



Agamben's 'bare life' and Grossman's ethics of senseless kindness

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Abstract

In his early works, Giorgio Agamben argues that some Auschwitz inmates practised a 'silent form of resistance' by shutting themselves off from the world until nothing could harm them. I argue that this conception of 'bare life' is both too abstract and too individualistic. Agamben's idea of bare life's resistance first neglects the socio-historical context that has produced particular instances of it, effectively barring the investigation into how to avoid future occurrences of sovereign violence. Agamben, second, emphasizes the potential for resistance present in individual bodies shut off from the world without providing guidelines for how these bodies should form a substantive community. I consequently employ Vasily Grossman's writings on the Shoah to provide an alternative conception of bare life's resistance in the camps. According to Grossman, resistance lies not in closing oneself off from the world, but in cultivating ineradicable nodes of 'senseless kindness' in concrete human interactions.

Keywords

animal studies, ethics, kindness, resistance, Shoah

This kindness, this stupid kindness, is what is most truly human in a human being. It is what sets man apart, the highest achievement of his soul. No, it says, life is not evil! This kindness is both senseless and wordless. It is instinctive, blind.

Vasily Grossman (2011: 393)

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Resistance in Giorgio Agamben's 'Homo Sacer'-project

Giorgio Agamben suddenly assumed a central position in contemporary philosophy thanks to the prophetic quality of his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* vis-à-vis the violent excesses of the War on Terror in the early 2000s. One of the key questions his 'Homo Sacer'-project raises is how to resist violence and death in a state of exception. What is to be done when human beings are reduced to bare life as they are exposed to the sovereign's power over life and death? This question has been especially urgent in the context of the concentration camps. Nazi 'thanatopolitics' effectively reduced Jews and other inmates to remnants of bare life lacking even the energy to take care of themselves properly, let alone politically organize. In the years after the publication of *Homo Sacer*, one can thus observe Agamben trying out different options to think resistance together with this minimal mode of existence. In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, he focuses on testimony; in *The Open*, he proposes a disarticulation of the human/animal-distinction; in *The Highest Poverty*, Agamben investigates Church history to find paradigms of escape in monasticism and Franciscan practices of poverty. I wish to take issue with one theory of resistance Agamben espouses especially in *Homo Sacer* itself. He argues that Auschwitz inmates performed a 'silent form of resistance' (Agamben, 1998: 185) by shutting themselves off from the outside world. The self-isolation would hence always already be a form of resistance insofar as the terror of sovereign violence would no longer affect its victims. Who cares about the power over life and death if you have lost the will to live? Agamben's theory of resistance has, however, been received with substantial scepticism (Didi-Huberman, 2018; Mesnard and Kahan, 2001); those subjected to bare life may withdraw themselves from the socio-political order, but more seems to be required before we can speak of resistance. If this is the most resistance has to offer today, we are living in dire times.¹ The following two valid criticisms can be levelled against Agamben: (1) his theory of resistance is too abstract insofar as it is more interested in developing the concept of bare life than in finding and contextualizing actions that might actually help victims of extreme violence and (2) his theory is too individualistic because it glorifies the retreat of the subject into itself instead of appreciating the ways concrete individuals are able to form collective bonds even in the most challenging circumstances.

I wish to employ the writings of Vasily Grossman to develop an alternative, more affirmative notion of resistance. In *The Road*, Grossman tells the story of Giu, a mule degraded to the status of bare life during the Second World War. His description of the mule mirrors the situation of concentration camp inmates, whom Grossman encountered after arriving with the Red Army at the site of the Treblinka extermination camp. Grossman however rejects the strategy of self-withdrawal. In his story, the mule is redeemed through the care received from a fellow animal. In the essay 'The Sistine Madonna', Grossman explains this redemptive potential of care with the paradigm of the Virgin Mary attending to her child. I wish to develop Grossman's statements on redemptive care into a theory of bare life's salvific force distinct from Agamben's views in *Homo Sacer*. According to theologians, God's act of incarnation is a willful form of self-weakening (*kenôsis*). The Madonna's sympathy for the weak God incarnated in the child Jesus shows how human beings are supposed to repeat this act of self-weakening in the

service of vulnerable others. Resistance and the subsequent improvement of humankind's lot are not to be found in life's capacity to withdraw itself from the evils of the world, but in the capacity of living beings to strike connections of care even in the direst situations. The Madonna's care for the helpless God exemplifies a form of resistance that evades the problems of Agamben's approach. It is less abstract insofar as it focuses on how concrete individuals help each other in real situations, not on how all individuals become identical exemplars of the category of 'bare life'. It is also less individualistic, because it assumes relationality to be an ineradicable part of the human condition, even in the hardest circumstances. This does not mean that Grossman's ethics do not come without their own set of problems. I will discuss two: his male-centred tendency to equate acts of care with femininity and the insufficiency of self-weakening in projects of political liberation.

