Angelaki

The Animal for which Animality is an Issue

Mathew Abbott [a]

[a] Quadrangle A14, University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW 2006,
Australia

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Being – we have no idea of it apart from "living."

Nietzsche, The Will to Power *582*[1]

I

There is congruence between Nietzsche's philosophy of life and the biopolitical philosophy of Giorgio Agamben. For both philosophers the human animal possesses a divided relationship to its being alive. For both philosophers this division is of a political nature, such that membership in political community as we know it is conditional on the human animal's alienation from its biological being. Both philosophers are also concerned with the possibility of transformation and, because of the connection they establish between politics and animality, link this possibility to a change in the relationship between humans and their being alive. Yet both philosophers end up with an entirely different understanding of the nature of this change, and of its potential scope. Nietzsche poses the problem in terms of affirmation, arguing that the task is one of establishing a non-resentful, welcoming relationship to one's biological being: an unconditional *yes* to life. In Agamben things are more ambiguous, and there is emphasis on the properly aporetic structure of the problem. Agamben does not quite figure it in terms of a demand for the affirmation of life, and does not follow Nietzsche in restricting the scope of redemption to those who possess the strength necessary to carry this out. Rather, his Pauline concept of redeemed humanity is resolutely non-hierarchical, turning on the possibility of a collective appropriation of our *common* consignment to unassumable animality. This essay is an attempt at clarifying this disagreement between Nietzsche and

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Agamben, and with using it to come to a better understanding of the latter's political ontology. As I will work to show, Agamben's concept of the *anthropological machine* challenges the Nietzschean program of the affirmation of life as will to power.

II

In "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" Nietzsche experimented with the provocative understanding of the problem of human life for which he has since become infamous. "What," Nietzsche asks, "does man know of himself?" He goes on:

Can he even once perceive himself completely, laid out as if in an illuminated glass case? Does

not nature keep much the most from him, even about his body, to spellbind and confine him in a proud, deceptive consciousness, far from the coils of the intestines, the quick current of the blood stream, and the involved tremors of the fibres? She threw away the key; and woe to the calamitous curiosity which might peer just once through a crack in the chamber of consciousness and look down, and sense that man rests upon the merciless, the greedy, the insatiable, the murderous, in the indifference of his ignorance – hanging in dreams, as it were, upon the back of a tiger. ("On Truth" 44)

According to this image, the human animal distinguishes itself from other animals not through its capacity for language or reason but more fundamentally through its ability to horrify or sicken itself, and a subsequent compulsion to turn away from the fact of its being alive, to forget its own animality. The human animal has an idiosyncratic burden: it is an animal burdened by its beastliness.

The Nietzsche of the *Genealogy* retains this basic insight: human animals, he claims here, are like sea creatures compelled to live on land, animals that suddenly had to "walk on their feet and 'bear themselves' when hitherto they had been borne by the water: a dreadful heaviness [lies] upon them" (II: 16); the human animal is marked by a "hatred of the human, and even more of the animal ..." (II: 28). By 1887, however, he had also developed it in a fascinating way. In the opening section of the second essay, he argues that a complex dialectic of forgetting and remembering marks the human's relation to its animality. The human animal, he argues, is the animal that remembers. Its ability to remember, which is linked with the experience of extreme forms of suffering, forms the condition for society, which is itself forged on the basis of the ability to make promises. What's particularly interesting about this claim from Nietzsche (which can be understood as a typically provocative version of a social contract theory) is that this ability to remember is itself predicated on a more original forgetfulness (Nietzsche calls it a "positive" or "active" forgetfulness). This is the forgetting that is "responsible for the fact that

what we experience and absorb enters our consciousness as little while we are digesting it ... as does the thousandfold process, involved in physical nourishment ..." (II: 1). Forgetting here is a condition for remembering; we selectively forget so as to be able to remember. Forgetfulness, as Nietzsche will put it, is "like a doorkeeper, a preserver of psychic order, repose, and etiquette ..." (II: 1). He thus understands the animal that makes promises – that is, the human animal – as the animal that emerges on the basis of a faculty of active forgetting, and in particular an active forgetting of the biological processes, of "our underworld of utility organs working with and against one another ..." (II: 1). The human is the animal that has to forget the animal, and Nietzsche understands the emergence of civilisation and the state as founded on the basis of an exclusion of the biological or animal substrate of the human. "[C]ivilisation," as Vanessa Lemm writes, "coincides with the forgetting of animality, the silencing of the animal within the human" ("Overhuman" 222).[2] The human animal for Nietzsche could become the social animal we know today only on the basis of a kind of blindness before the fact of its being alive. It has a divided, opaque relation-ship to its own biological being: it has the ability, indeed needs the ability, to hide its own living from itself. Or as Lemm puts it in her invaluable book-length study of these problems,

