the profane, while Roman jurists may have been clear as to what it meant to profane, it is Agamben's contention that we have lost a sense for it and thereby opened ourselves to terrible dangers. As early as *Language and Death*, Agamben had stressed, "the sacred is necessarily an ambiguous and circular notion," and in the works to come he graphically illustrated this idea.[5] In his more recent work he has found that the profane also contains ambiguities and circularities in need of clarification. "Sacred or religious," writes Agamben in *Profanations*, "are those things that belonged in one fashion or another to the gods" (*Profanazioni*, 83). For this reason, "they were removed from the free usage [*al libero uso*] and commerce of mankind, and could not be sold, given as deposit, or ceded in usufruct" (*Profanazioni*, 83). The idea of "sacrilege" stemmed from this circumscription and consisted in its violation. For Agamben, profanation is, however, best understood in relation to another term: *consecration*. "If consecration was the term that denoted the leaving of the sphere of human law, profanation signified returning something to the free usage of mankind" (*Profanazioni*, 83). To profane was thus *to return* the things that had become subject to a state of sacred exception—things that had been consecrated—to their original context.

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homo sacer along with the juridical definition of his status. See Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 105, translation modified. *Il linguaggio e la morte: un seminario sul luogo della negatività* (Torino: Einaudi, 1982), 131–32.

Eight years later, the last chapter of *The Coming Community* comes closer to *Homo Sacer* in its raising of the question of the paradoxical status of the Roman conception of *sacer.* See Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 86–87. *La comunità che viene*, Nuova edizione accresciuta (1990; repr., Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2001), 68–69. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *CC*. With *Homo Sacer*, this question had moved to the center of Agamben's interests—crystallized in a single, fragile figure. Agamben told interviewers in 2001, "I was always fascinated by the Latin formula that describes the *homo sacer*" ("Das unheilige Leben: Ein Gespräch mit dem italienischen Philosophen Giorgio Agamben," interview with Hannah Leitgeb and Cornelia Vismann, *Literaturen* [Berlin] 2, no. 1 [January 2001]: 17). Elaborating on this fascination, he remarked, "I found this definition many, many years ago and for long years since always carried it around with me like a package, like a riddle [*ein Rätsel*], until I finally thought, now I must finally grasp [*begreifen*] it" ("Das unheilige Leben," 17). *Homo Sacer* and the works to follow chronicle Agamben's attempt to grasp this figure and relate it to events ancient and modern—leading him from Roman jurisprudence to German extermination camps, to the history of the state of exception that he sees characterizing our contemporary political landscape.

5. Agamben, *Language and Death*, 105/131–32.

From the above we can easily see that Agamben's conception of the relation of sacred to profane is a *desacralized* one. In his account, there is nothing inherently sacred in sacred things, just as there is nothing inherently contaminated in profane ones. They are, for him, categories like others, buttressed by those in whose interest it was to have and hold fast to such distinctions. For Agamben, to profane something is thus in no sense to debase its nature or reduce its value. It is, instead, a positive act for the simple reason that it liberates things and practices for communal usage. Agamben will thus write that "pure, profane, and liberated from sacred names [*dai nomi sacri*] is the thing returned to the common use of mankind" (*Profanazioni*, 83). This chain of adjectives—"*pure, profane, free*"—shows the intent of profanation and the reason Agamben wishes to praise it. Its goal is to free things from the "sacred names" that set them apart as the province of the few; it is to return the things of the world to their natural context: "common usage."

Given this view, the return of the things of the world to their original context, where they would be subject to a "free usage," seems like a natural movement, but how one is to envision this transition is another matter. In *Means without End*, Agamben declared ". . . that which demands reflection is the possibility and the modalities of a *free usage* [*uso libero*]."[6] In an interview with the French magazine *Vacarme*, he offered an illustration of what he envisioned under the sign of such a free usage, discussing the debate that sprang up between the church and the Franciscan order about a "free usage" of the things of the world. Not only did the Franciscans reject the idea that they possessed personal property, they also refused to accept communal property (in the name of the order). The church suggested that they classify their manner of living as "*droit d'usage*" (*usufructus*, as distinguished from the right of ownership). Agamben relates that the Franciscan order retorted (in his own paraphrase), "*Non, ce n'est pas un droit d'usage, c'est de l'usage sans droit* [No, not a rightful usage, but usage without right]."[7] This makes clear that the "free usage" in question is not simply one with a more ample or liberal legal definition, but one that categorically rejects the idea of legitimate ownership. This "lawless usage" is not

6. Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 117. *Mezzi senza fine: Note sulla politica* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1996), 93, translation modified; Agamben's emphasis. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *MWE*.
7. "Une biopolitique mineure: un entretien avec Giorgio Agamben," *Vacarme* (Paris), 10 (Winter 1999): 7.

a purely anarchic usage, but it is one that rejects the paradigms offered by the juridical culture of its day and carried the revolutionary implication that "lawful usage," as then understood by church and state, was far from just. It should come as no surprise that Agamben returns to the idea of a free usage called for by the Franciscans, and that John XXII responded to with such vehemence, in *Profanations* (see *Profanazioni*, 94–96). The idea of a "lawless usage" or a "usage without right" corresponds to a "free usage" to which the things of the world—and above all those things and practices that have been consecrated by a sacred few—be "returned" to their original context. "Free usage" is thus communal and even communist usage, but it is also more than this, and its understanding implies a new conception of the categories of law and usage.

Here Agamben's reader is confronted with the difficult question of how to reconceive these categories and how to devise ways and means of profaning things such that they may return to the sphere of "common usage." A first indication of how he envisions this is to be found in the thought of a figure whose importance for Agamben is without equal: Walter Benjamin. In "The Critique of Violence," Benjamin makes a suggestion that appears quite casual. "It might be worthwhile," he speculates, "to investigate the origin of the dogma of the sacredness of life."[8] From its title to its final lines, from *Language and Death* to *Homo Sacer* to *The Kingdom and the Glory*, it is precisely this "dogma of the sacredness of life" that Agamben follows into the most remote corners of Western intellectual history. Agamben's investigation of the idea of "the sacredness of life" is not singular, but what he pairs with it is: an investigation of the idea of the *profaneness* of life. In a series of books and essays culminating in *Profanations*, he has shown that investigating the origin of the dogma of the sacredness of life has as its corollary exploring the idea of the profaneness of life. As he made clear as early as *Language and Death*, Agamben sees the sacred as separated from the profane by nothing other than the rituals that set it outside of the continuum of everyday life, thus creating and cordoning off a sacred space and sacred powers to be wielded by the few over the many. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben claims that for societies like classical Greece, "life became sacred only through a series of rituals whose aim was precisely to separate life from its profane context"—and here too suggests that this

8. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Herman Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974–1989), 2:155. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as Benjamin *GS*. Cited in *HS*, 66/75.

"profane context" was its original one (*HS*, 66/76). Agamben's intention in *Profanations* is to reverse this process. Just as Benjamin helped Agamben study "the dogma of the sacredness of life," he also helped him conceptualize what Benjamin had called, in one of his most famous and cryptic fragments, "the profane order." So as better to understand Agamben's *Profanations*, it is to this fragment that we must now turn.

The Profane Order

After acknowledging the transience of "worldly existence" in his early "Theologico-Political Fragment,"[9] Benjamin introduces a decisive term into this constellation: the *profane*. The English translation of the text leaves this passage extremely difficult to understand as it reads: "The *secular* order should be erected on the idea of happiness" (Benjamin *SW*, 3:305; my emphasis). This is not per se a difficult idea to envision, but it is difficult to align with Benjamin's other claims in that fragment—and for good reason, as it is not what Benjamin writes. His declaration is both more radical and more coherent: "The *profane* order [*Die Ordnung des Profanen*] is to be erected on the idea of happiness" (Benjamin *GS*, 2:203; my emphasis). The choice made by Benjamin's translator is at once understandable and unfortunate. On the one hand, Benjamin frequently discusses the idea of "secularization"—from the "secularization" of the idea of the messianic in Marx, to the more general "secularization of the theological in politics" diagnosed by Carl Schmitt, to the secularization of a religious "aura" in aesthetic experience.[10] The term Benjamin here employs—*profane*—has a

9. The fragment in question dates, in all probability, from the early 1920s and thus from the beginning of Benjamin's career. This has been a matter of some dispute, however, both amongst Benjamin's friends and his editors. Gershom Scholem claims that the ideas expressed therein are clearly of a piece with those Benjamin was occupied with in the early 1920s and that the fragment clearly bears the stamp of those years. Adorno, however, gives a much different date for the fragment. He claims that Benjamin read the text to himself and his wife in San Remo in 1937 or 1938, describing it on that occasion as "the newest of the new." Benjamin's German editor (and Adorno's student), Rolf Tiedemann, found Scholem's testimony compelling enough to date the fragment in Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften* to this period. The editors of the recent English edition of Benjamin's works, however, have found Adorno's testimony more convincing than Scholem's and have chosen to date the work to 1938 (see Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock, Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings, and Gary Smith, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996–2003), 3:306n1. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as Benjamin *SW*.