Agamben and bare life's silent form of resistance

In *Homo Sacer* (1998: 1), Agamben argues that, since the Greeks, Western political order has been built through the separation of natural life (*zôê*) and socio-political life (*bios*). Aristotle, for instance, distinguishes between mere survival and the good life, the latter requiring the cultivation of *logos* to acquire happiness.² This organization, however, requires the presence of a sovereign who should apply the rules of the good life. It is allegedly by voluntarily submitting oneself to the authority of this sovereign that *zôê* becomes *bios*. But the logic of sovereignty hides an insidious presupposition; the sovereign is also free to decide *not* to apply the law (Agamben, 1998: 20–1). Whoever transgresses the basic laws governing community membership is declared 'sacer'. Legal protections are thenceforth suspended. During the subsequent 'state of exception', life is directly exposed to the sovereign's authority without legal protections. Underneath lawful life as *bios*, there is 'bare life' (*nuda vita*) subjected to the sovereign responsible to apply *bios*' laws. Usually this residue of life remains a latent possibility, but it becomes manifest in the individuals who are denied citizenship of their community. These outcasts do not profit from the advantages of membership in a particular community but are still subject to the community's sovereign. They can subsequently be killed with impunity but are not allowed to voice their concerns. Without proper access to a *bios*, human beings become, in Agamben's opinion, stunted into formless living matter. They still possess the potential to enact the good life, but its actualization is suspended. Bare life

designates a life shorn of all qualifications and conceived of independent of its traditional attributes. [. . .] Bare life is not an initial state so much as what becomes visible through a stripping away of all predicates and attributes. (De La Durantaye, 2009: 203)

It is not nothing that remains in the state of exception, but a residue of living substance qualified by nothing else than its exposure to sovereign violence. Bare life appears as a *bios* from which all positive characteristics binding it to a social existence have been subtracted and only the pure subjection to the sovereign decision over life and death remains.

According to Agamben (1998: 166), this logic reached its apex in the Nazi concentration camps. Nazi biopolitics reduced the good life to the promotion of the German race and eugenics (Agamben, 2002: 82–6). To immunize the German gene pool from degeneration, the Nazis attempted to exterminate all purportedly inferior races. The fate of the Jews exemplifies this thanatopolitical perversion (Agamben, 1998: 179).³ Their legal rights were gradually taken away from them after 1933 until they became rightless creatures at the mercy of the German state. The promotion of the Aryan race subjected Jews to the German authorities' sovereign decision over life and death. Once they entered the concentration camps, Jews were cut off from anything that would have enabled them to cultivate a *bios*. They were separated from their clothes, their freedom, even their names. They became, in Agamben's terminology, a life that 'may be killed and yet not sacrificed' (Agamben, 1998: 8). The inmates could be selected for the gas chambers at a moment's notice; if they were not killed that way, they could die from the deprivations of camp life. Yet, one could hardly call their deaths 'real deaths': the killing of millions was reduced to an administrative affair, the mere 'fabrication of corpses' (Agamben, 2002: 71).

The kind of inmate that revealed the destructive potential of the camps was the so-called *Muselmann* (Agamben, 2002: 34). For Agamben, this case is paradigmatic: subject to the arbitrary sovereign decision over life and death without legal protections and robbed of any capacity to cultivate the good life. Primo Levi (1996) describes the *Muselmänner* as follows:

They, the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead in them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand.

The *Muselmänner* were a crowd of undead automata, physically still walking but mentally long deceased. although the word possibly refers to the religion of Islam, Agamben writes that 'the Muslim's resignation consists in the conviction that the will of Allah is at work every moment and in even the smallest details, [while] the *Muselmann* of Auschwitz is instead defined by a loss of all will and consciousness' (2002: 45). This type of inmate confronted the others with the horrific truth that there is still something of living substance left after the destruction of humanity, as if the human being would be an entity that could infinitely be destroyed (Agamben, 2002: 134). After one is degraded, stripped of all qualities that could embed someone in a *bios*, there is still a residue left, a vital zero degree of humanity (De Kesel, 2009). This remnant still looks human but partakes in nothing that would make its life more than a mere biological process. Levi (1989) describes them as people who have, as it were, 'seen the Gorgon' (p. 83). In the concentration camps, the *Muselmänner* were confronted proverbially with this ancient Greek monstrosity and, subsequently, their relation to the world turned to stone. They withdrew from any meaningful relations with their surroundings but continued to roam around as faceless automata-like beings. If the *Muselmänner* were conscious of anything at all, it was of an insatiable hunger that devours all mental space. The forced labour, the cold, the beatings no longer made an impact.

Instead of lamenting their fate, however, Agamben discerns a ‘silent form of resistance’ (1998: 185) in their conduct. The withdrawal of the *Muselmänner* into themselves immunizes them from their surroundings. Once turned into stone, the evils of the world slide off them like water off a rock. They reciprocate the exclusion from *bios* with an analogous self-exclusion from human, socio-political life. The inmates thereby liberate themselves from the sovereign authority of the Nazi officials. The latter are obviously still in a position to put the *Muselmänner* to death, but the *Muselmänner* no longer have the capacity to care. The authorities’ decisions no longer concern them. Insofar as the Nazi death machine feeds on the fears and pains of the Jews, the *Muselmänner* have thus rendered the machine inoperative through their self-isolation. Once human beings lack the capacity to partake in a *bios*, the law loses its grip on life.⁴ Adriana Cavarero captures this phenomenon succinctly:

Those who have seen the Gorgon represent a degenerated form of helplessness; they can no longer even feel the hurt of the *vulnus* that nevertheless continues to be inflicted on them with methodical perseverance. [. . .] Totally engaged in its own destructive passion, violence ends, in the horrorist laboratory of the *Lager*, by producing victims who can no longer suffer from it. (Cavarero, 2009: 34–5)

