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Sanctifying Profanation – Agamben's Critique of Apophatic Theology as a Call for Revision

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Abstract

Agamben's corpus turns on a question he raised but never resolved, how the extraction of the individual from the sovereign claim can be transmitted across generations without the very transmission restoring that claim. Three established readings of his work, the ontological, the immanent-ethical, and the nihilistic-messianic, each step away from the theological dimension at the very point the question begins to demand a theological response. I argue that Agamben himself is a theological thinker in the constitutive sense, and that his critique of apophatic theology should be read as a "revise and resubmit", a demand for the internal revision of the apophatic structure. Critical Political Theology, the framework I develop here, performs that revision through seven interconnected principles culminating in sanctifying profanation, a political act that removes false sanctities while giving rise to a transgressive sanctity that cannot be turned into authority. The contribution extends beyond Agamben scholarship to the wider question of whether apophatic theology can ground critical political thought. The transmission becomes possible because its very form carries the apophatic structure that makes the extraction possible. The article thereby completes Agamben from within, performing the revision his own critique called for.

Keywords

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1. Introduction

Agamben devoted his corpus to a single question, how the individual is to be drawn out of a theopolitical order that constitutes him as bare life. Within this question lies a second face, one Agamben himself approached without bringing to a close. How is such an extraction to be bequeathed as a binding value across generations, without the bequeathing itself restoring the very

authority against which the extraction set itself?[1] I propose to read this second face within Agamben himself, in the place where he worked without announcing. Two signs within his writing allow this reading. The first concerns his critique of apophatic theology, which falls upon the moment at which hiddenness is converted into the magnification of an oppressive divine majesty, while leaving the apophatic structure itself untouched. The second concerns his sustained continuity with Benjamin, where the theological hunchback Benjamin placed beneath the figure of history continues to ground his thought.[2] Taken together, these two features open within Agamben's own writing the possibility of completing his thought through the apophatic itself, by way of strengthening the idea of profanation through its sanctification.

These two features, taken together, place the reading I propose in a position different from what a first glance would assign to it. They convert it from an external proposal into attention to what Agamben himself opened without announcing. The conversion calls for an explicit ruling on the standing of his critique of apophatic theology. Within the apophatic structure itself, I propose to read this critique as a demand for internal revision. The critique does not amount to a wholesale rejection. Agamben would not have continued to build upon the Benjaminian hunchback had he rejected the ground on which it stands. His critique falls upon a single site within the structure, the site where the structure undergoes its distortion, while the structure itself remains in place. The conclusion follows. Agamben himself, in all likelihood, did not declare such a stance in any direct or explicit way. From the analysis just carried out, however, it follows that his engagement with apophatic theology operates in the manner of a reader issuing a revise and resubmit, in the editorial sense of the term, a reader who sees what the work can become and asks for the revision that would bring it there. The signature of rejection is absent from this engagement. The present article performs the revision his critique called for. It is not an alternative to Agamben, nor is it a correction supplied from outside his thought. How the revision is performed is the work of what follows.

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[1]Walter Benjamin, On the Concept of History, in Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 389–400, thesis I.

[2]For Agamben's sustained engagement with Benjamin in this register, see Miguel Vatter, In Odradek's World: Bare Life and Historical Materialism in Agamben and Benjamin, Diacritics 38, no. 3 (2008), 45–70.

2. The Field of Existing Readings

The work begins with a map of the existing field. Three leading readings of Agamben operate within the literature, the ontological reading associated with Abbott, the immanent-ethical reading associated with van Riessen, and the nihilistic-messianic reading associated with List and Prozorov. The three identify important dimensions within his thought, and the three stand together at the same place with respect to the question of bequeathing. They push the theological dimension out of the frame, each in its own way. Abbott turns Agamben into a philosopher of ontology, an operation that displaces theological discourse altogether. Van Riessen calls for theology within Agamben, and the theology he calls for is the positive theology of a commanding God. List and Prozorov color Agamben in a passive nihilistic-messianic reading, and the emptiness of the politics this reading produces dissolves the apophatic-theological depth on which his thought stands. The three readings, each in its own way, miss the same thing. They do not see that Agamben's critique of apophatic theology operates as a demand for internal revision. The fourth reading I propose finds its ground precisely there, at the point where the three converging readings leave the second face of the question open.