10. In a claim that was to carry much weight both for Benjamin and Agamben, Schmitt

direct cognate in English and, as such, should have presented no problems of translation. Such surprising shifting of terms has a long history in translations, a long history in translations from the German, and even a relatively long history in translations of Benjamin's work (de Man's essay "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'" isolates several striking instances of such in the case of other translators—both English and French—grappling with the difficulty of Benjamin's often baffling choice of terms). While such replacements initially appear to ease the reader's task by offering a familiar concept (the *secular*) presented in familiar fashion, the choice prevents a full understanding of what Benjamin invokes. As noted, Benjamin often employed the term *secular* and had a clear and systematic understanding of the term. But he chose here to invoke not a "secular order" but a "*profane* order." What then is this "profane order"? A "secular order" would be, after all, easy enough to identify: a worldly order as opposed to a *religious* one, with this operative distinction being between the *religious* and the *secular*. The *profane* is part of a still more ancient pairing—older than Christianity, which forged the term *secular* in its modern sense—and is one of the oldest and most deeply ingrained of cultural distinctions. It is paired with and opposed not to the *religious* but to the *sacred*, and once distinguished those allowed inside the temple (the *sacred*) and those kept from it (the *profane*). The "profane order," we can then assume, is opposed to a "*sacred* order"—and indeed Benjamin's vehement rejection of "theocracy" in the fragment points precisely in this direction.

To dismiss "theocracy" as Benjamin does in that fragment (Benjamin *GS*, 2:203) here is to abandon the idea of a sacred order beyond this world and thereby focus on dwelling integrally in this one: a transient world where things pass and fade; a world without transcendent distinctions or absolute privileges. This allows us to understand something of why Agamben chose to title his fifth book as he did. In the same preparatory note for the *Theses* in which Benjamin evokes the "idea of prose," he writes, "the messianic world is the world of complete and integral actuality [*allseitiger und integraler Aktualität*]" (Benjamin *GS*, 1:1239).[11] In an important essay

asserted in his *Political Theology* that "all the decisive concepts of modern political theory . . . are secularized theological concepts" (Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapiteln zu Lehre von der Souveränität* [Munich: Duncker and Humboldt, 1922], 37). For the question of the work of art and its secularized aura, see Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Benjamin *SW*.

11. This remark provides the title for Alexander García Düttmann's introduction to the English translation of *Idea of Prose*. See Alexander García Düttmann, "Integral Actuality," intro. to *The Idea of Prose*, trans. from the French by Kerstin Behnke, 3–25. Düttmann's

on Benjamin published three years before *Idea of Prose*, Agamben cites this passage, noting that in it "Benjamin expressed one of his deepest intentions in a radiant abbreviation [*scorcio luminoso*]."[12] In such a world of "complete and integral actuality," Benjamin writes in another variant, "history is not written: it is celebrated as a festival. As a purified festival, however, it does not have the character of a ceremony and does not know any hymns. Its language is free prose, a prose that has broken the chains of writing" (Benjamin *GS*, 1:1235). This festivity without festival is one where the division between sacred and profane no longer pertains. It is without rite because there is nothing to divide sacred practice from profane life; it is a life where all illuminations would be profane ones. Such a world no longer waits for any transcendental consecration or culmination, and what it celebrates, it celebrates *now*. The idea of happiness Benjamin expresses is *profane* in precisely the same sense as his idea of prose, and the same sense as Agamben's "coming community": in its all-inclusiveness, in that it does not base its rights or its practices on a connection with a sacred or transcendental realm.

Opposed to this happiness, then, is not only the pain we feel at the passing away of things but the established privileges of a sacred order that introduces divisions of power and prestige, property and special permission, into the world and has so often employed the most violent means to retain them. Benjamin's "profane order" (like the "profane illumination" he was to see years later in certain revolutionary practices of the Surrealists) follows one of the conclusions of an "eternally transient" world: the rejection of a distinction between the sacred and the profane. If the world is truly to be conceived of as transient, such distinctions as a *sacred order* institutes are arbitrary ones masked as divine ordinance; they are mere ideology.

At the end of *Language and Death*, it is this aspect of the *sacred* that Agamben approaches (without naming here the *profane* that will become so important, from *The Coming Community* to *Profanations*). Of *sacrifice*

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analysis places special emphasis on the proximity of Agamben's views to those of not only Benjamin but also Adorno, as well as stressing the role of potentiality in Agamben's thinking and its connection to all areas of the latter's inquiries.

12. Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed., trans., and with an intro. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 49, translation modified. *La potenza del pensiero: Saggi e conferenze* (Milano: Neri Pozza, 2005), 38. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *P*. Where pages cited are from the later additions to the Italian text, and no published English translation exists, I will cite only the Italian, as *La Potenza*.

and the *sacred* therein he writes in a passage Agamben found important enough to repeat verbatim in another essay from that same year:

> However one interprets the sacrificial function, the essential thing is that in every case, the action [*il fare*] of the human community is grounded in another action. . . . At the center of the sacrifice is simply a determinate *action* that, as such, is separated and marked by exclusion; in this way it becomes *sacer* and is invested with a series of prohibitions and ritual precepts. Forbidden action, marked by sacredness, is not, however, simply excluded; rather it is now only accessible for certain people and according to determinate rules. In this way, it furnishes society and its ungrounded legislation with the fiction of a beginning: that which is excluded from the community is, in reality, that on which the entire life of the community is founded.[13]

It is precisely against this practive of sacred exclusion as the foundation of community that Benjamin's "profane order" and Agamben's coming community are both directed. The "ungrounded legislation" that Agamben evokes at the end of *Language and Death* becomes the target of his later "praise of profanation." "To profane," Agamben writes twenty-three years later, "does not simply mean to abolish or cancel separations, but to learn to make new uses of them" (*Profanazioni*, 100). The goal of *profanation* is to repeal this ungrounded legislation and to find new uses for structures that are to be deprived of their divisive force. "The creation of a new use," Agamben writes, "is only possible through disactivating an old use—rendering it inoperative [*inoperoso*]" (*Profanazioni*, 99). This new use is for this reason also "a pure means [*un mezzo puro*]"—that is to say, "a means without end [*un mezzo senza fine*]" (*Profanazioni*, 99). The idea of *profanation* is in this respect closely linked to the ideas of *vocation* and *the inoperative*, to *decreation* and *potentiality*, so important elsewhere in Agamben's writing, as all of them are oriented toward such "new uses." At the end of *Language and Death*, Agamben writes, "philosophy is precisely the foundation of man [*la fondazione dell'uomo*] as human . . . and the attempt to absolve [*assolvere*] man of his ungroundedness and the unsayability of the sacrificial mystery."[14] It is this sacrificial mystery that will be explored both in the *Homo Sacer* series and in *Profanations*. "Pure, profane, and liberated

13. Agamben, *Language and Death*, 105/131, translation modified; Agamben's emphasis. See also *P*, 135–36/188.

14. Agamben, *Language and Death*, 106/133, translation modified.

from sacred names," as we saw, "is the thing returned to the common use of mankind."

Secularization and Profanation

There are few thinkers with whose concerns Agamben's so often converge as Adorno. After the essay in *Infancy and History* on a pivotal exchange of letters between Benjamin and Adorno, the latter is only rarely referred to or cited in Agamben's work—even when his reader might most expect it. This is most striking in the *Homo Sacer* series, where Agamben claims, "today it is not the city but rather the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West" (*HS*, 181/202). Though Agamben does not mention this precedent, he was not the first student of Benjamin's to see such a dark figure at the heart of our era. Before he questioned the status of poetry after Auschwitz, Adorno wrote in an essay composed in 1939 and 1940, as reports concerning the conditions in German concentration camps began to filter through to him in American exile, that our age was the "age of the concentration camp [*Zeitalter der Konzentrationslager*]."[15] However, it is one thing to say in the midst of World War II that our age is "the age of the concentration camp," and quite another to say, as does Agamben fifty years later, that it is—and not only in the sense of being marked by its sign but as having it as its concealed "paradigm." Considering the fame of Adorno's categorical imperative concerning Auschwitz ("that Auschwitz not happen again . . . that it not repeat itself"—see Adorno *GS*, 10:674) and his remarks on art after Auschwitz ("after Auschwitz, writing a poem is barbaric"—Adorno *GS*, 10:30), it is surprising that they play no role in the sections on categorical imperatives and art in the next installment of that series, *Remnants of Auschwitz*.

Another point of equally close proximity is the idea that gives its title to Agamben's *Profanations*. Adorno wrote to Benjamin that he planned to

15. Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 20 vols., ed. Rolf Tiedemann with Gretel Adorno, Susan Buck-Morss, and Klaus Schultz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973–1986), 10:1.286. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as Adorno *GS*. Though he rarely cites him, it is clear that Agamben is quite familiar with Adorno's work. That the essay in question here was first published in a 1942 commemorative volume dedicated to the memory of Benjamin makes it all the more probable that Agamben was familiar with it. Asked about his relation to Adorno's thought, Agamben limited his response to noting, "my relation to Adorno has taken place from the beginning under the sign of Benjamin" (letter to author from May 27, 2006).

make himself "the advocate of theological motifs in your—and, perhaps I might say, my own—philosophy," and went on to write of "saving" theology through what he saw as Benjamin's "alterations [*Alterationen*]" of theology.[16] Adorno also noted wherein he saw these alterations lying—in what he called theology's "immigration into profanity [*Einwanderung in der Profanität*]."[17] This much of Adorno's declared intention appears identical to Agamben's efforts in *Profanations* and the studies leading up to it. Years later, Adorno returned to the idea of the profane and of the movement of theological experience and energy into its realm, writing, "nothing of theological content will remain unchanged; every one must be put to the test of immigrating into the secular, the profane [*Nichts an theologischem Gehalt wird unverwandelt fortbestehen; ein jeglicher wird der Probe sich stellen müssen, ins Säkulare, Profane einzuwandern*]" (Adorno *GS*, 10:608). Here Adorno returns to the idea of an "immigration into profanity," with a second term appended: the "secular." And it is here that we find a crucial divergence between Adorno and Agamben's praise of profanation. Whereas for Adorno the profane and the secular could be named in a single breath and as a single destination, for Agamben they are to be clearly distinguished from one another.