Of course, Agamben is not arguing that everyone should become like the *Muselmann* just to ‘beat the system’. He does not equate bare life with redemption. Agamben merely points out that the *Muselmann*’s disengagement is an effective form of resistance, even if it was not intended as such. This conduct succeeds in voiding the logic of sovereign capture, but Agamben is not so naïve as to think that this would immediately deliver an alternative, better form of existence. Agamben’s statement about the *Muselmann*’s silent resistance should be read, in other words, as a theory of resistance, not as a theory of the good life or a moral prescription. Even in this restricted format, however, there is something disturbing about Agamben’s approach. This silent self-withdrawal is, at best, a pyrrhic victory. The *Muselmänner* were the first to be selected for the gas chambers. ‘This character has not chosen resistance; the *Muselmänner* become resistant by being reduced to a pith of humanity’ (Martel, 2015: 188). Agamben’s other examples of bare life’s resistant potential of self-withdrawal frequently share the same deadly fate: Melville’s *Bartleby*, Kafka’s man from the country, the protesters at Tiananmen Square and so on. The immobilization of bare life seems more like a horrific catastrophe than a heroic act of self-defence. One could call this ‘resistance’ in the sense that an electrical current meets resistance when moving through a non-conducting medium, but this has nothing to do with human emancipation. One can scrutinize the following two aspects of Agamben’s theory of silent resistance: (1) its excessively abstract character and (2) its implicit individualism:

- (1) Bernstein (2004) fervently argues against Agamben, claiming that it is perverse to glorify the fate of the most destitute people in the twentieth century. How could the *Muselmann* be the paradigm of anything except the utmost despair and unjust misery? According to Bernstein, Agamben only succeeds in foregrounding the *Muselmann*’s self-isolation as resistance because he abstracts from the particularities of camp life in order to present it as a ‘pure’ instance of bare life. Agamben

is more interested in proving a philosophical point than in investigating the exact history of the Jews' persecution under Nazism. Without this historical context, however, the genocide receives an artificial semblance of inevitability without concrete guidance about how to avoid future disasters. Cavarero (2009) agrees that Agamben treats the *Muselmann* as an abstraction to support a theoretical point about bare life. Agamben obscures the historical and social context of the *Muselmänner* in the camp to highlight their appearance as an anonymous mass without a history or a future. Anything that might individuate a particular inmate is forced into the background to reveal a formless substance; it is as if Agamben had taken pictures of all kinds of human disaster and thereby made them indistinguishable from one another. The context required to differentiate one scene of suffering from another has been edited out of the frame.

- (2) Apart from this excessive abstraction, there is also a hidden individualism in Agamben's theory of silent resistance. Agamben focuses on the individual *Muselmann* subtracting himself from the social body that rejected him. The bare life under consideration is 'stripped of all relations' (Colebrooke and Maxwell, 2016: 13), also social relations. The *Muselmänner* do not form a community capable of collective action, but an 'anonymous mass' of disconnected individuals. The *Muselmann* faces his oppressors alone. In response, Agamben (1992) posits a bridge from bare life to a 'coming community' anteceding every concrete *bios*:

In this conception, such-and-such being is reclaimed from its having this or that property, which identifies it as belonging to this or that set, to this or that class (the reds, the French, the Muslims) – and it is reclaimed not for another class nor for the simple generic absence of any belonging, but for its being-*such*, for belonging itself. (pp. 1–2)

A *bios* develops a community based on a decision on the good life in terms of properties all members are supposed to cultivate (e.g. being red-haired, French, Muslim, etc.). For Aristotle, this property was *logos*; for the Nazis, it was in the bloodline of the Aryan race. As noted, problems arise for people who fail to embody these qualities. The coming community, however, does not prescribe the possession of certain properties. It is satisfied with everyone's being-thus, that is, with their potential to acquire a multitude of properties (becoming red-haired, French, Muslim, etc.), which is universal. According to Agamben, bare life is stripped of all social qualities, but what is left retains the potential to belong to a whole range of different imagined communities. By manifesting this potential in its pure state, bare life is supposedly a herald of the coming community. But how this collection of so-called 'whatever singularities' forms anything that resembles a genuine human community remains a mystery (Marion, 2006: 1017). Ultimately, Agamben is saying nothing more than that everyone is always already in a community with everyone else because we all share the absolute potentiality to belong to communities. This might be true, but it says nothing about how members of that community interact. A theory of community should not only articulate what people hold in common, but also how intersubjective praxis occurs among its

members. Genuine community entails more than sharing a specific quality, even if it is only a potential one. It requires a way for people to coordinate their activities with each other. This messy reality of human togetherness is eclipsed in Agamben's writings. It is hence fair to criticize Agamben's theory of silent resistance for lacking 'a collective political subject' (Whyte, 2013: 45).⁵ He gives no coordinates for a human collectivity capable of emancipating or governing itself as a group.