3. The Ontological Reading

The ontological reading enters first. Abbott locates within Agamben the philosophical core on which the corpus stands.[3] He cites Agamben's own declaration that in "bare life" the adjective "bare" corresponds to the Greek haplōs, the term by which first philosophy defines pure Being.[4] From this, Abbott infers that the key concepts of Agamben operate at the level of conditions of possibility for political order, a level above historical configurations open to change. The conclusion Abbott draws is that Agamben remains enclosed within a Heideggerian horizon, one that can diagnose the problem of metaphysics without supplying the means of extraction. The

[3]Giorgio Agamben, The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa with Matteo Mandarini (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 211, "Government glorifies the Kingdom, and the Kingdom glorifies government. But the center of the machine is empty, and glory is nothing but the splendor that emanates from this emptiness."

[4]Mathew Abbott, The Figure of This World: Agamben and the Question of Political Ontology (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014); Mathew Abbott, No Life is Bare, the Ordinary is Exceptional: Giorgio Agamben and the Question of Political Ontology, Parrhesia 14 (2012), 23–36. For a related ontological reading, see Germán Eduardo Primera, The Political Ontology of Giorgio Agamben: Signatures of Life and Power (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

reading places Agamben within ontology and removes from view the theological face of the very analogy at its center. The two isolations, of pure Being and of bare life, rest on an act of separation, and the structure of such an act is theological. Abbott stops short of this recognition. The point at which he stops is precisely the point on which the reading I propose turns.[5]

4. The Immanent-Ethical Reading

The immanent-ethical reading enters next. Van Riessen approaches Agamben with a practical question, what form of life is worthy after the sacred has been profaned.[6] Agamben's proposal, in form-of-life, happy life, and profanation, presents an immanent ethics of a life drawn from within. Van Riessen finds in this a contribution and identifies within it an absence. If the sacred has been profaned and what remains is immanent reality, in the name of what or whom should we protest against inhuman conditions? The question is the form in which van Riessen names the absence, the lack of a normative anchor capable of standing against oppression. The answer he proposes is a positive theology of a commanding God. The point at which he stops is here. Van Riessen rightly identifies theology as what the question demands. His identification of which theology is

[5]The ontological reading rests on textual ground that Agamben himself supplies. Beyond the equivalence between haplōs and pure Being, Agamben directly identifies the political stakes of pure Being, writing that "it 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." Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 182. The reciprocity Agamben formulates here is bidirectional. The ontology of pure Being and the politics of bare life are bound to one another. The very foundation of sovereign power, as Agamben presents it elsewhere, is biopolitical at its root, "the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power. It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power. In this sense, biopolitics is at least as old as the sovereign exception." Agamben, Homo Sacer, 6. The Heideggerian framework Agamben operates within is openly acknowledged in his earlier work. He notes in Stanzas that the thought of Derrida has its basis in that of Heidegger, an acknowledgment that places his own engagement within the same lineage. Giorgio Agamben, Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 158 n.15. Abbott's reading thus locates a substantive textual ground. The reading nonetheless stops short. It misses that the analogy between pure Being and bare life, which Agamben himself draws, also carries a theological face. The isolation of pure Being and the isolation of bare life both rest on a structure of separation, and the structure of separation is theological in its very form. This is the point at which the present reading turns.