"Profanation is something completely different [*etwas völlig anderes*] from secularization," Agamben remarked in a recent interview.

> Secularization takes something from the sacred sphere and *seems* to return it to the worldly sphere [*und gibt es—scheinbar—der Sphäre des Weltlichen zurück*]. But in this case power's mechanisms are not neutralized [*neutralisiert*]. When theological power is transformed into secular power, this provides a foundation for secular power. But secularization never truly does away with the sacred [*Säkularisierung schafft das Heilige nie wirklich ab*]. And it is for this reason not a good solution to our problem—on the contrary. We must neutralize this relation to the sacred and that is what profanation first makes possible.[18]

16. *Theodor W. Adorno / Walter Benjamin Briefwechsel, 1928–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), 324, 323.
17. *Theodor W. Adorno / Walter Benjamin Briefwechsel, 1928–1940*, 324, 323. In that same letter, Adorno also writes of "making the power of theological experience anonymously available in profanity [*die Kraft der theologischen Erfahrung anonym in der Profanität mobil zu machen*]" (324, 323).
18. "Der Papst ist ein weltlicher Priester," interview with Abu Bakr Rieger, *Literaturen* (Berlin) (June 2005): 22.

This is the last thing but an isolated line of reflection in Agamben's thought, and it is to this point that he returns in *Profanations*, where he writes that in light of the "political task" currently facing us, "we must . . . distinguish between secularization and profanation" (*Profanazioni*, 88).[19] "Secularization," he writes, "is a form of removal [*rimozione*] which leaves forces intact, which limits itself to moving them from one place to another" (*Profanazioni*, 88). And for this reason Agamben claims that the political secularization of theological concepts "only displaces the celestial monarchy into a terrestrial one" (*Profanazioni*, 88). Profanation, on the other hand, is a "neutralization of that which it profanes" (*Profanazioni*, 88).

Agamben's adoption of Benjamin's profane order differs from Adorno's interest in the profane most clearly, then, in how it distinguishes secularization from profanation. While Adorno placed the two terms next to one another, Agamben sharply separates them and, in so doing, clarifies what he sees as the function and goal of profanation. For Agamben, the change that secularization introduces is a superficial one: it "seems" to return something from the sacred to the worldly sphere, but this is mere appearance, and for this reason it is something "completely different" from profanation. For Agamben, while secularization may seem to free ideas and things from the sacred sphere in which they had been confined, what it actually does is to change the location of that closed-off area. Secularization, in his view, ultimately conserves the divisions inhering in theological concepts, merely displacing their center of power. What Agamben, however, envisions under the sign of profanation is more radical: it is a revolution in our structures of thought and experience, and would correspond to a real change in the state of worldly affairs. In Agamben's words, secularization does not "do away with the sacred"—and it is precisely this which is the goal of his profanations.

Profanation and Play

How, then, does one profane? "To profane means: to open the possibility of a special form of negligence [*negligenza*] that ignores the separation—or rather, makes a particular usage of it" (*Profanazioni*, 85). The first form of this negligence that Agamben offers as paradigmatic easily

19. In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben studies different conceptions of *secularization*—particularly the different ways in which Schmitt and Weber use the term (see *Il Regno e la Gloria: Per una genealogica teologica dell'economia e del governo. Homo Sacer II.2* [Milano: Neri Pozza, 2007], 15ff.]).

risks seeming light-handed and light-hearted, as anarchic and unserious: "play [*il gioco*]." This element in *Profanations* is also not a new concern for Agamben, as the historical evolution from rite to game, which is also the profanation of sacred practices, is something he systematically studied as early as the chapter "In Playland: Reflections on History and Play" in *Infancy and History*.[20] Picking up this earlier thread, Agamben observes in *Profanations*, "the majority of our games derive from ancient and sacred ceremonies, from rituals and divinatory practices that had belonged for a time to the religious sphere" (*Profanazioni*, 85–86). He then cites a series of such games: ball games "that reproduce the gods' struggles to possess the sun," and such objects as the spinning top and the chess board that were initially "divinatory instruments." The conclusion that Agamben then draws is that "this signifies that the game liberates and diverts humanity from the sphere of the sacred, but without simply abolishing it" (*Profanazioni*, 86).

But, as Agamben points out, recourse to games and play is not a simple one in our day and age—and above all because "the game as means of profanation has fallen into disuse [*decadenza*]" (*Profanazioni*, 87). This does not mean that games as such have disappeared from our culture—on the contrary, they are more present than ever. But they do not play this profanizing role that Agamben saw in earlier cultures. "That modern man no longer knows how to play," he writes, "is to be seen precisely in the vertiginous multiplication of old and new games" (*Profanazioni*, 87). What one finds in these new games is not a profanizing instrument or force, but a "desperate and obstinate" search to "return to the lost festival, a return to the sacred and its rites" (*Profanazioni*, 87). "In this sense, the televised games for the masses are part of a new liturgy, secularizing an unconsciously religious intention" (*Profanazioni*, 87–88). It is for this reason that "to return the game to its purely profane vocation [*alla sua vocazione puramente profana*] is a political task" (*Profanazioni*, 88).

As we saw above, for Agamben, "profanation implies . . . a neutralization of that which it profanes" (*Profanazioni*, 88). In his third work, Agamben evoked a "negation of a negation," and it is this idea which returns in a new and more precise form in *Profanations*.[21] His goal is not simply to

20. This was a largely structuralist attempt—it is dedicated to Claude Lévi-Strauss—to understand the "systems" and "mechanisms" whereby rites become profaned—which is to say, become games—and vice versa.

21. Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 98. *Infanzia e storia: Distruzione dell'esperienza e origine della storia* (1978; repr., Torino: Einaudi, 2001), 103.

negate or to nullify the sacred history of an object or practice but to remove it from its sacred context and return it to a profane one. For this reason, it is better envisioned as the division of a division or the negation of a negation. It still exists, and its history remains accessible, but its sacred signification is suspended; it has been rendered, to use one of Agamben's favorite terms, "inoperative."

The Messiah

Any reader of Agamben's works will note that he is drawn to theological figures. Amongst these, one has, as it should, clear pride of place: the Messiah. Agamben's references to the Messiah, messianic time, and the idea of the messianic are frequent and yet have perplexed a number of his readers. He has written of a "messianic vocation that is the revocation of every vocation" found in Paul's letters as well as of an "untitled messianic moment" in Cy Twombly's painting.[22] In an aside made in an essay from 1995, Agamben refers to "the classless society or the messianic kingdom [*nella società senza classi o nel regno messianico*]," effectively equating the two ideas (and reiterating Benjamin's assertion from a thesis Agamben himself rediscovered) (*MWE*, 32–33/32). As for who reigns in that kingdom, Agamben writes in an essay from 1995, "the Messiah is the figure in which religion confronts the problem of the law," and in *Homo Sacer*, Agamben tells his reader, "the Messiah is the figure in which the great monotheistic religions sought to master the problem of law" (*MWE*, 135/104, translation modified; *HS*, 56/65). The Messiah is thus "a figure" which allows us to see a historically decisive confrontation of religion and law. That this is the last thing but a historically or conceptually localized phenomenon is something that Agamben is at pains to stress, claiming, "in Judaism, as in Christianity or Shiite Islam, the Messiah's arrival signifies the fulfillment and the complete consummation of the Law" (*HS*, 56/65). The consequence he draws from this is that "in monotheism, messianism thus constitutes not simply one category of religious experience among others but rather the limit concept of religious experience in general" (*HS*, 56/65).

22. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005), 23–24, translation modified. *Il tempo che resta: Un commento alla Lettera ai Romani* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000), 29. See also Giorgio Agamben, "Bellezza che cade," in *Cy Twombly: 8 Sculptures, American Academy, Rome, Sept. 28–Nov. 15, 1998* (Rome: American Academy in Rome, 1998), 5.

While this is a great deal to see under the heading of the messianic, he sees still more. Just as, for him, the state of exception is not a category of political experience among others but, instead, marks the limit of political experience, messianism marks the limit of religious experience and the point where it gives way to questions of law. This limit is, however, not only one that links religion with law. In another essay, Agamben writes, "messianism represents the point of greatest proximity between religion and philosophy," and he will echo this position in an interview, noting that "because philosophy is constitutively bound up in a confrontation with the law [*un confronto con la legge*], the messianic represents the point of greatest proximity between religion and philosophy" (*P*, 163/255).[23] The figure of the Messiah is thus a figure standing at the crossroads of the areas demarcated by *law*, *religion*, and *philosophy*. But how are we to understand this figure and its role in Agamben's thought?