Vasily Grossman's *The Road* as an allegory of care

Vasily Grossman was a Jewish–Ukrainian writer during the Stalinist era in the Soviet–Union.⁶ As a war correspondent, he reported on the battle of Stalingrad and the red Army's march westward into German territory. He witnessed the liberation of his homeland, but also heard of the slaughter of Babi Yar, where the Nazis killed thousands of Jews in September 1941. Grossman wrote one of the first reconstructions of life in the concentration camps, based on interviews with survivors from Treblinka. On a theoretical level, he seems to have a lot in common with Agamben. He is also suspicious of biopolitical projects that govern populations according to pre-determined laws and qualities leading to thanatopolitical disasters. He writes that

There is a terrible similarity between the principles of Fascism and those of contemporary physics. Fascism has rejected the concept of a separate individuality, the concept of 'a man', and operates only with vast aggregates. [. . .] Fascism arrived at the idea of the liquidation of entire strata of the population, of entire nations and races, on the grounds that there was a greater probability of overt or covert opposition among these groupings than among others: the mechanics of probabilities and of human aggregates. (Grossman, 2011: 78)

He believes likewise that 'life inside the camps could be seen as an exaggerated, magnified reflection of life outside' (Grossman, 2011: 829). The camp can serve as a paradigm for the decipherment of modern politics outside the camps. What struck him particularly about the camps was the manifestation of what Agamben would call 'bare life':

After you've been searched, after you've had your buttons ripped off and your spectacles confiscated, you look on yourself as a physical nonentity. And then in the investigator's office you realize that the role you played in the Revolution and the Civil War means nothing, that all your work and all your knowledge is just so much rubbish. You are indeed a nonentity – and not just physically. The unity of man's physical and spiritual being was the key to the investigators' almost uninterrupted run of successes. Soul and body are two complementary vessels; after crushing and destroying a man's physical defences, the invading party nearly always succeeded in sending its mobile detachments into the breach in time to triumph over a man's soul, to force him into unconditional capitulation. (Grossman, 2011: 826)

These seeming similarities are, however, misleading. Grossman's essays and short stories deviate sharply from Agamben's understanding of human existence under such extreme conditions. In *The Road*, an Italian mule called Giu is mobilized into the German army for the invasion at the Eastern Front. He is made to pull a carriage together with one

other mule, who assumes a distant and indifferent demeanour, not caring for the surroundings, Giu's difficulties or the master's whip, instead just marching forward like an automaton. After a while, Giu also succumbs to the hardships of the road:

No longer any different from the old mule who was his workmate, he did all this without emotion, without throwing his head back or baring his teeth. The polished breastband, the cart, and the road had become part of his life. (Grossman, 2010a)

Giu transmogrifies into a sorry creature akin to the Auschwitz *Muselmann*:

Slowly, inescapably, war and winter were crushing the mule. A vast, indifferent force was on the point of annihilating him; Giu countered this attack with an indifference of his own that was no less vast. He became a shadow of himself – and this living, ashen shadow could no longer sense either its own warmth or the pleasure that comes from food and rest. (Grossman, 2010a)

He too reaches the degree zero of existence. At a certain moment, the German battalion comes under attack from Russian forces. Giu stands in the midst of the battlefield, indifferent to the bombs and artillery fire. His master and the other mule die instantly in an explosion, but Giu stands unaffected because he has moved beyond care for his life. After the battle, the Russian army passes by and a soldier attaches Giu to a new cart, next to a small Russian mare. Now Giu is the petrified bystander working alongside a lively yet inexperienced fellow creature. In contrast to the previous interactions with his deceased work mate, the mare is not indifferent to Giu:

She flicked Giu with her tail. Her silky, slippery tail was not in the least like either the driver's whip or his old workmate's tail; it slid caressingly over his hide. After a while, the mare gave another flick of her tail, even though there were certainly no flies, gadflies, or mosquitoes anywhere on this snow-covered plain. And Giu looked out of the corner of one eye at the mare trotting beside him, and she glanced at him at the same moment. Now there was no viciousness at all in her eye; it was just a little sly. (Grossman, 2010a)

Gradually, Giu returns from the realm of the undead, even if he still undergoes the same hardships. 'In this good, kind warmth all that had gone to sleep awoke again. All that had long been dead came back to life' (Grossman, 2010a). The concrete relationship with the new horse gives him back his sense of self.

In the first part of the story, Grossman presents a phenomenological description of the descent into bare life experienced by the *Muselmänner*. At first sight, it confirms Agamben's intuition: all attempts at active resistance fail, so the only way to make his situation livable is for Giu to withdraw from the world. Once he has seen the Gorgon, he turns to stone. Giu has indeed shielded himself from the evils of the war by numbing his spirit. The last few pages, however, dampen Agamben's appreciation about silent resistance and Giu is saved not thanks to his petrification, but by sharing his suffering with a fellow animal. It is by accepting the mare's benevolent attention and caring for her in return that Giu attains some level of consolation. This hints at an alternative to Agamben's excessively (1) abstract and (2) individualistic theory of silent resistance:

- (1) Agamben's approach to the *Muselmann* is abstract because he reduces the situation of any particular *Muselmann* to a pure category without concerning himself with the historical or social specifics of any single individual's fate. Grossman, however, presents the reader with the particular fate of one named creature embedded in a context. It is only through this lens that the relational element of redemption appears. However small, the personal connection to the mare creates a space of solidarity, care and common belonging that comforts both beings. A sense of wellbeing is generated in mutual acts of kindness. Resistance, in this view, is hence not shutting oneself off from a violent world but discovering and cultivating nodes of love in that world. Grossman regards the condition of bare life not as a useful tactic of resistance, but as an evil one should be saved from (Danchev, 2013: 359).
- (2) Agamben's theory of silent resistance is individualistic because it embraces the individual *Muselmann's* self-isolation as the prime tactic of resistance, but neglects to show how this isolated singularity can meaningfully connect to others. In Grossman's story, the relation to the other is not an afterthought of individualistic heroism, but a constitutive element of being alive. 'An absolutely strong being does not need friendship, but this seems only to be valid for God' (Grossman, 2011: 362). Even in its darkest moments, bare life is still exposed to another who can meet it with affection or indifference. Bare life that has seen the Gorgon, cannot lift itself up from misery. It needs an element of grace to rise above its deprivation. It is, for Grossman, the other's gratuitous love that constitutes this grace and saves bare life from its isolation.