[u]nder the rule of civilization, the human animal forgets what it was and what it is – an animal – in order to become what it is not yet – a moral and rational being. In this sense, the becoming rational and moral of the human animal depends on the gradual increase of the forgetting of the human being's animality ... (*Nietzsche's* 17)

III

If we read these claims in light of Agamben's work, it emerges that in his *Genealogy* Nietzsche unearths a version of what the Italian philosopher identifies as the "inclusive exclusion," which he understands as the defining paradox of the Western *polis*. In this aporia, the biological life

of human political subjects is excluded from the city as something extraneous to political life, and yet constitutive of the city as that which must be presupposed for the construction of political life to be possible. Agamben's claim rests on a different methodology to the genealogical one at work in Nietzsche, but he also traces this paradox as far back as the classical world, citing the Aristotelian distinction between *zoē*, as the simple fact of living common to gods, plants, animals and humans, and *bios*, or the qualified life that is the distinct property of human beings qua political creatures. He argues that it "would have made no sense" in Ancient Greece to speak of a political *zoē*, as politics was defined at the time in terms of an "additional" (but extremely important) capacity of human existence, indeed as that which separates it from animal existence (*Homo Sacer* 1). Crucial here is a movement of presupposition, in which the simple fact of living is presupposed by the *polis* as an unthought and indeed unthinkable ground for it. For Agamben, this exclusion, in which the political subject is divided from its animal life, represents the original political relation. However, he finds that this exclusion can never quite reach completion, because it was always an "implication . . . of bare life in politically qualified life" (this he shares with Nietzsche, for whom the forgetting of the animal is never entirely successful) (*Homo Sacer* 7). Agamben goes on:

> What remains to be interrogated in the Aristotelian definition is not merely – as has been assumed until now – the sense, the modes, and the possible articulations of the "good life" as the *telos* of the political. We must instead ask why Western politics first constitutes itself through an exclusion (which is simultaneously an inclusion) of bare life. What is the relation between politics and life, if life presents itself as what is included by means of an exclusion? (7)

Agamben finds that the fact of living, as the unthought presupposition of the *polis*, is never successfully banished, and by the time of modernity reappears as an ambiguous political object. This can be framed in terms of the split exemplified in the title of the 1789 French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Agamben makes very much of the equivocal status of the use of two terms for what is supposed to be a single referent here, arguing that the introduction of the term "man" shows what was really at stake in this founding document of political modernity: the return of natural life from the *polis* from which it was excluded and its subsequent inscription within it. This, for Agamben, represents the source of the nihilism characteristic of modernity, which he follows Foucault in defining as the period in which the life of the human being (and of human populations) takes on an unprecedented political significance.[3]

While Foucault's work plays an important role for Agamben here, this whole schema is deeply indebted to Heideggerian ontology. Consider, for instance, the following from the closing pages of *Homo Sacer*, which I cite at length because it makes the extent of Agamben's debt so clear:

> In the syntagm "bare life," "bare" corresponds to the Greek *haplos*, the term by which first philosophy defines pure Being. The isolation of the sphere of pure Being, which constitutes the fundamental activity of Western metaphysics, is not without analogies with the isolation of bare life in the realm of Western politics. What constitutes man as a thinking animal has its exact counterpart in what constitutes him as a political animal. In the first case, the problem is to isolate pure Being (*on haplos*) from the many meanings of the term "Being" (which, according to Aristotle, "is said in many ways"); in the second, what is at stake is the separation of bare life from the many forms of concrete life. Pure being, bare life – what is contained in these two concepts, such that both the metaphysics and the politics of the West find their foundation and sense in them and in them alone? What is the link between the two constitutive processes by which metaphysics and politics seem, in isolating their proper element, simultaneously to run up against an unthinkable limit? For bare life is certainly as indeterminate and impenetrable as *haplos* Being, and one could say that reason cannot think bare life except as it thinks pure Being, in stupor and in astonishment. (*Homo Sacer* 182).