In Agamben's reading, the great monotheistic religions sought "to control and reduce the essential messianic properties of religion and philosophy" (*P*, 163/255). They could never fully succeed for the reason that "the messianic is precisely that element which, in religion, goes beyond it, exceeds and completes it at every point [*la eccede e compie in ogni punto*]."[24] Nevertheless, this has led not only to the consistent repression of messianic movements within the great monotheistic religions but also to a singular use made of messianism's central feature: the *real* state of exception it calls into being. As he states in an essay from 1992, "messianic time has the form of a state of exception" (*P*, 160/252). In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben writes, "from the juridico-political perspective, messianism is . . . a theory of the state of exception—except for the fact that in messianism, there is no authority to proclaim the state of exception; instead, there is the Messiah to subvert [*sovverte*] its power" (*HS*, 57–58/67). The messianic state of exception Agamben enigmatically evokes here corresponds to what Benjamin had enigmatically called "a *real* state of exception," where the state of exception that has become the rule is deprived of its divisive power. And it is for this reason that Agamben will speak of "the task that messianism has assigned to modern politics," and that he defines as "to conceive of a human community that would have not (only) the figure of the law [*non avesse (soltanto) la figure delle legge*]" (*MWE*, 135–36/105, translation modified).

23. See also "Un libro senza patria: Giorgio Agamben intervista di Federico Ferrari," *Eutropia* 1 (2001): 44–46, 44.
24. "Un libro senza patria," 44.

As these remarks make amply clear, Agamben's recourse to the Messiah, the messianic, and the messianic kingdom is both crucial and elusive. To better understand it, let us return to the fragment which first revealed a "profane order." The "Theologico-Political Fragment" we looked at above begins: "Only the Messiah himself completes all history [*Erst der Messias selbst vollendet alles historische Geschehen*], in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates [*erlöst, vollendet, schafft*] its relation to the messianic" (Benjamin *SW*, 3:305; *GS* 2:203). In light of the Jewish tradition of messianic thought, these opening lines are orthodox ones and present no great interpretative difficulties. The Messiah will come, and when He does, His Coming will "complete" human history. For Christians, the Messiah (Jesus Christ) has already come—and until His Second Coming, He can offer redemption by coming again to the individual hearts of mankind. In this sense, redemption through Christ occurs in the private world of each individual touched by grace. In the Jewish tradition Benjamin is clearly writing in, however, redemption through the Messiah is nothing of the sort. It is not an individual experience (grace) but a communitarian—a public and political—event that takes place, to borrow Scholem's canonic definition, "on the stage of history, and within the [Jewish] community."[25]

Whereas the first clause in Benjamin's fragment is straightforward, the second one asserts something that has divided messianic thought: ". . . he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the messianic." Benjamin seems to say thereby that we can do nothing to influence the relation of human history to the Messiah, nothing to hasten or slow His arrival. It is the Messiah who not only "redeems" and "completes," but also "alone . . . *creates*" the relation of the messianic to human history. How then does Benjamin move from this more or less orthodox conception of the Messiah and His coming to a "method" called "nihilism" that is "the task of world politics" (". . . *die Aufgabe der Weltpolitik, deren Methode*

25. See Scholem's "Towards an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism," first given as a lecture in 1959. Scholem's distinguishing of a Christian idea of redemption through the Messiah as a private and individual experience from a Jewish one, in which this element of "interiority" is absent, was long held as unassailable. It was first seriously questioned by Jacob Taubes in his lecture before the Jewish World Congress in Jerusalem in 1979 entitled "The Price of Messianism," first published after Scholem's death in 1982, then reprinted in *Vom Kult zur Kultur: Bausteine zu einer Kritik der historischen Vernunft*, ed. Aleida and Jan Assmann, Wolf-Daniel Hartwich, and Winfried Menninghaus (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1996), 43–50.

Nihilismus zu heißen hat" [Benjamin *GS*, 2:204])? To understand this singular constellation of ideas, we must first stress that, in Benjamin's hands, *nihilism* has no necessarily negative associations. For a thinker like Nietzsche, nihilism is an all-too-human consequence of "the death of God" and the "devaluation of all values" that follows in its wake. Such "nihilism," however, is far from what one could call a "method" having something decisive to offer "world politics." The nihilism that Benjamin has in mind, however, asks to be seen along the lines of a clandestine anarchism like that of the Russian "nihilists." Benjamin's conception of *nihilism* here is difficult to grasp because its valorizations are unconventional and the link between this most positive of presences, the Messiah, and the "method" Benjamin calls "nihilism" is only comprehensible through two other terms that play decisive roles in Benjamin's fragment: *transience* and the *profane*.

A few lines later Benjamin writes, "the rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality, the rhythm of messianic nature, is happiness [*der Rhythmus, dieses ewig vergehenden, in seiner Totalität vergehenden, in seiner räumlichen, aber auch zeitlichen Totalität vergehenden Weltlichen, der Rhythmus der messianischen Natur, ist Glück*]" (Benjamin *SW*, 3:306; *GS*, 2:204). Two things are asserted here and both of them are surprising. Benjamin looks at the world and sees "*transience*"—complete and total "*transience*." This emphasis is far from a self-evident one. *Transience* is, of course, part of our vision of the world and makes for much of the beauty that we experience. We are touched by its fragility, by what we see as the unimaginable touch of time that will soon take it from this world. For this reason, transience is at the heart of poetry, but less evidently at the heart of philosophy. One might better say that transience is opposed to philosophy, for if philosophy is about things that are not just temporarily and contingently true but which pretend to some level of universal validity, they cannot be founded on the basis of things ceaselessly passing away. The eternal universe of the classical world and the eternal realm of pure ideas clearly stand in opposition to it. Plato's project of "saving appearances" was to show that this transience, this continual passing away of the things of the world, was not the ultimate reality of human existence but, instead, only its imperfect reflection. Things do not *really* pass away, for, as Plato said in the *Timaeus*, "Wherefore he resolved to have a moving image of eternity, and when he set in order the heaven, he made this image eternal but moving according to number, while eternity itself rests in unity, and this image we

call time."[26] The seeming transience of this world is redeemed by the real eternity of another.

In the Christian redemption of the transitory, this eternity is given a single divine face, and it is the loving and watchful eye of God whose grace transforms the transient into the lasting and the desultory into the meaningful. In the Gospels of both Matthew and Luke, we hear this vigilance extended even to the most insignificant elements of our worldly existence and mortal person, and we are told that even "the very hairs of your head are all numbered."[27] In a world in which everything seems to pass away, where all is consigned to ruin and loss, there is a principle that retrieves and retains *everything*, where nothing is lost, where, as Gerard Manley Hopkins taking up the evangelical lesson wrote, "Every hair is hair of the head / Numbered." In both classical and Christian conceptions, there is another world or place—a timeless one—that transcends *this* time and *this* place. In asserting that this world is "eternally transient [*ewig vergehend*]"—both in space and in time—Benjamin is categorically rejecting this millennial philosophico-theological heritage.

Benjamin then draws two conclusions from the "eternal transience" he sees: that this transience corresponds to "messianic nature," and that it is "happiness." The "rhythm" this transience follows or forms is not one of loss or despair, not one of nausea or the gnashing of teeth, and not one calling for elegies or laments at the sight of a world forever disappearing into nothingness. This "rhythm" that Benjamin says is that of "messianic nature" is simply and completely "happiness." Benjamin is not dismissing the fact that nothing in life is so difficult to accept as that it will end. To accept that not only we ourselves but all the beautiful things that we experience—all the people, places, and things that we love—are destined to pass and fade into nothingness ("nihilism," in the singular turn Benjamin gives to the term) is supremely difficult. What is more, our mortal sense of justice demands that the world *not* be a nihilistic one—that there be a positive principle of judgment and retribution for all the cruel acts we see committed around us. We ask that the just be rewarded and unjust punished. And our mortal sense of beauty (or grace) demands that these passing things have some durable reality. It is not singular or strange to look at the world and

26. Timaeus 37d. in Plato, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Bollingen Series 71 (New York: Pantheon Books, 1961), 1167.
27. Matt. 10:30; Luke 12:7.

see, as did Benjamin, transience. And it is not singular or strange to claim that this is all there is to the world. But for all the reasons noted above, it is singular and strange to find in this fact the source of "happiness." On the contrary, were we not to expect in its stead melancholy and despair? It is for this reason that, in the fantastically compressed logic of Benjamin's fragment, he refers to a "messianic intensity of the heart" that consigns it to "unhappiness [*Unglück*] in the sense of suffering" (Benjamin *SW*, 3:305; *GS*, 2:204, translation modified).[28] The extraordinary nature of Benjamin's conception lies in his effort to find and found happiness not in a transcendent realm lying elsewhere, but here and now in this and only this world, in this and only this life.

That Agamben is perfectly aware of this element in Benjamin's thought and that it is an important one for him is attested to in his *The Time That Remains*, where he contrasts Benjamin's vision of transience with Paul's: "While, for Paul, creation is unwillingly subjected to transience [*caducità*] and destruction and for this reason groans and suffers while awaiting redemption, for Benjamin, who reverses this in an ingenious way, nature is messianic precisely because of its eternal and complete transience, and the rhythm of this messianic transience is happiness itself."[29] *Nihilism* for Benjamin is thus not opposed to some form of positivism and not aligned with meaninglessness. It is instead the radical and difficult acceptance of the *transience* of this world, and what it denies is that our happiness and our political tasks should be shaped by a transcendental realm seen in sacred glimpses by privileged individuals. In the face of worldly transience, the best "method," the best path to follow, is one that follows an endless route toward some transcendental plane or place, but one focused fully on *this* time and *this* place.