[6]Renée D. N. van Riessen, Community and Its Other: Remarks on Giorgio Agamben's The Coming Community from a Levinasian Point of View, Zeitschrift für Dialektische Theologie, Supplement Series 5, at 97. Adjacent ethical readings include Ype De Boer, The Profane Land of the Happy: On the Messianic Promise in the Work of Giorgio Agamben, Religions 14, no. 6 (2023): 808; and Vivian Liska, Messianic Language and the Idea of Prose: Benjamin and Agamben, Bamidbar 2, no. 2 (2012), 44–63.

mistaken.[7] The ground his question requires is an apophatic theology held at a sharpness sufficient to withstand the very critique of authority. The theology of a positive God falls short of this load. The place where van Riessen stops is the second place to which my reading turns.

5. The Nihilistic-Messianic Reading

The nihilistic-messianic reading enters last. List and Prozorov work from a materialist starting point and locate the political stagnation Agamben imposes within a specific operation he performs on his sources. Agamben reduces Schmitt to legal formalism and reads Benjamin through that narrowed Schmittian lens. Benjamin's revolutionary messianism becomes, in Agamben's handling, a form of passive waiting. Agamben himself supplies an anchor for this reading when he writes that the singular claim of our age is that it no longer wants to be a historical age.[8] The reading is correct in identifying the danger. Passivity is indeed present. List and Prozorov resolve it at a cost. The cost is the surrender of the apophatic-theological depth on which Agamben stands.[9] They see

[7]Van Riessen's reading rests on textual ground that Agamben himself supplies. The concept of "happy life," which van Riessen identifies as Agamben's positive alternative, is formulated explicitly. Agamben writes that "the 'happy life' on which political philosophy should be founded thus cannot be either the naked life that sovereignty posits as a presupposition so as to turn it into its own subject or the impenetrable extraneity of science and of modern biopolitics that everybody tries in vain to sacralize. This 'happy life' should be rather, an absolutely profane 'sufficient life' that has reached the perfection of its own power and of its own communicability." Giorgio Agamben, Means Without End: Notes on Politics, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 114–115. Elsewhere Agamben sharpens this further, writing that "the happy life, life finally 'free from the sovereign ban'... cannot be the naked life that sovereignty posits." Agamben, Means Without End, 43. Van Riessen reads these formulations as a call for ethical content. The reading is partial. Agamben himself sets a stricter boundary by distinguishing profanation from secularization, "One has to differentiate between profanation and secularization. Secularization is a form of repression, which does not transform any forces but merely leads to their relocation." Giorgio Agamben, Profanations, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 98. Profanation deactivates apparatuses of power, "deactivates apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power has seized." Agamben, Profanations, 87. Happy life carries a stricter structure than van Riessen's reading allows. It is the result of an act that deactivates the entire apparatus of sacralization, including its supposed secular replacements. Van Riessen's call for a positive theology to ground the ethical reads happy life as needing such a ground. The ground happy life requires is precisely the apophatic deactivation Agamben himself names, the same deactivation that prevents the secular ethics van Riessen calls for from settling into a new sanctity. The principle of transgressive sanctity, developed later in this article, articulates the form of ground that Agamben's project requires.

[8]Giorgio Agamben, The Idea of Prose, trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 87.

[9]Lotte List, Political Theology and Historical Materialism: Reading Benjamin against Agamben, Theory, Culture & Society 38, no. 3 (2021), 117–140, at 129–130; Sergei Prozorov, Giorgio Agamben and the End of History: Inoperative Praxis and the Interruption of the Dialectic, European Journal of Social Theory 12, no. 4 (2009), 523–542, at 530. For an earlier materialist intervention, see Ernesto Laclau, Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy? in Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life, ed. Matthew Calarco and Steven DeCaroli (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007). List and Prozorov locate a genuine difficulty in Agamben. The dictum "no longer wants to be a historical age" can be read as a withdrawal from history. The reading is supported by other moments. Agamben presents Benjamin's messianic position as "a messianic nihilism that nullifies even the Nothing and lets no form of law remain in force beyond its

in that depth only a passive messianic theology and, therefore, reject theology altogether. They exchange one problem for a larger one. Passivity belongs to a particular version of the apophatic, the version Agamben sought to criticize. The apophatic itself, at its sharpness, is the ground of action. The place where List and Prozorov stop is the third place to which my reading turns.