As this passage indicates, Agamben's concept of bare life has to be understood as beginning from a transposition of Heidegger's ontological difference onto classical biological categories, where *zoē* (natural life) is equated with the fact of being as such, and *bios* (politically qualified life) with the ontic level of particular beings. This transposition allows Agamben to read the distinction between natural life and political life in terms of fundamental ontology, and sparks his move into the study of the political stakes of ontology (or more accurately, of the political stakes of the ontological question). As he puts it:

> [I]t may be that only if we are able to decipher the political meaning of pure Being will we be able to master the bare life that expresses our subjection to political power, just as it may be, inversely, that only if we understand the theoretical implications of bare life will we be able to solve the enigma of ontology. (*Homo Sacer* 182)

When Heidegger claims that "within metaphysics there is nothing to being as such" (*Nietzsche* 202), then, Agamben takes him one step further to claim that within our politics there is nothing to life as such. In Heideggerian fashion, he finds something like an ontological law here: that which is presupposed and passed over by a system of thought will return to that system as its unthinkable (such that any exclusion of being/life is always already an inclusion). Agamben gives the name "bare life" to this object to try and mark something of the change it undergoes as part of this process: what returns is not natural or animal life but rather a metaphysical image of "a life that is separated and excluded from itself" (Agamben, *Open* 28). The Heideggerian problematic of the "forgetting of being" thus takes on a biopolitical character, such that what Western metaphysics tries to forget is not just the fact that beings are, but the fact of biological life itself.[4] This is to say that Agamben sets up the problems of politics in terms of a Heideggerian understanding of the metaphysical tradition, finding that the Western political space is following a particular metaphysical logic when it works to forge the human through the exclusion of the animal (an exclusion that is always already an

inclusion). As he puts it: "ontology, or first philosophy, is not an innocuous academic discipline, but in every sense the fundamental operation in which anthropogenesis, the becoming human of the living being, is realized" (*Open* 79).[5]

As with the Nietzsche of the *Genealogy*, the idea is that the state is constituted on the basis of an exclusion of animality, and that this exclusion is one that always leaves an ambiguous remainder (one thinks here of Nietzsche's remarks on the savage beast or wild animal that remains alive within the human, despite the attempts by civilisation and its priests at taming it). In *The Open*, Agamben names this dialectic of human and animal "the anthropological machine" (37), arguing that the attempt to create and police a border between the human and its animal life is haunted by the figure of a bare life that it must both banish and include. Agamben uses the refugee as one of his key contemporary examples, pointing out how this figure, which as the human being stripped of the predicates of nationality, represents a kind of blind spot in the functioning of contemporary liberal democracies, which have proved themselves "absolutely incapable not only of resolving the problem but also simply of dealing with it adequately" ("We Refugees"). The refugee is not literally reduced to bare life; rather, it is an exemplary figure bringing to light the metaphysical remainder that is bare life. In modernity, the "production of man" carried out by the anthropological machine entails the production of the metaphysical image of bare life, which comes back to haunt the space from which natural life was originally expelled (*Open* 37). Does the human forget the animal because it has already forgotten being? Or does the human forget being because it has already forgotten the animal? For Agamben, these two questions are actually equivalent, and the answer to both of them is yes. Instead of the forgetting of being or the forgetting of animality, what we find here is something like the forgetting of being (animal).

The congruence is important: bringing Agamben and Nietzsche together may provide an important supplement to the Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian project of the overcoming of metaphysics. Amongst other things, it may help

fill an explanatory gap in this project, perhaps accounting for something of what motivates the forgetting of being in the first place: on a Nietzschean reading of Agamben's Heideggerian project, we might say, it emerges that the human animal forgets being because it can't bear its animality, turning away from the intensity of its attendant affects; that it feeds itself into the anthropological machine of sovereign power in an attempt at escaping the fact of animal life. Nietzsche's work, in other words, may help us map those psychic processes of resentment, bad conscience, and active forgetting by which the inclusive exclusion of being (animal) is carried out, giving us a subjective description of the events and processes that Agamben describes in stricter political ontological terms. What Nietzsche can provide, then, are the means of concretely accounting for ontological forgetting: the problem, it emerges on a Nietzschean analysis, is not simply our way of thinking and speaking; or rather, that is precisely the problem, but our way of thinking and speaking is itself part of the history of the instinctual and social conflicts of the human creature, which is marked by its irreducibility either to "nature" or "culture." To forget being is to forget living, and vice versa. The Heideggerian history of being can be *fleshed out* in a Nietzschean theory of human animality.

IV

Kafka can help us here. In particular, his characteristically enigmatic (and allegedly unfinished) short story "The Burrow" dramatises these problems in a particularly clear and compelling way. The piece, which is narrated by an animal of an unnamed burrowing species, is Kafka's penultimate story, which gives it a certain pathos and opens the temptation to regard it as some kind of summation of his vision (it was written, after all, in the final stages of the author's illness (Snyder 113; Koelb 137)). The animal protagonist is, like so many of Kafka's animal protagonists, a complicated mixture of anxiety and beatitude, an obsessive and perhaps even delusionally paranoid figure who nevertheless takes an occasional pleasure in the simple fact of