Still, Grossman's microscopic community of mutual care between Giu and the mare is not the construction of a new *bios* instituting a new sovereign. It does not postulate a new set of properties supposed to constitute the good life. Grossman prioritizes concrete human beings over abstract humanity. Tenderness or love knows no laws, so this remains a network of microscopic relations of dependency that is not subsumed under a higher *bios* that is supposed to 'form' life into a pre-determined mould. Community is not produced by imposing a form of the good life on the members through the law, but by affectively connecting fellow living beings. In the relation between Giu and the mare, there is no sovereign to apply or suspend the law. It remains a relationship between two singular individuals that is not subsumed in a larger totality.

Grossman's (2011: 388–95) ethics are most explicit in the letter written by Ikonnikov in *Life and Fate*. Ikonnikov figures as a holy fool imprisoned in a German concentration camp who voices Grossman's own views (Danchev, 2013: 359). He is a former follower of Tolstoy who has witnessed the killing of the Jews in Belarus, after which he loses his faith in God. He is himself a prisoner of war but has already become unhinged when the reader meets him in the novel. He knows that he and his fellow inmates are building gas chambers, at which point Ikonnikov refuses to work, effectively signing his death sentence. Before he is taken in however, Ikonnikov succeeds in scribbling down his final thoughts in a letter. He starts it with a condemnation of all totalizing doctrines of the

good and the good life. Any project that wishes to enact the good by imposing specific laws regulating the good life is doomed to turn into their opposites. Like Agamben, Ikonnikov dismisses the project of cultivating a *bios*. Such communities end up sacrificing many lives to the greater good. The greatest atrocities have been committed in the name of some good by well-intending beings. To this 'Good with a capital G' Ikonnikov opposes concrete acts of goodness:

Yes, as well as this terrible Good with a capital 'G', there is everyday human kindness. The kindness of an old woman carrying a piece of bread to a prisoner, the kindness of a soldier allowing a wounded enemy to drink from his water-flask, the kindness of youth towards age, the kindness of a peasant hiding an old Jew in his loft. The kindness of a prison guard who risks his own liberty to pass on letters written by a prisoner not to his ideological comrades, but to his wife and mother. The private kindness of one individual towards another; a petty, thoughtless kindness; an unwitnessed kindness. Something we could call senseless kindness. A kindness outside any system of social or religious good. (Grossman, 2011: 391)

Ikonnikov describes how life continuously produces meaningful human connections, simply because humans are social beings that spontaneously care for each other. Senseless acts of goodness are ineradicably part of the human condition, just like the vicious pursuit of self-interest is. They are 'senseless' in that they do not serve any ulterior motive derived from the Good or from self-interest. Some acts of kindness just spontaneously occur, with no further explanation. This entails that, even in the most detrimental situations, human beings are capable of gratuitous acts of kindness. Even if most communities expose individuals to the worst extremes of sovereign violence, they cannot extinguish the human capacity to come to the aid of the vulnerable. These local acts of senseless kindness are, for Ikonnikov, an invincible form of resistance against evil. Through the words of Ikonnikov, Grossman (2011) shows a goodness that evades the suspicions of Agamben towards the construction of the good life in a *bios* without falling trap of Agamben's abstract and individualistic notion of resistance against *bios*:

The powerlessness of kindness, of senseless kindness, is the secret of its immortality. It can never be conquered. The more stupid, the more senseless, the more helpless it may seem, the vaster it is. Evil is impotent before it. [. . .] This dumb, blind love is man's meaning. Human history is not the battle of good struggling to overcome evil. It is a battle fought by a great evil struggling to crush a small kernel of human kindness. But if what is human in human beings has not been destroyed even now, then evil will never conquer. (p. 394)

Ikonnikov's community of kindness starts from the concrete acts of goodness specific individuals perform for each other. The aim is not to prove some abstract philosophical point, but to do justice to the concretely lived reality of human interaction. By focusing on this experience, he discloses a realm of togetherness that provides a more robust form

of community than Agamben's coming community. It centres around microscopic communities of care that spontaneously emerge.