6. The Convergent Boundary

The three places taken together form a pattern. Abbott stops before recognizing that the analogy between pure Being and bare life is theological in structure. Van Riessen stops before recognizing that the theology his question demands is apophatic in kind. List and Prozorov stop before recognizing that the apophatic, at its sharpness, is the ground of action itself. The three stopping points converge upon a single boundary, the relation to the apophatic. The boundary carries weight. It marks the place where any reading must decide whether to take the apophatic structure as a tool of oppression and dispense with it, or to take it as a structure susceptible to internal revision and pursue that revision to its end. Each retreats at the moment the apophatic asks for recognition and labor. The fourth reading crosses that boundary. The crossing requires a preliminary move, the recognition of Agamben himself as a theological thinker, a thinker whose theological commitments are constitutive of his work. That recognition is the work of what follows.

7. Agamben as Theological Thinker: The Three Axes

The recognition of Agamben as a theological thinker shows itself the moment we attend in earnest to three axes on which his corpus stands, the theological structure of modern government, his

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own content." Agamben, Homo Sacer, 53. And he positions inoperativity as a central category, writing in The Use of Bodies that "in contemplation, the work is deactivated and rendered inoperative, and in this way, restored to possibility, opened to a new possible use." Giorgio Agamben, The Use of Bodies, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 247. The reading of these formulations as passive nihilism misses what Agamben distinguishes within them. Inoperativity, in Agamben's formulation, is the form of an act, the act of deactivation. It is the act of returning what was seized by power to a different mode of use. He clarifies this in the case of profanation as play, writing that "it [profanation] is the sort of use that Benjamin must have had in mind when he wrote of Kafka's The New Attorney that the law that is no longer applied but only studied is the gate to justice." Agamben, Profanations, 76. And again in State of Exception, where "this studious play is the passage that allows us to arrive at that justice that one of Benjamin's posthumous fragments defines as state of the world in which the world appears as a good that absolutely cannot be appropriated or made juridical." Giorgio Agamben, State of Exception, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 63. The studious play is itself the form of action. List and Prozorov, in reading inoperativity as passive nihilism, miss the apophatic form of action it carries. The retreat into materialism they recommend exchanges the apophatic ground for the absence of ground that Agamben himself diagnosed in Homo Sacer. The present article retains the apophatic ground and develops its action-form through the five political principles, beginning with political humility and culminating in sanctifying profanation.

Pauline messianic corpus, and his sustained engagement with the apophatic structure. The first axis carries the case at its clearest. In The Kingdom and the Glory Agamben demonstrates that the structure of modern government is theological, and that the distinction between Kingdom and Government replicates the Christian theological distinction between God's being and God's activity in the world. The citation already brought, on government glorifying the Kingdom and the Kingdom glorifying government, stands as a demonstration. Modern sovereignty requires theology in order to exist as sovereignty. At the center of the machine sits emptiness. The emptiness is the apophatic emptiness of theology itself. The same emptiness produces the splendor that gives the appearance of legitimate authority. Without that structure, what remains is force unaccompanied by aura. The political register reads such force as violence. The requirement is structural. It is not the residue of any particular historical configuration, and it is not accidental to any era. If the theological structure is necessary to the production of sovereignty, then Agamben's political question is in its very form a theological question.