its being alive: "[T]he most beautiful thing about my burrow is the stillness. Of course, that is deceptive. At any moment it may be shattered and then all will be over. For the time being, however, the silence is still with me … Sometimes I lie down and roll about in the passage with pure joy" (327). The animal is obsessed with its burrow, having apparently spent a large portion of its life on the planning, construction, renovation, and maintenance of the underground dwelling (indeed, most of the text is taken up with the animal's incessant recounting of the various virtues and failings of its baroquely structured home). The narrative arc of the story is typical Kafka in that it is both simple in its basic structure yet strikingly opaque when it comes to issues of motivation and causal detail (what, exactly, is happening in the middle section, where our narrator inexplicably maroons himself outside his burrow? Why does the animal have to leave the burrow? Why does it wait so long to risk returning? If the danger is so great, why start and then abandon the second entrance?).

The crucial moment in the story comes when an "almost inaudible whistling noise" (343) arrives in the burrow and rouses the narrator from sleep. The animal immediately blames the "small fry" (343) – the little creatures that populate the earth around it – which, it reasons, must have "burrowed a new channel somewhere during my absence, this channel must have chanced to intersect an older one, the air was caught there, and that produced the whistling noise" (343). Thus it begins searching for the origin of the sound, striking out with extreme haphazardness through the passages of the burrow, and digging "at random" (343) to cut new trenches. The initial search turns up nothing, and the original explanation soon gives way as the animal comes to realise that the sound is actually present with the same volume at each point in the burrow: "Had I rightly divined the cause of the noise, then it must have issued with greatest force from some given place, which it would be my task to discover …" (345). Here it entertains other hypotheses: that there are in fact two noises being produced at equal distances from the burrow, producing a relatively uniform sound throughout;

that the sound could be coming from the burrowing sounds of "a whole swarm of little creatures" (347) larger than the small fry; that it may instead be coming from another swarm "far tinier" (348) than that. In a decision that is largely inexplicable given these premises, the animal then decides to "dig a wide and carefully constructed trench in the direction of the noise and not cease from digging until, independent of all theories, I find the real cause of the noise" (348); it concedes, however, that it does not really believe the plan will work, and decides to "postpone the task for a little while" (349). It then starts to consider strategies for the defence of the burrow, having become convinced that the sound is emanating from something or someone with malevolent intentions; it then abandons all its plans, in which it can now find "no slightest trace of reason . . ." (352). The whole progression reads like a bizarre parody of scientific method, where a hyper-rational desire for certainty, an obsession with empirical verification, is itself propelled onwards by a series of desperate and wildly irrational leaps in logic.

Finally the animal admits what has been haunting it all along: "I have actually come to believe – it is useless to deny it to myself – that the whistling is made by some beast, and moreover not by a great many small ones, but by a single big one" (353). Of course the facts contradict the hypothesis, but in true paranoid style the animal comes to believe that this is just further justification of its fears: that the beast is "not so much impossible, as merely dangerous beyond all one's powers of conception" (353). This new hypothesis drives the animal to distraction over the final pages of the story, as it becomes mired more and more deeply in speculations regarding the powers of its new opponent, cursing itself for failing to prepare properly for the event: "But apart altogether from the beast's peculiar characteristics, what is happening now is only something which I should really have feared all the time, something against which I should have been constantly prepared: the fact that someone would come" (354). The story then ends abruptly, with the animal interrupting a series of speculations regarding whether or not the beast knows of the burrow to

observe the fact that will have been obvious to the reader since the arrival of the noise on the scene: "But all remained unchanged" (359).

As Britta Maché points out, any full interpretation of the story must include an explanation of the noise in the burrow (526–27). Is it, as Herman Weigand argues, a "psychotic hallucination"? (155). Or is the beast some kind of metaphor for Kafka's own encroaching illness, as Mark Boulby (175) and Maché herself have claimed (527)? There is an interpretation of the story in which these two readings are both deepened and supported. Blanchot gets at it when he writes: "What the beast senses in the distance – that monstrous thing which eternally approaches it and works eternally at coming closer – is itself" (169). This is to say that what the animal hears is nothing other than the sound of its own being alive, the whistle of its own breath; that it is haunted not by a malevolent opponent (or swarm of them) but rather by itself, by its own status as an animal. This reading has the merit of explaining a key conundrum of the story: the uniformity of the noise at each point in the burrow, which is, of course, the very fact that drives the animal to the brink of insanity; the noise is uniform wherever the animal goes because it is the sound of the animal itself. It can also help account for passages like the following:

> Lying in my heap of earth I can naturally dream of all sorts of things, even of an understanding with the beast, though I know well enough that when we see each other, more, at the moment when we merely guess at each other's presence, we shall both blindly bare our claws and teeth, neither of us a second before or after the other, both of us filled with a new and different hunger, even if we should already be gorged to bursting. (Kafka 358)