The Madonna in the camps as a paradigm of senseless kindness

For Grossman, the isolation of the *Muselmann* is an unfortunate result of extreme violence that ought to be evaded through human relationality. An 'ethics of small acts of senseless kindness' (Danchev, 2013: 361) can mend the damage done by sovereign violence. Agamben claims that sovereign violence reduces human beings to the zero degree of vitality, living bodies with nothing to live for, but Grossman objects that there remains 'a small kernel of human kindness', the potential to care for others. Grossman (2010b) elaborates with the image of Raphael's (1512) *The Sistine Madonna*. The painting shows a bare-foot Madonna with the small Jesus in her arms descending from a cloud, flanked by Saint-Sixtus, Saint-Barbara and two cherubs. Mother and son hold each other comfortably while they look straight at the audience. A glow from the background illuminates the duo. According to Grossman, the image of the Madonna and child discloses the constitutive exposure of human beings to others in asymmetrical relations of care:

The Madonna with the child in her arms represents what is human in man. This is why she is immortal. Looking at *The Sistine Madonna*, our own epoch glimpses its own fate. Every epoch contemplates this woman with a child in her arms, and a tender, moving, and sorrowful sense of brotherhood comes into being between people of different generations, nations, races, and eras. (Grossman, 2010b)

Throughout history, the scene of the Madonna and child has been the quintessential image of human love. Theologians explain God's incarnation in Jesus Christ as an act of self-weakening love, or *kenôsis*, for the salvation of humankind (Beattie, 2002: 122; Claverie 310). God has voluntarily reduced his majesty to share the fate of man. In Raphael's painting, divine glory is left behind in the background as a golden glow, while God the Son approaches us as a weak and helpless child caressed in his mother's arms. God has chosen to assume human vulnerability, agreeing to be sacrificed in the name of human redemption. By sharing in the human condition, the Christian God reverses the logic of sacrifice: his followers do not have to sacrifice themselves *ad majorem Dei gloriam*, but he sacrifices himself for the lot of humanity.

Mary has a crucial role in this project of *kenôsis*.⁷ As the Mother of God, it is thanks to her that God can take on human form and experience the human condition. Mary, however, not only mediates between the human and the divine, but also provides humankind with an example of how to follow in the footsteps of Christ. As Cacciari (2017) notes in the context of Madonna iconography, 'her relationship with him defines her relationship to the divine; this mother and this son together decide upon the entire relationship to the divine appropriate for the Age that announces their image' (p. 99, my translation). The Madonna functions as an ethical exemplar for human conduct. By emulating her humankind learns how to adequately respond to the gift of God. According to

Grossman, the Sistine Madonna suggests that the Mother of God shows humanity to repeat the self-weakening gesture of God. The good life imitates Christ's conduct of *kenôsis*. God chose to incarnate himself as a helpless child in the arms of Mary, while Mary responds to this vulnerability with gratuitous love and care (Beattie, 2002: 93–5). She does not nurture Jesus to acquire some reward or in the name of some higher ideal, nor has the child done anything to deserve her love, but she responds with love to the cries of a singular helpless creature.

This choice, however, condemns her to partake in the future suffering of Christ. Like many other images of the Madonna and child, Raphael's Madonna has a sad facial expression. She already senses her child's impending fate. But

rather than hiding her child, she holds him forward to meet his fate. And the child is not hiding his face in his mother's breast. Any moment now he will climb down from her arms and walk forward on his own little bare feet to meet his fate. (Grossman, 2010b)

She is already grieving for her child, participating in the suffering to come, yet chooses this fate with the same determination as her son (Cacciari, 2017: 55; Smith, 2013: 276):

The young woman and the child she has just given birth to, bear already the image of the old woman and the crucified. [. . .] The perfect *com-passion* is, in a sense, the sign of Mary [. . .], from the moment of her son's birth to that of his crucifixion. No saint, no martyr can have suffered like her. She has relived in the flesh the divine *kenôsis*. (Cacciari, 2017: 63, my translation)

To stress this homologation of self-weakening, many paintings of the *mater dolorosa* give the crucified Christ and the mourning Mary the same bodily postures, to evoke the *imitatio Christi* expected from believers. She chooses to care for and feel with a helpless and vulnerable creature, becoming just as vulnerable in the process. Cavarero evokes the same theological tradition to stress the constitutive relationality of the human condition.⁸ 'Already indebted to the *other* – the mother – for his arrival in and persistence within the world, the newborn depends, precisely by virtue of his vulnerability, on the one who, inclined and thus bent forward outside herself, leans over him' (Cavarero, 2016: 102). The insurmountable exposure of the small child puts her for a choice: either withdraw and let the child die, or respond to its call with love. Images of the Madonna and child reveal the human condition as an interwoven set of asymmetrical dependencies. Human existence implies taking part in a network of concrete caregivers and recipients of care. Just like Christ depends on Mary, humankind as a whole is composed of chains of dependencies. The senseless acts of kindness that Grossman tracks throughout his novels bear witness to this relational aspect of the human condition.

According to Cavarero, this community through immanent chains of dependencies prefigures a new form of politics beyond the project of *bios* criticized by Agamben without getting stuck in the purely negative character of bare life. For Agamben, human political communities have relied on a sovereign that applies or suspends the law. Marian theology brackets out the role of the sovereign Father to foreground the relation between mother and child. Just like God chose to enter this world as a helplessly small child,

trusting himself to the care of others and caring for them in return, we must acknowledge our constitutive vulnerability, our embeddedness in a network of relations of dependence from which there is no emancipation. This network establishes a form of community that does not depend on a sovereign. There are only immanent relations of care among equally vulnerable beings. Mary does not opt for the Agambenian solution of self-withdrawal. Not the passive self-emptying of the *Muselmann*, but the active *kenôsis* in the service of the vulnerable serves as a paradigm of Christian love.