8. The Pauline Axis

The second axis runs through Agamben's reading of Paul. The Time That Remains, his book on Paul's letter to the Romans, is the formulation of Agamben's own philosophical-political structure through that reading. Agamben places Paul as the figure who radicalizes the state of exception itself. He writes that "in his rendering of the messianic condition of the believer, Paul radicalizes the condition of the state of exception, whereby law is applied in disapplying itself, no longer having an inside or an outside."[10] The formulation of the state of exception that runs through the center of Agamben's political-philosophical corpus rests on this reading of Paul. The concept of the remnant, also central to that corpus, takes shape in the same theological reading, in the moment Agamben writes that "messianic division introduces a remnant (resto) into the law's overall division of the people, and Jews and non-Jews are constitutively 'not-all'."[11] He formulates messianic time itself through Paul. In this reading, "the messianic does not simply cancel out this figure, but it makes it pass, it prepares its end. This is not another figure or another world: it is the

[10]Giorgio Agamben, The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 10–17.

[11]Agamben, The Time That Remains, 50.

passing of the figure of the world."[12] He places the messianic subject through the reading of Benjamin on Paul, "The messianic subject does not contemplate the world as though it were saved. In Benjamin's words, he contemplates salvation only to the extent that he loses himself in what cannot be saved; this is how difficult it is to dwell in the calling."[13] These four formulations, the state of exception, the remnant, messianic time, and the messianic subject, are the ground of major philosophical-political constructs in Agamben's work. All four rest on the theological reading of Paul. The Pauline axis extends beyond The Time That Remains and runs across his corpus, into Homo Sacer, Potentialities, and Profanations, where the messianic structure operates as a continuous theological-political register.[14]

9. Profanation Within the Theological Structure

What holds for sovereignty holds equally for profanation. Agamben himself, in the very moment he names what profanation does, places it within the theological structure. He writes that to profane means to open the possibility of a special form of negligence, which ignores separation or, rather, makes a particular use of it.[15] The formulation places profanation as a movement within the distinction between sacred and profane, a movement that remains in the distinction throughout. If profanation moves within the distinction, then profanation rests upon the theological structure that produces the distinction. Without a structure that constitutes separation, nothing is available for profanation. The sacred to which profanation addresses itself is the sacred that some theological structure has produced. The act of returning the sacred to common use presupposes the prior separation. The attempt to do without the theological structure undoes the conditions on which

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[12]Agamben, The Time That Remains, 24–25.

[13]Agamben, The Time That Remains, 42.

[14]In Homo Sacer, Agamben writes that "Benjamin proposes a messianic nihilism that nullifies even the Nothing and lets no form of law remain in force beyond its own content," and that "the messianic task of the man from the country... might then be precisely that of making the virtual state of exception real, of compelling the doorkeeper to close the door of the law (the door of Jerusalem)." Agamben, Homo Sacer, 53 and 57 respectively. In Profanations, the kingdom-profanation register reappears, "The idea that Kingdom is present in profane time in sinister and distorted forms... is a profound messianic theme." Agamben, Profanations, 34. In Potentialities, the messianic is held against deconstruction, "deconstruction is a thwarted messianism, a suspension of the messianic." Giorgio Agamben, Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 209. The Pauline-messianic structure thus operates as a sustained theological register across the corpus, present in book after book.

[15]Agamben, Profanations, 73–74.

profanation itself depends. The question shifts. It now concerns how the theological structure is to be operated in keeping with what Agamben sought.

10. The Revise and Resubmit

The answer takes shape from what has come into view. Agamben is a theological thinker in the constitutive sense. His critique of apophatic theology falls upon a specific site, where hiddenness is converted into the magnification of an oppressive divine majesty. His continued building upon the Benjaminian hunchback remains undisturbed. These three findings, taken together, place the reading of his critique as a demand for the internal revision of apophatic theology. The reading I propose opens the article. Its placement then required the two internal signs presented in the first paragraph. After the survey of the existing readings and the discussion of Agamben as a theological thinker, the reading occupies a new position. It stands as the one reading that takes Agamben himself at full seriousness. Every alternative either dissolves the theological, as the three readings in the literature do, or dissolves the critique, as apologetic readings of apophatic theology do. Agamben's reading of apophatic theology in the manner of a revise and resubmit calls for an internal revision. The revision falls to whoever takes the critique seriously. I now perform the revision, presenting sanctifying profanation, its precise definition, and the seven principles that form its movement.[16]