The simultaneity of the encounter here – "neither of us a second before or after the other" – is telling: the animal seems to intuit in the form of an image what it could not consciously countenance; it is as though it possesses an obscure awareness of what is really driving his obsession, but that even obliquely accessing it entails setting

off a violent fantasy of mutual/self-destruction. As such, it is very interesting that Brod reports many of the words in the text are ones that he and Kafka used together on a daily basis, pointing out that "the animal = the hacking cough" (*das Tier* = der quälende Husten) (349–50) that dogged Kafka at the end of his life. Walter Benjamin was aware of this connection as early as 1934, writing that "because the most forgotten source of strangeness is our body – one's own body – one can understand why Kafka called the cough that erupted from within him 'the animal.' It was the vanguard of the great herd" (810). It is not enough, then, to read the whistling noise as a hallucination, nor simply as a metaphor for Kafka's own impending death: rather, it is the return of the forgotten fact of biological existence itself, a fear of mortality of sorts, but only in so far as the fear of death can be understood in a more original sense as an inability to accommodate the sheer fact of life itself in the face of one's certain biological demise. This can help shed some light on the problem of whether or not this story is in fact unfinished, lending weight to the claim from Blanchot that the idea that in the missing pages Kafka staged some final confrontation or fight to the death between the animal protagonist and the whistling beast is based on a "rather poor reading." After all, if the animal is hearing itself, then "there could be no decisive combat" (169): rather, what the story shows is that this very desire for a final showdown, this obsessive search for the beast, was always going to misfire before it really got started.

V

This problem of a final confrontation with the beast is one that is common to both Agamben and Nietzsche. It will also allow us to draw a distinction between them. Indeed, Agamben's work should compel us to consider the extent to which this image of "decisive combat" remains a kind of fantasy – in Nietzschean terms, this is the fantasy of a full affirmation of or reconciliation with the beast – which is not external to but actually conditions the whole failed process of exclusion. Kafka's story shows the properly aporetic structure of the problem of animal life,

and taking its claims seriously will lead us to complicate the Nietzschean program of affirmation. The demand that we affirm the beast cedes too much to the anthropological machine. As Alex Murray writes in his recent book on Agamben: "[i]t is not a matter of choosing animal life or human life, but of attempting to render the machine inoperative, to stop it from working" (45). For this reason, the Nietzschean equation between redemption and the possibility of a renewal of or return to animal life is too quick, at least to the extent that it passes over the paradoxes of the problem. The idea of the "natural" (and any concept of the animal that is dependent on it) is a condition for the functioning of the anthropological machine, which must presuppose it in order to police the borderlines between these oppositions (nature/ culture; animal/human; life/language). As such, the task is not simply to affirm what has been excluded via "the return of humanity to its animal self" (Berkowitz) but rather to undermine the very logic of (inclusive) exclusion. In that sense, Agamben's work may give us reason to be sceptical of a Nietzschean "affirmative biopolitics" (Lemm, *Nietzsche's* 152) as a solution to the political problems of modernity.

Nietzsche understands life as such as profoundly innocent: it is evaluative in that it makes selections (as he asks in aphorism nine of *Beyond Good and Evil*: "[I]s not living – estimating, preferring, being unjust, being limited, wanting to be different?"), but is not itself beholden to moral principles, both pre-existing them historically and subsisting beneath them after the positing of civilisation. His theory of redemption, which is embodied in the figure of the overhuman, is a complex figure of both remembering and forgetting: the overhuman is the being that is able to forget resentment and live free from the poison of bad conscience, but this in turn means it is the being that is able to remember its animality, to retrieve its natural drives from the taming clutches of civilisation.[6] Indeed, we might even say that things are more complex than this, because the animal, as the paradigm of another type of forgetfulness, may itself be the very resource that allows the forgetting of resentment: the overhuman, then, is the animal that can

forget resentment of its animality through a kind of mobilisation of that animality. To quote from Lemm once again: "[T]he strength of the over-human is reflected in its ability to contain within itself an increasing degree of struggle between the greatest plurality of animal passions" (*Nietzsche's* 23). The double aspect of this process helps to explain a key Nietzschean metaphor: that of the human animal as a "rope" or "bridge" (*Zarathustra* 4, 13e) between the overhuman and the animal. Nietzsche's redemptive ideal does not ask the human animal to progress beyond its humanity in the way civilisation alleges the human progressed beyond animality, but rather asks the human animal to climb in both directions at once, moving through the overhuman to a new relation to its animality while simultaneously moving through the animal to an overcoming of an all-too-human version of humanity. If and when the human animal arrives at either end, then, it will have already found itself at the other.[7]

