AGAMBEN
AND THE
EXISTENTIALISTS
EDITED BY MARCOS ANTONIO NORRIS
AND COLBY DICKINSON
Agamben and the Existentialists

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Chapter 3

Biopolitics and Probability: Modifications on Life’s Way

Virgil W. Brower

Despite everything people ought to have learned from my maestoso carefulness . . . they will probably Basel out . . . that I know nothing about sociality . . .

Kierkegaard’s journal

This project retraces activations of Kierkegaard in the development of political theology. It suggests alternative modes of states of exception attributed to him. Several Kierkegaardian themes open themselves to ‘something like pure potential’ in Agamben, namely: living death, animality, criminality, auto-construction, modification, literature, love and certain articulations of improbabilities.

Genealogy of Infatuations

It is almost comic, distinctly short of divine. The Dane and Dante are thought together. Something borders on humour about the way Agamben twice invokes Kierkegaard in an early essay devoted to the radical naming of the divine as ‘Comedy’. He is included among a solemn few who appreciate the tragic-comic distinction in the development of modern philosophy. But this early engagement seems to strain Kierkegaard exclusively on the tragic stage — as if lacking any laughter on his side — associating Fear and Trembling with the Abraham of Averroes: “the tragic situation par excellence.”

Something is no less tragic about another way Agamben later invokes Kierkegaard as a prophet of the state of exception, by which a delimitation extreme becomes a norm. In §2.4 of Remains of Auschwitz, the ‘extreme situation’ or ‘limit situation’ is analogous to the function ascribed by some jurists to the state of exception . . . As Kierkegaard writes, ‘the exception explains the general as well as itself. And when one wants to really study the general, one need only look around for a real exception.’ Agamben does not find it necessary to cite or reference the text in question. This is already an anxious symptomatic of an overgeneralized and unnameable deployment of Kierkegaard within political theology. Agamben is not the first to exhibit this symptom. This deployment becomes a self-perpetuating — perhaps even tactical (considering its dissemination in wartime — feedback loop of repeated self-reinforcements that verge upon regulatory ‘capture’). The primary concern would be critical consideration of what remains uncaptured; beginning with the serious omissions that have been made to Kierkegaard’s text.

For a thinker so allegedly turned towards style as Agamben, there is tragic insurrection to the metical pains and ‘maestoso carefulness’ Kierkegaard devotes to the pseudonymous perspectives of respective texts through his signature mode of indirection. The deference which Agamben’s political theology grants to ‘the anonymous ones we call artists [seeking] to constitute their life as a form of life’, specifically, ‘one who signs [a “work”] with an ironic false name’ must be extended Kierkegaard’s singular style. Such referential haste in Remnants is likely self-parodied by Agamben because he is simply extracting the first two sentences from a larger quotation already canonized by Schmitt in the first chapter of Political Theology.

A Protestant theologian (Ein protestantischer Theologe) who demonstrated the vital intensity possible in theological reflection in the nineteenth century said: ‘The exception explains the general and itself. And if one wants to study the general correctly, one need only look around for a true exception.’ (Mem. Agamben stops.) It avoids everything more clearly than does the general. Endless talk about the general becomes boring; there are exceptions. If they cannot be explained, then, the general also cannot be explained. The difficulty is usually not noticed because the general is not thought about with passion but with a comfortable superficiality. The exception, on the other hand, thinks the general with intense passion.’

In Homo Sacer Agamben identifies this ‘theologian . . . as none other than Severus Kierkegaard.’ Schmitt not only omits the title of the text in question, but even Kierkegaard’s name (the omission of which is, ironically, perhaps the most astute aspect of the quotation).

Besotted Repetitions

Something almost criminal is at hand. As if constituting a kind of sovereign command or expropriating control over another’s words, Schmitt’s block
beyond the probable, God is absolutely not included, though it does not follow from this that he is present wherever there is yearning beyond the probable.27

Politics and probability are found entangled and indissoluble. "The political denotes the possible to the probable. Politics takes command of humanity as probability feigns control over possibility. In politics as such humanity is perhaps no longer possible. It probabilities the pews — as mega-data enumerates subhumans — so politics might optimise policing."

Theodicy of Probable Animals

Agamben draws attention to how probability calcula seems reliant upon enumeration. "If the cause of the rupture with classical physics was the numerical character of the calculation of probabilities", he then wonders along with Simone Weil, "why scientists did not choose to work on the very notion of probability in order to elaborate a model of calculation that is not founded on discontinuity but on continuity — instead of changing the theory of physics from top to bottom."