To link the idea of transience with that of the messianic is, for both Benjamin and Agamben, to grasp what the former called a "messianic freezing of events" through a "concept of the present as 'now-time' ['*Jetztzeit*'] . . . loaded with splinters of the messianic [*Splitter der messianischen*]" (Benjamin *GS*, 1:704). This vision of messianic time is thus one that is clearly not concerned with waiting for some state of affairs to come about, or with reaching some point located in the future, but is, instead, focused on how we experience our historical present. That this aspect of

28. The translation of *Unglück* as "misfortune" obscures Benjamin's clear opposition of *Unglück* (unhappiness) and *Glück* (happiness) in the passage.
29. Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 141/131.

Benjamin's thought is central to Agamben can be seen in his claim that "the concept of messianic time . . . constitutes the theoretical nucleus of Benjamin's 'Theses'" (*P*, 160/252).[30] And it is on this same point that Agamben distances himself from many thinkers whose projects might seem at first glance to be so similar to his own. Agamben has remarked that what separates his own thought from Derrida's is "an important difference" in the manner of "confronting the same problem," and he gives that problem the name "messianic time."[31] In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben refers to Derrida's "idea of an infinite deferral," and, as with the "infinite negotiations" he spoke of in the precursor to that book, *Homo Sacer*, herein lies, for him, the problem with Derrida's thought.[32] As Agamben argued in his *Infancy and History*, the revolutionary conception of history introduced by Marx was not accompanied by a revolutionary conception of *time*, and it is this theoretical lacuna that he aspires to fill. Derrida's thought clearly contains much for Agamben that is revolutionary in its conception of language and in its conception of history—but not in its conception of the *time* in which they take place. The "important difference" Agamben refers to in the interview above is that of time—and, for him, it makes all the difference.[33]

To many, the idea of "messianic time" might suggest indeterminate waiting for the Messiah to come, redeem mankind, and complete human history. But for Agamben, drawing on conceptions of messianic time in

30. Agamben stresses how Paul, too, spoke of a "time of the now" virtually equivalent to Benjamin's "now-time" and how "Benjamin's messianism finds its canon [*il suo canone*] in Paul" (*The Time That Remains*, 144/133).

31. "Un libro senza patria," 44.

32. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive (Homo Sacer III)*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone, 2002), 123. *Quel che resta di Auschwitz: L'archivio e il testimone (Homo sacer III)* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998), 114. See also *HS*, 54/62–63.

33. Adam Thurschwell follows Agamben's critique of deconstruction back to *Language and Death* (see "Cutting the Branches for Akiba: Agamben's Critique of Derrida," in *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben's "Homo Sacer*," ed. Andrew Norris [Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005], 173–97, esp. 174). It is Kevin Attell, however, who rightly traces this dispute farther back—to *Stanzas* (Attell places his emphasis on the question of Agamben's and Derrida's divergent interpretations of Saussure. See "An Esoteric Dossier: Agamben and Derrida" (unpublished conference paper, June 6, 2006, in Freiburg, Germany, at the Annual Conference of the International Association of Philosophy and Literature). For more on this question, see also Catherine Mills, "Agamben's Messianic Politics: Biopolitics, Abandonment and Happy Life," *Contretemps* 5 (December 2004): 42–62; and Eva Geulen, *Giorgio Agamben zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2005), 127ff.

Benjamin and in Paul, it means just the opposite. "Messianic time," the term that came to replace the "cairology" Agamben wrote of in *Infancy and History*, is like that earlier term in that it rejects a historical dialectic of progress and its logic of deferral; it rejects the positing of the completion of a historical task in an indeterminate future. "The sole possibility we have to truly grasp the present," Agamben has remarked, "is to conceive of it as the end [*sie als das Ende zu denken*]. That was Benjamin's idea and his messianism is above all to be understood after this fashion. The paradigm for the understanding of the present is messianic time."[34] In *Infancy and History*, Agamben wrote that the "cairology" he described was one that should be sought not at the millennium but, instead, "*now*." This is a time in which individuals and communities can seize what Agamben has called the *kairos* of every historical moment: the call to thought and action of the alarm clock Benjamin heard ringing "sixty seconds every minute."

What is at once *messianic* and *profane* for both Benjamin and Agamben is a world no longer bound by consecrated divisions and distinctions, and where the things of the world are returned to "the common usage of mankind." The "profane order" is given this name because it is one in which the sacred as source of criteria for exclusion and exception has no place. In *The Coming Community*, the messianic kingdom served as a paradigm because it had neither an *in*clusive or *ex*clusive identity and in this most fundamental sense corresponds to "The Idea of Communism" Agamben had sketched in *Idea of Prose*.[35] The divisions that separate groups and individuals need not be annihilated or forgotten, but they need to be rendered *inoperative* and thereby deprived of their power to divide. For this reason Agamben will write of an "untitled messianic moment in which art stays miraculously still, almost astounded: fallen and risen in every instant [*ad ogni istante caduta e risorta*]."[36] Agamben says "fallen *and* risen" because in the light cast by a profane world there is no operative distinction between the two. Every creature and every gesture in such an integrally profane and integrally actual world is equally and at every moment "fallen and risen."

While this clarifies the relation of the profane to the sacred and the meaning of a profane order in relation to the categories of nihilism and transience, we are left with the figure that Benjamin begins his reflection

34. "Das unheilige Leben," 18.

35. Giorgio Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995). *Idea della prosa: Nuova edizione illuminata e accresciuta* (1985; repr., Macerata: Quodlibet, 2002).

36. Agamben, "Bellezza che cade," 5.

with and to which Agamben so often returns: the Messiah. What place, if any, does the Messiah have in such a profane order? Would He not belong to the realm of the sacred? Are we to wait first for His coming to actualize such an integral vision of a transient world? The answer to the last question is: clearly not. For Benjamin, it is a false messianism that sees "the Divine Kingdom . . . as the telos of a historical dynamic [*das Telos der historischen Dynamis*]." Such a kingdom is, for him, "not the goal [*Ziel*], but instead the end [*Ende*]" of history (Benjamin *GS*, 2:203–4). *Nihilism* is the "task" of world politics because it is to see the world as nothing more than it is, to not construct world politics on the basis of a sacred order that is one day to come into being (a false messianism), but instead on a *profane* order that is already right before our eyes and is the only world we have ever known. In no way does he exclude the idea of a divine order beyond this one. What he does wish to isolate are the dangers of the idea of a *sacred order*. And it is for this reason that he begins by evoking the decisive figure in that order: the Messiah. A connection to the Messiah, Benjamin claims, is not to be created from *this* side, from the transient and profane world that is our own—whether it take up the mantle of the sacred or not. If there is a Messiah, and if he is coming, is something we cannot know. It is a "relation" that can be made, in Benjamin's view, only from the other side—by the Messiah. In the meantime, we have only this world and this life. And we have no time to waste.

How to Bring About the Coming of the Messiah

The preceding allows us to better understand the recourse made by both Benjamin and Agamben to the messianic and the Messiah, but the question remains whether they might not have expressed their thoughts with equal clarity without recourse to this Messiah who, for all intents and purposes of this "profane order," may never come. In another text—one that interests Agamben in *The Coming Community*—Benjamin recounts the most decisive thing in the world: how to bring about the coming of the Messiah. The thirteenth chapter of *The Coming Community* begins: "There is a well-known parable about the Kingdom of the Messiah that Walter Benjamin (who heard it from Gershom Scholem) recounted one evening to Ernst Bloch, who in turn transcribed it in *Spuren*."[37] Bloch writes, "A rabbi,

37. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 53. *La comunità che viene*, nuova edizione

a real cabalist, once said that in order to establish the reign of peace it is not necessary to destroy everything nor to begin a completely new world. It is sufficient to displace this cup or this brush or this stone just a little, and thereby everything. But this small displacement is so difficult to achieve and its measure is so difficult to find that, with regard to the world, humans are incapable of it and it is necessary that the Messiah come" (quoted in *CC*, 53/45, translation modified). The parable that passed through the hands of Scholem and Benjamin and that Bloch here recounts concerns the most divisive question in Jewish messianic thought: what, if anything, can we do to hasten the arrival of the Messiah? Many have held that the Messiah was waiting for certain worldly criteria to be fulfilled. This criterion or these criteria fulfilled, the Messiah would come, "complete" human efforts, and close human history. *What* exactly this thing was—the coming of a truly just man, the forming of a truly just community, the reaching of a certain global state of affairs such as peace on earth or a return to the Holy Land—was a matter of the greatest uncertainty and contention, but all members of this school of thought shared the idea that mankind needed to discern and do some thing or things to bring about the coming of the Messiah.

This was not, however, a premise adopted by all thinkers in the messianic tradition. Another school of thought saw the coming of the Messiah as determined in advance and independent from human actions and thus from the fulfilling of any worldly criteria. The Messiah would come when He was destined to come, and there was nothing we could do to hasten or slow His arrival. Whatever the current state of the world, whatever its degree of justice or injustice at that moment, He would come. In the former case, everything depended on finding out how to fulfill the seemingly unknowable criteria. In the latter case, nothing could be done to slow or hasten His arrival, and one had only to wait.