As with Nietzsche's, Agamben's political ontological approach to these problems is predicated upon the possibility of their transformation: the claim that human beings could experience a change in their relation to their animality. This proposition – which is phrased in *The Open* in terms of a demand that we "render inoperative" (92) the anthropological machine of humanism – can be understood as a call to definitively abandon any idea of realising a human essence, whether it be through work, philosophy, or revolutionary politics. The key image of the text is Agamben's description of an illustration from a thirteenth-century Hebrew bible which depicts "the messianic banquet of the righteous on the last day" (1). This image is surprising, Agamben says, because the figures are depicted with animal heads, because "the artist of the manuscript . . . intended to suggest that on the last day, the relations between animals and men will take on a new form, and . . . man himself will be reconciled with his animal nature" (3). Despite (or perhaps because of) its reference to the Judeo-Christian tradition, Agamben's claim here seems very Nietzschean, especially if we understand the overhuman as the figure of remembered and affirmed animality. Yet we

find this suggestion on the third page of the book. By the end of the text Agamben has developed his account in such a way that any idea of a "reconciliation" between the human being and its animality appears impossible, and the desire for reconciliation even appears as a symptom of the very problem he wants to resolve. In the final chapter, then, we find him writing the following:

> And if one day, according to a now-classic image, the "face in the sand" that the sciences of man have formed on the shore of our history should finally be erased, what will appear in its place will not be . . . a regained humanity or animality. The righteous with animal heads . . . do not represent a new declension of the man–animal relation so much as a figure of the "great ignorance" which lets both of them be outside of being, saved precisely in their being unsavable . . . (92)

The problem is no longer being posed in terms of how to reconcile the human to its animal nature but in terms of "an inquiry into the practico-political mystery of separation" (92). What happens over the course of the text, which in this respect actually represents an important development from the *Homo Sacer* series, is a kind of deconstruction of the very terms of the problem of how the human could re-engage with or retrieve the animal life that was banished from the *polis*.[8]

The key difference between Agamben's account and that of Nietzsche comes to light here. If in Nietzsche the task is to forget resentment and affirm life as will to power,[9] then in Agamben the desirability and indeed even the very possibility of such affirmation becomes questionable. We see this difference in Agamben's profound ambivalence regarding Nietzsche's eternal return, which is certainly the Nietzschean concept that he cites most regularly (see Durantaye 314–23). I want to argue, however, that this ambivalence is actually symptomatic of a deeper difference, and that when the works of these two thinkers are framed by the ontology of life at play in each we get to the heart of the disagreement from which Agamben's ambivalence stems. The eternal

return, after all, is Nietzsche's great redeeming test, the ultimate ethical challenge whereby the all-too-human animal is given a chance to redeem itself through a primordial act of absolute affirmation. This redeeming test of Nietzsche's can be compared productively with the following passage from Agamben's short essay "On Potentiality":

> For everyone a moment comes in which he or she must utter this "I can," which does not refer to any certainty or specific capacity, but is, nevertheless, absolutely demanding. Beyond all faculties, this "I can" does not mean anything – yet it marks what is, for each of us, the hardest and bitterest experience possible: the experience of potentiality. (178)

Once again this sounds very Nietzschean, but once again appearances deceive. The difference between the Nietzschean account of affirming the will to power in the potentially crushing experience of the eternal return and the Agambenian account of uttering the "I can" in the experience of potentiality is that Agamben frames this experience in terms of an originary impotential or foundational impotence. If for Nietzsche what is affirmed in the "I can" of the redemptory response to the eternal return is the totality of life, the sum of all past and future events, then in Agamben what is affirmed is not existence as a whole in its actuality but rather potentiality, and thus the "potential not to" that subsists within every action as its original enabling condition. Indeed, for Agamben every ability to be able is itself predicated on a more original inability, an "I can't" that stems from the ontological nature of potential as something which can never fully discharge itself, as something that could always have been otherwise. This is how we should interpret his claim that "[b]eings that exist in the mode of potentiality *are capable of their own impotentiality*" or that "[e]very human power is *adynamia*, impotentiality; every human potentiality is in relation to its own privation" ("On Potentiality" 182). In Nietzsche, life is will to power, and the test posed by the eternal return is a test of affirming life as pure power. In Agamben, life is passivity and receptivity, *potentia passiva*, and the ethical

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test of the experience of potentiality is not a test of strength but rather a test of the *ability to be unable*, the affirmation of a privation. If for Nietzsche the human animal flees from the affective intensity and sheer potency of life and makes itself anaemic, then for Agamben it flees from its original impotence and makes itself monstrous.