Bad faith in raw numbers potentially burgeses into a form of governmental command. This is indicative of Bentolli "law of large numbers, on which every statistical calculation is based."29 Kierkegaard shares this suspicion based on vast enumeration.

"How [ironic] this: the law is this — that everything that needs numbers in order to be important...the more numbers it needs, the less important it is. Everything that can be...realized, only by means of great numbers, and that men then regard with unfeigned admiration, as if it were really important — everything of this kind is unimportant. What is truly important is outside the reason, it always needs less and less numbers in order to be realized..."

The reliability of numbers is of course a fraud, they are untrustable, and yet this is what is offered you in the world, calculated to fool you, so that you become part of the numbers...Numbers are used in order to conceal the emptiness of existence, they put you in a state of calculation, like opium, and so you are tranquillized by the immense reliability of numbers running into millions...the animal needs no higher certainty than number.30

Kierkegaard, the Anti-Bentolli, transgresses the law by imagining a nonlaw of lesser numbers.31 Command again is found malformed human life into animality, now, through probability (algorithmically self-optimised by numerical law) rather than sovereignty (administratively auto-constituted by exceptional law). Kierkegaard indices enumeration as a brute logic of animal survival far less than human living. Numbers

Notes

3. "There are all the gods...I was grained...a wish. "What do you want," asked Mercury...I choose one thing — that I may always have the laughter on my side." 'Not one of the gods said a word; instead, all of them began to laugh.' Soren Kierkegaard, Either/Or, Part 1, trans. Howard V. Hong and Erudia H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), pp. 42-3. Cf. Eckstein, Nietzsche, This Spake Zarathustra, trans. Adrian Del Carlo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 146. [Part 3, On Apollonius, 52].
10. Carl Schmitt, Political Theology, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of
meta-conceptual (even if only conceptual-activated) articulation of this in the closing paragraphs to the "Theology of disruption of the Greater Logic ..." such a movement
is itself immediately disabled and a foot is always also a second. In the concept
of faith for that, it is, in its subjectivity, the difference of itself from itself as an
immediate identical unity on its own but since its determinate here is in diffe-
rent extension, its self-identity is in this extensity instantaneously also self-reflexion
again, so that what is determined as external and indifferent to the identity is rather
this identity itself, and the identity as identity, as self-reflexion, is rather in other:
65. Kierkegaard, The Scenery on Death, p. 14, 16. "It is exclusively receptive rela-
tion in which one 'simply keeps [it] all assimilative' and, as such, a 'change occurred in
everything [our] received'. Søren Kierkegaard, Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses, trans.
Here Kierkegaard perhaps anticipates the idea that in all possible differences be-
 tween (1) self-reflection and (2) letting oneself be caught in the dichotomy (1)
reception and (2) auto-effectuation (aesthetic or ethical) as merely to affect or to be
felt oneself (or alter oneself) or to feel oneself to affect or to be felt oneself by a feel-
 ing or latter officer equal part on some continuum" addressed in Jacques Derrida, "Justices", trans. Peggy Kamii, Critical Inquiry 31.3 (Spring
would have something to do with the porosity by which any so-called 'T of oneself
is overcome by its own passivity, its own emptiness' in Agamben, Remains of
Auswater, p. 105.
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid., p. 264.
70. Ibid., p. 170. Agamben's title.
71. Ibid., p. nia.
72. Ibid., p. oui.
73. My reading of the Kierkegaardian system (of it is that it) inclines to possibilities sug-
gested by Mendel Weephol, whereby works of love exceed the religiosities (a
and b) sketched out within it (and, as such, the system itself). 'Hidden in each
remains uncomprehended, but it is ideologically suspended in currently viable works of
love. Here is an interpretation ... that goes beyond Climacus. I call it Religiousness C,
Mendel Weephol, Becoming a Self: A Reading of Kierkegaard's Cammadistic
74. Kierkegaard, Philosophical Crumbs, p. 106; italics added.
75. Agamben, The Use of Bodies, p. xxi.
76. Agamben, Open Citi, p. 28.
77. Agamben, The Highest Poverty, pp. 70, 74, 92-3, 98, 141. C. "Laboratorium" in
Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Die deutsche Ideologie, Werke, vol. 3 (Berlin: Dietz
Verlag, 1990), p. 21.
78. Kierkegaard, Either-Or, P.2, trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton:
79. Ibid.
80. Agamben, Homo Sacer, p. 16; italics added.
Paul Rabinow (New York: Penguin, 1984), pp. 78, 95; Gilles Deleuze, Nietzsche