When considered in the context of these two currents of messianic thought, the parable Bloch recounts offers a radical reformulation of the problem. Though there is indeed something we must do in order for the Messiah to come, this is something neither great nor grand—nothing to do with social justice (a just community) or political hegemony (a return to the Holy Land)—but instead is something so subtle and small, if perhaps ineffably genuine, so as to seem to our eyes perfectly insignificant. Here, however, is where the contours of the parable begin to blur. How can we

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accresciuta (1990; repr., Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2001), 45. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *CC*.

discern which stone or which cup to displace—and how far? Because this "small displacement" is so tiny, we will never find it (we are "incapable of it," says Bloch), and for this reason we need the Messiah to come—of His own calling. With this idea of the "small displacement," Bloch brings the two schools of messianic thought into the greatest possible proximity. There is in fact something to do that will hasten the coming of the Messiah, but it is so minor that we can never know it and have only to act *as if* the Messiah were not waiting for some mortal action.

As Agamben reminds his reader in *The Coming Community*, Bloch was told the parable—or something approximating it—by Benjamin. And he is not the only one to have committed a version of it to paper. In the version of the parable that Benjamin recounts, things stand a tiny, but decisive, bit differently. He writes, "The *Hassidim* tell a story about the world to come that says everything there will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too will it sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, those too we will wear there. Everything will be as it is now, just a little different" (Benjamin *GS*, 2:432).[38]

It seems that Benjamin's vision of the messianic kingdom is more radical—and more perplexing—than Bloch's. In Bloch's telling, the messianic kingdom and this world are astonishingly close, but nonetheless separate. The tiny displacement in Benjamin's version focuses instead on something absolutely different. The emphasis is no longer on what we must do to bring about the coming of the Messiah, but on what the world will be like *after* He has come. And, surprisingly enough, this event seems almost superfluous. The messianic world is indeed not this world, and yet *nothing* will be changed in it. "*Everything*," says Benjamin, "will be as it is now"—all things will remain in their places, and the various vocations of men and women will remain the same—or almost. "Everything will be as it is now," says Benjamin, "just a little different." Everything then lies in understanding this difference.

The Messiah is the anointed one come to transform the world and to mark a fundamental change in all its distinctions: the messianic kingdom. But what happens in this messianic kingdom? Paul seems to say something akin to Benjamin's parable in the First Letter to the Corinthians, where

38. Agamben cites this passage at *CC*, 53/45, though without noting its provenance. In an essay published two years later, he again refers to this "small displacement," though also without citing its provenance (see *P*, 174/270).

he notes that, in the time of the end, we will remain in our places—men will remain men and women, women, rich and poor will remain rich and poor, it is only that these distinctions will cease to divide them as they had in the past; we would not change in our worldly callings, but our relation to the categories, qualities, possessions, and properties that had hitherto defined us would.[39] Circumcised will remain circumcised, uncircumcised will remain uncircumcised, but circumcision will become, in Paul's words, "nothing" (1 Cor. 7:19)—that is, nothing that need divide us. But how are we to envision such a messianic kingdom where everything remains the same—except for a small difference?

Hope, or, The Irreparable

Another way of posing this question is: if everything is to be the same, where does this leave the figure of the Messiah and the hope assigned to His coming? Rolf Tiedemann has claimed that Benjamin was "not referring to that Messiah . . . which religions promise."[40] If Benjamin's editor and critic is right, the question remains as to what Messiah he *is* referring to. In the Jewish tradition, the Messiah is the divine figure of worldly *hope*. What, then, is the role of *hope* in Benjamin and Agamben's "time of the now"?

In the final words of Benjamin's study of Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, he writes, "only for the sake of the hopeless are we given hope [*Nur um der Hoffnungslosen willen ist uns die Hoffnung gegeben*]" (Benjamin *GS*, 1:201). His remarks evoke one of the most famous modern statements on hope and hopelessness—and one that Benjamin found of particular interest. One evening, Max Brod summarized his friend's position as that there was simply no hope. Kafka immediately corrected him: "Oh no, there is indeed hope, hope enough, unending hope—only not for us" (see Benjamin *GS*, 2:414). Given Kafka's and Benjamin's remarks on the matter, it should come as no surprise that this elusive hope was one that Adorno would attempt to come to grips with. In a section bearing the heading "Finale," at the end of his *Minima Moralia*, Adorno writes, "the only philosophy that can be responsibly practiced in the face of despair is the attempt to con-

39. For a discussion of this passage in the context of Paul's idea of vocation, see *The Time That Remains*, 19/25ff.

40. Rolf Tiedemann, "Historischer Materialismus oder politischer Messianismus? Politische Gehalte in der Geschichtsphilosophie Walter Benjamins," in *Materialien zu Benjamins Thesen "Über den Begriff der Geschichte*," ed. Peter Bulthaupt (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), 77–121, esp. 90.

template all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption." To this end, "perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light." In the haunting final words of the fragment, he writes, "beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters."[41] This imperative is felt so strongly by Adorno that the question of actual redemption—redemption through the coming of the Messiah—appears of secondary importance. The thinker to whom Agamben's *The Time That Remains* is dedicated, Jacob Taubes, was to excoriate this view—and this passage—as "the aesthete's variant" on the idea of the messianic. In Adorno, says Taubes, "it hardly matters whether [redemption] is real. In Benjamin, it does matter."[42] Whether Taubes's criticism is founded or not, it clearly formulates the question of how "actual redemption" is to be viewed—and awaited.

In *The Coming Community*, this topic is approached through the curious term *irreparable*. Agamben says of the figures one finds in the fiction of the idiosyncratic Robert Walser—a favorite of both Kafka and Benjamin—that they are "irreparably astray" (*CC*, 6/14).[43] Both the tenth chapter and the appendix to Agamben's work bear this same term—*irreparable*—as their title. The first of these, the chapter entitled "Irreparable," evokes "the *post iudicium* world" (*CC*, 40/38). From it, suggests Agamben, "both necessity and contingency, those two crosses of Western thought, have disappeared," with the result that "the world is now and forever necessarily contingent or contingently necessary" (*CC*, 40/38). This idea of making the necessary indistinguishable from the contingent is perfectly in line with Benjamin's idea of a "profane order." It is only on the basis of a transcendental and sacred realm beyond this world that such a dividing line could be drawn. A truly *profane* world—one that was truly conceived of as transient and thereby as "integral actuality"—would have no place for such. Agamben's *irreparable* is linked to a special form of *irreverence* so singu-

41. Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: NLB, 1974), 247. *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 333–34.

42. Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004), 75.

43. Agamben also refers to Walser in *Profanations* (see *Profanazioni*, 14). For more on Walser and Agamben's relation to him, see Jan Plug, "Shame, On the Language of Robert Walser," *MLN* 120, no. 3 (April 2005): 654–84.

larly rendered in Walser's characters, who, having accepted the irreparable state of worldly affairs, lose their reverence for what are held up as sacred truths. And yet what role does the Messiah play here? Why is this called a "*post iudicium* world," and why is that world not a transformed one? Taubes attacked Adorno for what he saw as an "aestheticization of the messianic." Adorno's messianism was ultimately empty because it claimed that it was a matter of no importance whether the Messiah came—or, to state the matter differently, because it employed *redemption* and the *Messiah* as paradigms that made their actuality of secondary importance, or, perhaps, of no importance at all. In this light, is Agamben not open to the same criticism?

In the appendix to *The Coming Community*, which also bears the title "Irreparable," Agamben writes, "how the world is—this is outside the world" (*CC*, 106/88). At its outset, Agamben informs his reader that this appendix "can be read as a commentary on section 9 of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* and proposition 6.44 of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*," adding, "both texts deal with the attempt to define an old problem of metaphysics: the relationship between essence and existence" (*CC*, 89/72). As Agamben does not cite Wittgenstein's proposition, it bears noting here: "What is mystical is not *how* the world is, but *that* it is [*Nicht 'wie' die Welt ist, ist das Mystische, sondern 'daß' sie ist*]." One thing that Wittgenstein is saying is that the sheer fact that the world exists is so wonderful and strange that *mystical* is not a bad word to describe it—and that what is far more "mystical" than any given rationally inexplicable event in the world is the world itself. Saying "how the world is—this is outside the world" is Agamben's way of saying what Wittgenstein (and Heidegger) said before him. Because there is no transcendental perspective from which to see the world in its totality, and from that point to judge it, one cannot say "how the world," in its totality, *is*. And, ultimately, making a distinction between *existence* and *essence*, between the *necessary* and the *contingent*, would require precisely that. Recognizing that "how the world is," is something that could be said only from "outside the world" is a precondition for living in a world where *existence* and *essence*, *necessity* and *contingency*, are inseparable, because there is no transcendental instance or sacred exception that can draw the line between the two from within this life and this world. It is for this reason that in the chapter entitled "Irreparable" Agamben will invoke a "*post iudicium*" world, not because the Messiah has come and gone, not because judgment has already been passed, but because we have every reason to cease waiting for such an impossible instance. And one way of

conceiving this is as living in a world where judgment of this sort belongs only to the past.