In his essay on the Sistine Madonna, Grossman links this theology of *kenôsis* to the fate on the inmates of the Treblinka concentration camp:

And then I realized that the vision of a young mother with a child in her arms had taken me back not to a book, not to a piece of music, but to Treblinka. [. . .] It was she, treading lightly on her little bare feet, who had walked over the swaying earth of Treblinka; it was she who had walked from the ‘station’, from where the transports were unloaded, to the gas chambers. I knew her by the expression on her face, by the look in her eyes. I saw her son and recognized him by the strange, unchildlike look on his own face. This was how mothers and children looked, this was how they were in their souls when they saw, against the dark green of the pine trees, the white walls of the Treblinka gas chambers. (Grossman, 2010b)

Grossman uses the Madonna as a metaphor for the indestructible force of love, the small kernel of kindness, that animates human beings even in the worst of circumstances. Wherever human beings relate to each other through gratuitous care for the suffering, the Madonna is, as it were, present. Grossman echoes this thesis in *Life and Fate* with the story of Sofya Osipovna Levinton.⁹ She is a doctor in a Jewish ghetto when she is put on a train to the concentration camps. During the journey, she meets David, a terrified 6-year-old boy who got separated from his family and shut himself off from the world. Sofya Osipovna grows to love him as her own son and takes care of him on the train. Once they reach the camp, the wards call out for all doctors to make themselves known. The doctors will presumably be spared from immediate death because they are needed in the camp. Sofya Osipovna, however, ignores the call, knowingly limiting her chances of survival. She chooses to stay with David whatever the cost. She voluntarily weakens herself in order to care for another helpless creature. Eventually both die in the gas chambers:

Sofya Levinton felt the boy’s body subside in her arms. Once again she had fallen behind him. In mine-shafts where the air becomes poisoned, it is always the little creatures, the birds and mice, that die first. This boy, with his slight, bird-like body, had left before her. ‘I’ve become a mother’, she thought. That was her last thought. Her heart, however, still had life in it: it contracted, ached and felt pity for all of you, both living and dead. (Grossman, 2011: 538)

Sofya Osipovna’s attitude incarnates the Madonna’s compassion for the vulnerable; she accepts to meet an untimely death only in order to support a dying child. She mimics David’s sorry fate to provide him solace in his last minutes. This shows how the human capacity for care exceeds the evils the concentration camp can bring to bear on human life. ‘Even the mightiest and most perfect violence cannot enslave this power; it can only kill it. This is why the faces of the mother and child are so calm: they are invincible’

(Grossman, 2010b). Affirming the constitutive relationality of being human is, in Grossman's view, the most radical form of resistance possible in the face of extreme violence.

Obstacles for the ethics of senseless kindness

My appraisal of Grossman's ethics of senseless kindness does not entail that this approach is flawless. Self-weakening comes with its own limitations. Rather than fundamental problems, I would however prefer to describe them as obstacles that call for taking the ethics of senseless kindness beyond Grossman's own novels. One issue is the implicit gendered dimension of Grossman's claim for an ethics of care and his choice of the Virgin Mary as his paradigm. It tends to equate acts of senseless kindness with expressions of womanhood, as if only women were 'natural caregivers'. In Grossman's novels, kindness is frequently reserved for his female characters while male characters are predominantly the beneficiaries of these gratuitous acts. Throughout *Life and Fate*, male characters are cared for by their female counterparts, but rarely the other way around. Female self-weakening is put at the service of male empowerment. Even in the animal world of *The Road*, an explicitly female mare saves Giu from collapsing into bare life.

It is hence no coincidence that Grossman ends up with exalting the Virgin Mary as his ethical exemplar. The figure of the Madonna has been a hallmark of female identity for centuries.¹⁰ The Church and the State have mobilized worship of the Virgin Mary to inculcate in young women the calling of a life in the service of men. The Marian story of self-sacrifice for her Son is then turned into an ideology to justify female care work. Domestic acts of kindness predominantly performed by women are thereby presented and justified as spontaneous enactments of womanhood rather than hard labour. Simone De Beauvoir writes that

for the first time in human history, the mother kneels before her son; she voluntarily recognizes her inferiority. This is the supreme masculine victory that culminates in the Cult of Mary: it is the woman's rehabilitation through the completion of her defeat. (De Beauvoir and Le Deuxième, 1949: 275–6, my translation)

Women are, in other words, reduced to instruments for male self-realization. It is thus crucial to follow Cavarero and Cacciari's proposal of a Marian ethics to the letter and present it as a paradigm for the *human* rather than the *female* condition. Men as well are entangled in networks of care and chains of dependencies. Care, vulnerability and self-weakening mark the degree zero of humanity as such.

A second obstacle to Grossman's ethics of senseless kindness is its apparent ineffectiveness as a strategy for political liberation. Grossman celebrates the indestructibility of human care, but he must have been keenly aware that these acts did not win the war. As noted, Cavarero presents her ethics of care as the basis for a new form of politics, but this can only convince within very concise circumstances. The context of the concentration camps shows how insufficient practices of care can be as a strategy of resistance. In Grossman's stories, Giu and the mare are still condemned to a life of toil at the end of *The Road*, David and Sofya Osipovna still die in the gas chambers. It was not the persistence of gratuitous kindness that saved the Jews from Nazi sovereign violence, but the Soviet

Red Army. The latter ultimately beat the Nazi army on the Eastern Front and subsequently travelled westward, where it discovered the horrors of the extermination camps. It would hence be dangerous to dismiss the need for politics along the lines of *bios* and confuse Grossman's ethics with a politics of liberation. More collective forms of social organization are required to beat sovereign violence. Microscopic communities of care will not suffice.