and Philosophy, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press,
2006), pp. 25-4, 197; John Marion, Keynes: A Treatise on Probability (Lexington:
Willsburg Press, 2017)1520, p. 337. (Keynes might have more in common with
Nietzsche, Fanciful and Deleuze on such issues than confrontational theories are often
led us to believe, especially if receiving their modes of thinking through Agamben's
presentation of them.)
82. Kierkegaard, Repetition, p. 5; italics added.
84. Schelling, Political Theology, p. 5; italics added.
85. 'It is important to remember that in the exception ... the law maintains itself in
relation to the exception in the form of its own self-explanation.' Agamben, The Time
86. Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, p. 56.
87. Ibid., p. 106; italics added.
89. Kierkegaard, The Use of Bodies, p. 265.
90. Kierkegaard, Journals and Notebooks, vol. 10, p. 84. Note this animality within 'To
Want to Be Free' alongside Derrida's critique of Agamben (discussed above).
94. Agamben, The Highest Poverty, p. 77; italics added.
95. Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, pp. 60-1; italics added.
96. Kierkegaard, Repetition, p. 78; Science is he that decides the suspension.
98. Kierkegaard, Journals and Notebooks, vol. 10, p. 120.
100. Ibid., p. 28. "Therefore ... forms a system with the law of the equality of probabilities
and confirms the principle that probability does not concern a real given event but only
the tendency to infinity of the number of examined samples", pp. 31-2.
This chapter offers a corrective to the relationship between Giorgio Agamben and Søren Kierkegaard. My starting point is the literature on Agamben’s writings on bare life and the exception, and the thought of Carl Schmitt. After summarizing the literature detailing how Schmitt’s sovereignty informed Agamben’s biopolitics, I consider how Schmitt and Agamben have cited Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard’s Repetition influenced Schmitt’s writings on the exception, and Schmitt read Repetition as a model for sovereignty. Kierkegaard’s writings informed Agamben’s philosophy as well. I read Repetition as a model for what Agamben terms ‘absolute immi-
nence’, or ‘form-of-life’. To support this, I explore Agamben’s coming politics. This politics eschews relationality and definitions of life based on apparatuses, divisions and caesuras, which produce and sustain bare life. This politics seeks to provide the basis for the figure of form-of-life to live. Form-of-life is a singularity, conceived of in all its difference from other singularities. It is life lived in a non-relational existence, its own mode of being generated by its manner of being. The ethical subject focuses on how it lives in life, through contact with other forms-of-life, and living a life of contemplative use. Contact is separate from relation in Agamben’s work. It is true that there is a lack of precision to the difference between the two terms in Agamben, leading to an ambiguity. This is illustrated by the fact that Agamben describes form-of-life as a singularity conceived in all its difference from other singularities. Yet relationality is tied to definitions which are based on difference. Contact is a way of relating to others outside of difference. Form-of-life is not differential or relational. Differential and relational should be understood in a precise way for Agamben. Form-of-life is non-relational in the sense that it is not defined or understood as being held up against other persons or beings.
‘Consistently challenging, informative, and enlightening, the essays in this volume make a major contribution in situating Agamben’s thought in relation to existentialist thinkers and themes. They provide a bright new lens through which to view Agamben’s work.’

Kevin Atteil, Cornell University

Explores the philosophical relationship between Giorgio Agamben and the existentialist tradition

While Giorgio Agamben’s work has not previously been categorised as existentialist, his work creatively repackages important existentialist themes in a politico-theological context. This collection of essays offers creative new ways of considering Agamben’s critique of the sovereign exception, as well as other existentialist themes, including feminism and postcolonialism.

The international range of contributors each challenge, complicate or reimagine Agamben’s reading of the sovereign exception, which appears among the writings of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, Heidegger, Beauvoir, Fanon, Kafka, Dostoevsky and others in both theistic and atheistic forms.

Divided into three sections – Agamben and the Sovereign Exception, Agamben and the Death of God and Existentialist Themes in Agamben – this collection re-introduces Agamben as an unacknowledged existentialist philosopher who takes the major themes and concepts of existentialism in a startling new direction.

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