Agamben's readers, as did Adorno's, often fail to distinguish between a harsh indictment and the relinquishing of hope. In this same "Finale" to his *Minima Moralia*, Adorno writes of a remove from the world from which to view it as an "utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even if by a hair's breadth, from the magic circle of existence, whereas we well know that any possible knowledge must not only be first wrested from what is, if it shall hold good, but is also marked, for this very reason, by the same distortion and indigence it seeks to escape."[44] This "distortion and indigence" that so darkens Adorno's world is not one that Agamben wishes to turn away from. But the idea of this world as lacking something, as needing some addition from elsewhere, is one he rejects (and for which his study of "the original structure of negativity" in *Language and Death* laid the groundwork). For this reason, in this second section of his work named "Irreparable," Agamben is fundamentally concerned with what he calls the "salvation of the profanity of the world [*profanità del mondo*]," and which he concisely defines as "its being thus [*il suo esser-cosi*]" (*CC*, 89/73). The idea of the salvation of the profanity of the world is an idea that is difficult to grasp—particularly as it is not conceived of as a sanctification of the profane, but as a salvation that takes place through its being and remaining "thus"—or, in the words with which Agamben began *The Coming Community*, "whatever." Agamben goes on to say, "the root of all pure joy and sadness is that the world is as it is," and it is here that we can best understand his idea of the irreparable and the importance of the idea of the profane—an idea which will guide his reflections to the present day and his recent book, *Profanations* (*CC*, 90/74). To say that the world is "irreparable" is, of course, not to say that nothing is to be done, that nothing in the world is to be bettered and that no imperative like the one formulated by Adorno is called for. The term is meant not in the conventional sense of something that one would like to repair or remedy but cannot. Just as Agamben does not try to wish transience away, neither does he try to repair the *irreparable*. On the contrary, accepting that the world is *irreparable*, in this sense that it is a transient and profane one, is the necessary precondition for bettering situations most in need of our attention and action.

The *post iudicium* kingdom that Agamben conceives of is thus not one where the temples are destroyed, or where all are crammed into them,

44. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 247/333–34.

but where the distinctions that separate sacred and profane are rendered, to choose one of Agamben's preferred words, *inoperative*. And this would show the way, then, for a coming community founded not on an inclusive logic of belonging (being communist, Italian, or the like), whose consequence has always been exclusion and violence, but as founded on a conception of our world as integrally and "irreparably" "profane." One of the fragments in this same "Irreparable" appendix to *The Coming Community* reads, "The world—insofar as it is absolutely, irreparably profane—is God" (*CC*, 89/74). To experience the world as "irreparable" (transient in its passing and unchangeable in its past) and "*profane*" by no means requires that one deny the existence of God or remove God from the world. One might just as well equate every atom and instant of the world with such a Divinity.[45]

An Absolutely Profane Life

In an essay from 1992, Agamben refers to a "political philosophy" worthy of the name and the task of "the thought to come" as the conceiving of "an absolutely profane life which has attained the perfection of its own potential and of its own communicability and over which sovereignty and law no longer have any hold" (*MWE*, 114–15/91). As we saw above, much depends on properly understanding what Agamben sees under the sign of the *profane* and of what he calls here "an absolutely profane life." In one of Agamben's very first published essays, from 1966, he refers to our modern world as one where "a total abolition [*abolizione totale*] of the sacred" has been brought about.[46] This is a position that he has radically altered. Appearances notwithstanding, a total abolition of the sacred has, in Agamben's view, by no means taken place. While the sacred has, in our secularized age, indeed receded from view, this has not meant its more or less total abolishment, only that it has taken on subtler forms. What Agamben sees in the ambiguous figure of *homo sacer* that gave his project its impetus and title, and that he glimpsed in the interstices between the two Greek terms for life, *zoē* and *bios*, is "a figure of the sacred that, before or

45. Agamben's most recent book ends on a virtually identical note. After quoting a passage from Bossuet in which the latter envisions God having created the world as if there were no God, Agamben praises this "grandiose image in which the world created by God is rendered indistinguishable from a world without God" (*Il Regno e la Gloria*, 314).
46. Giorgio Agamben, "Favola e fato," *Tempo presente* (Rome) 11, no. 6 (1966): 18–21, esp. 21.

beyond the religious, constitutes the first paradigm of the political realm of the west" (*HS*, 9/12). This paradigm is one that reveals that, far from abolished, the idea of the sacred is as present as ever in the divisions and distinctions of contemporary society—from the prisoners of Nazi concentration camps to the detainees at Guantánamo.[47] While this "total abolition of the sacred"—whose other names would be "a profane order" and "a *real* state of exception"—has by no means come to pass, it is, for Agamben, what we must strive for if the "unprecedented biopolitical catastrophe" he sees as menacing our age is to be averted (*HS*, 188/211).

Where are we to seek such "an absolutely profane life"? One of the most sacred members of Rome was the Flamen Diale. Agamben writes,

> His life is remarkable in that it is at every moment indistinguishable from the cultic functions that the *Flamen* fulfills. This is why the Romans said that the *Flamen Diale* is *quotidie feriatus* and *assiduus sacerdos*, that is, in an act of uninterrupted celebration [*celebrazione*] at every instant. Accordingly, there is no gesture or detail of his life, the way he dresses or the way he walks, that does not have a precise meaning and is not caught in a series of functions and meticulously studied effects. As proof of this "assiduity," the *Flamen* is not allowed to take his emblems off completely even in sleep; the hair and nails that are cut from his body must be immediately buried under an *arbor felix* (that is, a tree that is not sacred to the gods of the underworld); in his clothes there can be neither knots nor closed rings, and he cannot swear oaths; if he meets a prisoner in fetters while on a stroll, the prisoner's bonds must be undone; he cannot enter into a bower in which vine shoots are hanging; he must abstain from raw meat and every kind of leavened flour and successfully avoid fava beans, dogs, she-goats, and ivy . . . (*HS*, 183/204; Agamben's ellipses).

"In the life of the *Flamen Diale*," Agamben summarizes, "it is not possible to isolate something like bare life" (*HS*, 183/204). This figure offers a glimpse of what Agamben envisions under the sign of a total abolition of the sacred: a world where no tree is an *arbor felix*, because *all* are.

In the fragment that gave *Idea of Prose* its name, Benjamin says that this "idea of prose" coincides with "the messianic idea of universal history"

47. See, respectively, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive (Homo Sacer III)* and *State of Exception (Homo Sacer II.1)*.

(Benjamin *GS*, 1:1235). "The messianic world," he continues, "is the world of general and integral actuality. Universal history exists only in this world. But this history is not written; it is a history celebrated as a festival. As a purified festival, however, it does not have the character of a ceremony and does not know any hymns. Its language is free prose" (Benjamin *GS*, 1:1235). Universal history and the messianic world correspond to our history and our world in its every integral and actual moment. In this sense, it is "celebrated" and is tantamount to a "festival," not one that divides the sacred from the profane but, instead, one that unites them. It is a festival without ceremony and hymn, and its language is a "free" one because it is liberated from the weight of a sacred and unsayable element. Agamben's idea of prose, which is an idea of the profane and an idea of the messianic, is prose freed of the burden of the unsayable, prose freed from the weight of the transcendental.

In the closing pages of *Homo Sacer*, Agamben expresses skepticism about the Foucauldian project of discovering a "different economy of bodies and pleasures," stating, "Just as the biopolitical body of the West cannot be simply given back to its natural life in the *oikos*, so it cannot be overcome in a passage to a new body—a technical body or a wholly political or glorious body—in which a different economy of pleasures and vital functions would once and for all resolve the interlacement [*l'intreccio*] of *zoē* and *bios* that seems to define the political destiny of the West. This biopolitical body that is bare life must itself instead be transformed into the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life and a *bios* that is only its own *zoē*" (*HS*, 188/210). This "form of life," where bare life could not be placed in a state of sacred separation or exception, is a profane life, one where *bios* would coincide with *zoē*. It is thus not the "passage to a new body," the discovery of a new body or conception of life with different attributes than those hitherto assigned to it, that Agamben is striving for, after the fashion of Foucault, but instead a displacement in our relation to the very concepts of body and life. Agamben's intention is thus not that of constructing a new body that would escape the powers of capture and recuperation of a State system—as is often the case in Foucault and, following him, Deleuze—but instead that of developing the "free usage" of "bare life" itself—a "free usage" that is, for him, best understood as "profane."

A life stripped bare is what the state of exception rapidly becoming the rule in contemporary societies effects and which our every effort, following Agamben, should strive to counteract. The response he suggests, the

counterfigure to this "bare life," is, as mentioned, not *zoē* or *bios*, but the two brought together in indistinguishable proximity, and which Agamben calls "form-of-life." In a seminal essay for the *Homo Sacer* project, Agamben refers to such a "*form-of-life* [*forma-di-vita*], in which it is never possible to isolate something like bare life" (*MWE*, 9/18, translation modified; Agamben's emphasis). This claim is, at first glance, difficult to understand. Earlier in this programmatic essay, Agamben offers a definition of such a "form-of-life." It is, he writes, "a life . . . in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilities* [*possibilità*] of life, always and above all potentiality [*potenza*]" (*MWE*, 4/14, translation modified; Agamben's emphasis). Agamben's conception of "bare life" is a conception of life that is not the sum of its attributes, or the chronicle of its history, but a life whose essence is *potential*. To reduce life to any one of its attributes, or the attributes to which society assigns it, follows the same logic that has been the condition of possibility for the exclusion and violence that are the subject of Agamben's work from *The Coming Community* to *Homo Sacer* and beyond. To think "bare life" and its essence as potentiality is, for Agamben, not simply to halt before some unthinkable limit, but instead to endeavor to loosen the knot that the logic of sovereignty has not ceased to tighten around our conception of life. What must be done, then, is to develop a conception of life, and of "bare life," whose only necessary and universal attribute is its very contingency, its potentiality and its ability to make "free usage" of that potentiality.