It is more helpful to specify that the primary role for gratuitous acts of care is to restrain the damaging force of sovereign violence on human subjectivity. Agamben believes that the hold of sovereign violence over bare life is total, so the only escape from suffering lies in the self-withdrawal of the *Muselmann*. The ethics of senseless kindness grants more leeway to humanity. When sovereign violence reduces human beings to bare life, acts of care succeed in revealing human beings as more than mere sacks of meat. A potential for striking affective bonds with one's fellow human beings persists. Small acts of kindness convince people that they are potentially more than mute victims of sovereign violence. The Nazi concentration camps might have tried to reduce the Jews to bare life, but the ineradicable potential to care for each other enabled them to retain the hope for a better life.

Conclusion

According to Agamben, the *Muselmann* in the Nazi concentration camps exemplifies a silent form of resistance associated with bare life. He argues that political communities (*bioi*) have always relied upon a sovereign to apply the laws those communities explicate in order to cultivate the good life. This also grants the sovereign, however, the power to suspend the application of the law for those people he deems unfit for his community. These individuals are subsequently exposed to violence without legal protection. The *Muselmann* exemplifies this fate, but also shows, in Agamben's opinion, a possible escape. The *Muselmänner* are so exhausted by the hardships of camp life that they become empty shells shut off from their surroundings. They thereby become immune to the violence of the camps. They are so isolated that nothing from the outside world reaches them. We have shown, however, that this approach to resistance in the camps is questionable. It is, first, too abstract in that it glorifies the fate of individual people's suffering as anonymous exemplars of 'bare life' without taking into account the particularities of any individual's historical and social circumstances. Agamben's approach is also implicitly individualistic as it focuses on the self-isolation of the *Muselmann* and thus leaves little room for collective action. Agamben's notion of the coming community does not amend this issue, because it only grounds human community on the abstract sharing of the potentiality to acquire different kinds of qualities without disclosing what forms of social interactions would pertain to that coming community.

I have argued that Vasily Grossman's fiction provides a better description of bare life's potential for resistance in the concentration camps. As a soldier in the Red Army Grossman saw what was left of the Treblinka extermination camp and stressed the human capacity for gratuitous acts of goodness in even the worst circumstances. He agrees with Agamben that the camps produced a form of bare life but regards this as a condition people should be saved from, not as a possible route to salvation. He shows this in the

short story *The Road* in which he wishes to show that, even in the direst conditions, there is an ineradicable capacity of living beings to perform acts of kindness. Refusing to give in to evil is hence a more adequate form of resistance, but it necessarily demands the help of others to provide care and support. This leads Grossman to present the image of the Sistine Madonna as a paradigm for human ethics; just like God chose to lower himself to the rank of a vulnerable creature to bring about salvation, Mary chooses to share in Christ's suffering out of gratuitous motherly love. According to Grossman, Mary's spirit is present in all beings that care for others during times of suffering. Humankind is called upon to recognize its own constitutively shared vulnerability and provide support for the weak. The kind of community that reveals itself in these relations of care is an immanent network of dependencies where everyone is simultaneously cared for by and giving care to others. Even in the camps, the greatest evils in human history failed to annihilate these spontaneous forces of kindness. This does not mean that Grossman's ethics do not have limitations. The promotion of senseless kindness and self-weakening has frequently been a gendered ideology to justify female self-weakening in the service of male empowerment. Grossman's own novels are not entirely immune to this gender bias. The ethics of senseless kindness is also not effective as a strategy of political liberation in the camps: gratuitous acts of care did not topple the Nazi regime, but only restrained its harmful effects on human subjectivity. Real liberation requires more political projects, like military invasions, as was the case with the Soviet invasion of Nazi Germany.

Notes

1. I will only focus on the theory of resistance from *Homo Sacer*, still partly present in *Remnants of Auschwitz*. Throughout his long career, Agamben has also developed other notions of resistance, like the ethics of testimony in *Remnants of Auschwitz* or the life 'as if not' in *The Time that Remains*. Discussing all of these perspectives would however be beyond the scope of this article.
2. For a critical discussion of this interpretation of Aristotle, see Dubreuil (2006), Finlayson (2010) and Christiaens (2018).
3. See also Esposito (2008: 110–45).
4. This figure of resistance returns in many guises in Agamben's oeuvre. Some famous examples are Agamben's treatment of Bartleby from Melville short story (Agamben, 1999: 243–71), the man from the country in Kafka's parable *Before the Law* (Agamben, 1998: 49–62), the damned unbaptized children in limbo (Agamben, 1992: 5–7) and so on.
5. A potential solution is to creatively interpret the coming community as a social movement for democratic, post-sovereign political action, but this does not seem to be Agamben's intent (see for example, Newman, 2017; Prozorov, 2017; Smith, 2016).
6. For a short biography, see MacIntyre (2016: 243–64).
7. For a full history of Marian theology, see Warner (1976: 179–276), Claverie (2003: 265–345) and Carnes (2018: 30–4).
8. She uses not the Sistine Madonna, but Da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with Saint-Anne* (1501–1519) as her point of departure (Cavarero, 2016: 97–106).
9. See especially Grossman (2011: 521–38).
10. See Warner (1976: 180–94), Kristeva (1987: 234–64) and Murgia (2011).

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