This is why Agamben and Nietzsche, despite the clear and fascinating similarities in their work, both end up with an entirely different understanding of the *scope* of redemption. For as Jacob Taubes points out, Nietzsche is in resolute agreement with the "ancient type of philosophy" in which truth is "difficult to attain, accessible only to a few" (80). The affirmation of the will to power practised by the overhuman is possible only for those with a particular kind of strength, with the fortitude of a being that can face up to the unending repetition of life in the eternal return; Nietzsche, as is obvious from even the most cursory reading of his texts, saw self-overcoming as something available to a select and extremely small subset of human animals. Against Nietzsche, however, Agamben's Pauline concept of redemption is absolutely non-hierarchical. This is because it has its basis in an idea of the human being as living with and as a kind of original weakness, a passivity that human animals share in virtue of being what they are. Each one of us suffers; each singular human animal knows an experience of radical passivity. To paraphrase Heidegger, the question is not how to overcome it but how to get into it in the right way. After all, what is so harrowing about Kafka's story is the profound sense of the animal's *isolation* as it fortifies itself in the bowels of the earth. Agamben's work indicates that if the animal is to present as something other than a beast that must be tamed or destroyed, it will be because it is able to appear as a sign of our being in common, of what we *share* just in virtue of the fact that we are each alive and breathing.

VI

What does this indicate about the kind of political ontological change towards which Agamben's

work gestures? The lesson here is not that there is something natural – a pure or innocent animal life, such as the one Nietzsche seemed to believe was expressed in pre-historical humanity – that we need to pry from the clutches of the state and affirm, but rather that the very opposition between the animal and the human, between nature and culture, is itself a fantasy constitutive of the state as we know it (and one that conditions the insanity of Kafka's animal, just as it conditions the real exclusions of today's states: refugee camps, "detention centres," Guantanamo Bay, etc.). As Agamben writes of Kafka's story (which, he reports, is the work by Kafka that made the strongest impression on Heidegger):

> The nameless animal that is the protagonist of the story – mole, fox, or human being – is obsessively engaged in building an inexpugnable burrow that instead slowly reveals itself to be a trap with no way out. But isn't this precisely what has happened in the political space of Western nation-states? The homes – the "fatherlands" – that these states endeavoured to build revealed themselves in the end to be only lethal traps for the very "peoples" that were supposed to inhabit them. ("In this Exile" 138–40)

The drive for security that plagues Kafka's animal protagonist, just like the drive for the same which plagues contemporary superpowers, is not only hopeless in a fundamental sense (in that the security sought could never be fully attained) but also bound up with the very problem it is ostensibly designed to solve: the animal needs the beast to justify the burrow; the beast responds by transforming the burrow into a trap. Kafka's animal experiences a kind of haunting. But it is a fantasmatic haunting: the animal convinces itself that it is being haunted by something radically alien, but this is a defence against the intimacy of what is really bothering it. This is why the fantasy of final confrontation that arises in the closing pages of the story is crucially ambiguous: if the animal destroys the beast, it destroys itself; if the animal welcomes the beast, it will be destroyed (winning means losing, and vice versa). The fantasy of full affirmation, then, is just the flipside to the fantasy of total

destruction. In Agamben's terms, one is a fantasy of exclusion without inclusion, the other a fantasy of inclusion without exclusion (crucially, these are both fantasies of *totality*). What is needed, then, is not the affirmation of the beast as certain contemporary Nietzscheans have demanded, but the undoing of the metaphysical logic that posits it as such; what needs to be resisted is the idea of a return to – a final confrontation and/or reconciliation with – the beast in its natural form. This is because the beast, as Agamben says of bare life, "is a product of the machine, and not something that pre-exists it" (*State* 87–88). Kafka's animal digs its burrow in order to escape itself, in order to banish the fact of its own being alive; what it finds, of course, is that the object of its fear pursues it. One cannot make peace with the beast just as one cannot make peace with bare life, for they are not concrete opponents but rather the twin images of the return of a repressed metaphysical problem.

At this point, we can modify Nietzsche's image of the bridge between the animal and the overhuman by imagining instead that it reaches between the human and the animal, and insisting that the question is not whether we could one day make it across, but whether we can appropriate – indeed, whether we can learn to collectively *use* – our basic inability to ever make that crossing. This would entail not the lauding of the singular individual who proves himself able to rise above the herd by affirming his own instinctual life but rather a reorientation of the problem around being in common, a recognition of the fact that if the anthropological machine is to be stopped it could only be via a collective appropriation of our shared consignment to *unassumable* animal life.[10] This is not an ethic of reconciliation between the human and the animal in the human but rather an ethic of attentiveness, an ethic that asks us to attend to animal life as something ungraspable. To the extent that the animal in me presents to my consciousness, it can only do so as an insoluble enigma.