The End of Days

In *Profanations*, Agamben asks a question he first raised in all its complexity in *The Coming Community*: "is a society without separations possible?" (*Profanazioni*, 100). The answer he offers is that the question as such is poorly formulated. "The society without classes is not a society which has abolished and lost all memory of the difference of class," he writes, "but rather a society that has learned to disactivate its protocols so as to render a new usage possible, to transform them into pure means [*mezzi puri*]" (*Profanazioni*, 100). In an essay published the same year as *The Coming Community*,[48] Agamben refers to a "threshold of de-propriation [*de-propriazione*] and de-identification of all modes and all qualities—a threshold in which those modes and qualities first become purely commu-

48. The essay is from 1990 but is falsely dated 1995 in the English translation.

nicable" (*MWE*, 100/80, translation modified). This is the Pauline message that Agamben sees everywhere in *The Coming Community*—from Heideggerian ontology to the preferences of Bartleby to pornographic films, where the signs of class are maintained but no longer carry any meaning that separates individuals from one another. What these varied paradigms seek to sketch are the contours of what Agamben called in a different work "a *political* community oriented [*ordinata*] exclusively towards the full enjoyment of worldly life [*vita mondana*]" (*MWE*, 114/90, translation modified).[49] In such a community, the ravaging and exclusionary logic of belonging, which dictates that one can only enjoy a community's protection if one fulfills certain sanctified criteria—only if one is red, Italian, communist, or whatever else—is replaced by a different conception of community conceived of through such theological figures as *the messianic kingdom* and the *remnant*. What sort of world political method, to borrow Benjamin's terms, is to be found in such a messianic vision? In an important essay on Benjamin first published in 1983 and to which in a recent Italian republication of it Agamben added a final page,[50] he writes, "To conceive of a human community and a human language which would no longer refer itself to an unsayable foundation and would no longer destine itself to an infinite transmission" is, as he says, "certainly an arduous task" (*La Potenza*, 54). And yet, to employ terms Agamben used elsewhere, the understanding and the forming of "this empty and unpresupposable community [*questa communità vuota e impresupponibile*]" is, for him, "the infantile task [*compito infantile*] of generations to come [*umanità che viene*]."[51] In such a conception, we have a task—but one that is completely undefined. And it is for this reason so "arduous."

A task of this order should recall the specific sense Agamben ascribes to the idea of *vocation*. In a chapter from *The Coming Community* entitled "Ethics," Agamben writes, "the fact that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize" (*CC*, 43/39). He continues, "This is the only reason why some-

49. Agamben links this "profane order" with the reflections on Guy Debord's society of the spectacle seen earlier in *Profanazioni*, where he claims that "the mediatic dispositives" of today have as their "goal" "to neutralize the profanizing power [*potere profanatorio*] of language as pure means [*mezzo puro*], to impede that it disclose the possibility of a new usage, of a new experience of speech [*della parola*]" (*Profanazioni*, 102).

50. This addition is nowhere noted in the new edition.

51. Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 10/xv, translation modified.

thing 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" (*CC*, 43/39). The "*post iudicium* world" of a coming community is not one *waiting* for some state of affairs to come or some judgment to be handed down from a sacred or transcendental realm, nor is it waiting to reach an endpoint of dialectical progress. In the postface to *The Coming Community* Agamben wrote eleven years after completing the book, he underlines that "*coming* does not mean *future*."[52] As in the conceptions of messianic time offered by Benjamin and Paul, the "time of the now" is one no longer waiting for its final form. In light of such a conception, mankind has no set and specific "destiny." This has nothing in common with quietism, and the idea that there is no specific "task" to fulfill or "vocation" to exercise does not mean that there is nothing to be done. On the contrary, Agamben's rejection of such conceptions of "essence" and "destiny" is done in the name of a time that is now and an action that is ours. What truly leads to apathy and quietism, in Agamben's view, is a naïve belief in historical progress, like the one he castigated in *Infancy and History*. And this is the sense that Agamben claims, in *Idea of Prose*, "the one incomparable claim to nobility our own era might legitimately make in regard to the past: *that of no longer wanting to be a historical epoch*."[53]

In this light we can understand Agamben's repeated claims that mankind has no historical *task, calling, or vocation*—whether individual or collective. The sense behind Agamben's interest in the paradigm offered by *messianism*, and that allows him to speak of a "*post iudicium* world," is the governing idea of no longer waiting for the fulfillment of a millennial historical vocation or the announcement of a new one. To speak of the "*post iudicium*" world is, for this reason, neither apocalyptic nor nihilistic in the customary sense of the term. For Agamben, it is our essential absence of determinate vocation that defines our human state and which is the most fundamental characteristic of our being in this world. As concerns his two most decisive modern influences, it is also the point at which Heidegger's ontology meets Benjamin's messianism. As Agamben repeatedly notes, "essence, in the Heideggerian definition of Dasein, lies [*liegt*] in existence," and *Dasein* "is an absolutely inessential being, whose essence . . . now lies [*liegt*] integrally in existence, in its multiple manners [*Weise*] of being" (*HS*,

52. Agamben, "Tiqqun de la noche," *La comunità che viene*, 92, Agamben's emphasis.
53. Agamben, *Idea of Prose*, 87/71, Agamben's emphasis.

188/210, and *La Potenza*, 326). To see the relation of existence to essence like that of profane to sacred means to render the distinction inoperative. This same integral identity and "integral actuality" that Benjamin finds between this world and the messianic one, and that leads him to evoke a "profane order," is what Agamben tries to conceive and convey.

It is only at the point where these influences and ideas come together that we can see the coherence of Agamben's reflections and the sense behind such difficult concepts as the "inoperative." While inspired by Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Raymond Queneau, and others, Agamben's conception of the "inoperative" is more radical—and more historical—tracing the idea as he does from Aristotle to the present, and carrying it through to its ultimate implications. In-*opera*-tive means that there is no specific work (*opera*) that any individual or any society *has* to complete or perform. When Agamben says that mankind is "inoperative," he is not saying that mankind is dysfunctional or that its natural state is one of a *dolce far niente* or apathetic laziness. On the contrary, this absence of specific work is a call to work for, indeed, the bettering of our world—because it will not better itself as a natural and inevitable consequence of the dialectic of history or Divine Will. This is to say, as he writes in an essay from 1996, "man is a being of pure potentiality [*un essere di pura potenza*], and which no identity and no vocation can exhaust" (*La Potenza*, 330). By the same token, human history and human life are contingent. To say that human history and human life in this sense are contingent is also to say and to see that they are free—free to continue as they are going, free to commit and undergo unimaginable atrocities, just as they are free to change the course of events and bring about a more just and egalitarian order.

In this same postface to *The Coming Community* from 2001 Agamben stresses that "the idea itself of a calling . . . or of a historical task . . . needs to be integrally rethought" (*La comunità che viene*, 91). What is called for here is not a general strike but a breaking with the millennial idea of a task to be completed and the need to form an elect corps to accomplish it. This is precisely the sense in which Agamben means—in what may seem at first sight an enigmatic formulation—that ours is the first era that is not a historical one. This does not mean because human history will end with our generation, but it does mean that a hitherto dominant mode of conceiving that history can—and should—end. "There is in effect," writes Agamben, "something that humans are and have to be, but this something is not an essence nor properly a thing: *it is the simple fact of one's own existence as possibility or potentiality*" (*CC*, 43/39, Agamben's emphasis). An ethics

worthy of the name could never be simply a list of historical tasks to accomplish or spiritual exercises to complete. It must remain, for Agamben, precariously open.[54] Benjamin wrote, "nihilism" is the "task" of "world politics." Agamben's version of this remark is that world politics has no set "task" at all.

In *Men in Dark Times*, Hannah Arendt writes, "what begins now, after the end of world history, is the history of mankind."[55] With a similar thought in mind, Agamben notes in *The Coming Community*, "the life that begins on earth after the last day is simply human life" (*CC*, 7/12). The name Agamben gives to the profane order, to the life that begins after the last day—"irreparable"—is, as we have seen, not to be understood in the sense of "not being capable of being bettered" but instead as meaning that no magic wand or sacred scepter will come to end our woes and that we must cease living in the expectation of some ultimate event. Such a life no longer waits for a culminating event that will crystallize, dissolve, transform, or transubstantiate it—whether after the fashion of a dialectic of progress or an apocalyptic End of Days. And for this reason, all our efforts—individual and collective—should be directed toward what Agamben calls "the end of days that is every day" (*Profanazioni*, 30).

54. Daniel Heller-Roazen ends his introduction to *Potentialities* with a reference to Agamben's "coming community" as "without identity, defined by nothing other than its existence in language as irreducible, absolute potentiality" ("'To Read What Was Never Written,'" editor's introduction to *Potentialities*, 23).
55. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955), 90.