notes

1 Translation modified.

2 Lemm's book on Nietzsche, *Nietzsche's Animal Philosophy*, which is the "first systematic treatment of the animal in Nietzsche's philosophy as a whole" (1), repeatedly insists on a fact that is foundational for the understanding of Nietzsche's thought at work in this paper: the animal in Nietzsche is not (just) a metaphor but rather a central figure of his philosophy. Lemm returns repeatedly throughout her book to the problem of forgetting as a condition of political life as we know it, arguing that "[c]ivilization and forgetfulness belong together insofar as it is only because of the forgetfulness of the human being's animal beginning (animal origin) that it can come to understand itself as a moral and rational being . . ." (17).

3 Foucault writes: "But what might be called a society's 'threshold of modernity' has been reached when the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies" (143).

4 Daniel McLoughlin writes:

> Agamben frequently intimates that there is a close relationship between ontology and politics, and his explicitly political texts draw on a range of concepts such as potentiality, play, and happy life, developed in his earlier first philosophical thought. Nonetheless, the nature of the relationship between the two remains indistinct, a difficulty that is particularly evident in the ambiguous role that "bare life" plays in *Homo Sacer.*

Like McLoughlin's, the reading of Agamben I am presenting insists on the primacy of ontology in his thought. It not only has the merit of allowing us to explain these crucial passages in *Homo Sacer*; arguably, it can help resolve the problem that McLoughlin identifies here, and allow us to put Agamben's claims in their most compelling form.

5 Though he is right to emphasise the importance of Heidegger, Miguel Vatter may therefore have things backwards when we writes that Agamben "map[s] the problem of Heideggerian facticity onto the space of modern biopower explored by Foucault" (47). If my reading is correct, then Agamben maps biopolitics onto fundamental ontology.

6 As this point indicates, reading Nietzsche in terms of the problematic of (the forgetting and

remembering of) the animal implicitly supports the idea that the figure of the *Übermensch* remains at work in Nietzsche's "mature" texts (of which his *Genealogy* is usually understood to be exemplary). This is because the concept of animality and its link to overcoming provides a clear basis for reading the *Genealogy* (which is replete with references to the human animal's divided relation to its instinctual drives) alongside *Zarathustra* (in which animals repeatedly play a role in the transformations of the protagonist). Thus it lends support to the claims of a small but growing body of scholars who are working to challenge the (until recently) consensual view in Nietzsche scholarship that in the *Genealogy* the older "poetic" figure of the *Übermensch* gives way to the more historically specific (and, from the vantage point of Anglo-American philosophy, rather more palatable) figure of the sovereign individual (see Hatab; Acampora; Loeb; see also Hanshe's fascinating esoteric reading of Nietzsche's use of dashes in "Invisibly Revolving— —Inaudibly Revolving"). The continued importance of animality for the "mature" Nietzsche is evidence of the continued importance for him of an idea of radical overcoming; in the *Genealogy*, animality remains a figure of a possible *Übermenschlich* redemption.

7 Of course, we need to qualify this in the light of Nietzsche's pointing out that the overhuman is not a goal. This simultaneous movement, we have to recognise, is just that: a movement, a continual process of becoming and not the endpoint of a teleology.

8 It is worth pointing here to *The Beast and the Sovereign*, Jacques Derrida's recently published lecture series on these problems. In this work Derrida works to deconstruct some of Agamben's own concepts, including the very opposition between *zoē* and *bios* (see 408–43). While this is not the place for a proper engagement with Derrida's critique, I believe that the reading of Agamben I present here – where the *zoē*/*bios* distinction is read in terms of fundamental ontology – may provide grounds for defending Agamben, whose claims will no longer stand or fall on the basis of this linguistic distinction. On my reading of Agamben, the *zoē*/*bios* distinction is not as fundamental to his project as it may appear; rather, it is another version of the (more primordial) ontological difference. As such, the project is based on a properly *philosophical* (Heideggerian) distinction, rather than a conceptual divide with a

(potentially spurious) basis in an ancient linguistic opposition.

9 "A living thing," Nietzsche writes in aphorism thirteen of *Beyond Good and Evil*, "seeks above all to *discharge* its strength – life itself is *will to power . . .*"

10 As Elizabeth Bishop writes in "IV / O Breath":

> Equivocal, but what we have in
> common's   bound to be there,
> whatever we must own   equivalents for,
> something that maybe I   could bargain with
> and make a separate peace   beneath
> within   if never with.

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Mathew Abbott
Quadrangle A14
University of Sydney
Sydney, NSW 2006
Australia
E-mail: mathewabbott@gmail.com