11. The Movement of the Seven Principles

The revision unfolds through seven interconnected principles, each of which gives rise to the next. They are seven stages of a single movement, a movement that begins in the theological structure of human limitation and arrives at the political act of sanctifying profanation. The first gives rise to the second, the second to the third, and so on through to the seventh. The seventh, sanctifying profanation, closes the movement and carries the name of the whole. Its precise definition belongs

[16]The position of a revise and resubmit, as a hermeneutic stance toward a philosopher's critique of a tradition, is sharper than the position of either rejection or apology. Rejection takes the critique as the dissolution of the tradition. Apology takes the critique as a misreading to be corrected by deeper acquaintance with the tradition. Revise and resubmit takes the critique as a binding diagnosis whose remedy the tradition itself must undertake. The first abandons what the critique opened. The second deflects what the critique opened by returning to the pre-critical form. The third performs what the critique opened. The present article, which takes the third stance, neither leaves apophatic theology behind nor returns it to its pre-critical form. It works the apophatic at the sharpness Agamben's critique requires.

after the movement has been laid out, so that the reader receives the definition as the outcome of what has been built, each prior stage having done its work.

12. The First Principle: The Incomprehensible God

The first principle is the incomprehensible God. Human consciousness is intrinsically limited, and its limit is the infinite, that which it is not.[17] In meeting that limit, a paradox is disclosed. The infinite, the moment it is placed as the limit of something finite, finds itself bounded by that finite thing. An infinity that can be bounded is no longer pure infinity. Levinas formulates the paradox in the language of creation, "The paradox of an Infinity admitting a being outside of itself which it does not encompass, and accomplishing its very infinitude by virtue of this proximity of a separated being—in a word, the paradox of creation—thenceforth loses something of its audacity."[18] The paradox admits only a backward inference from the very fact of its existence, an inference that proceeds from the paradox to what enabled it. The backward inference points to an incomprehensible God, a God that is neither an entity that can be apprehended nor a nothing that can be named, a God whose existence is reached only through such inference. The principle carries deep lineage in the apophatic traditions that turn toward an incomprehensible divine. Gregory of Nyssa wrote that knowledge of the divine "is a sort of knowledge to know that what is sought transcends knowledge." Pseudo-Dionysius called upon the seeker to "leave behind you everything perceived and understood... toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge." Meister Eckhart described the "virginal" reception of the divine as one "liberated from all alien

[17]This recognition of structural limitation operates within the very vocabulary in which Agamben constructs his political analysis. Agamben himself identifies the linguistic and ontological depth of the term "bare life" by tracing it back to the Greek haplōs, the term by which first philosophy defines pure Being. He writes that "In the syntagma 'bare life,' the adjective 'bare' corresponds to the Greek haplōs, the term by which first philosophy defines pure Being." He proceeds to draw an analogy that bears directly on the present principle, "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." He further insists that "For bare life is certainly as indeterminate and impenetrable as haplōs Being." And he concludes that "reason cannot think bare life except as it thinks pure Being, in stupor and in astonishment." Agamben, Homo Sacer, 182. The conjunction Agamben draws here is exact. The very act of thinking bare life encounters the same kind of indeterminacy that thinking pure Being encounters. The principle of the incomprehensible God names the theological ground that holds the human condition Agamben's analysis already presents as bordered by the indeterminate and impenetrable. The apophatic structure CPT develops is the theological articulation of the limit Agamben himself locates at the heart of his political analysis.

[18]Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), 102–103.

images."[19] Jewish sources developed the same recognition through the formula takhlit ha-yedi'ah de-lo leida', the telos of knowledge is to know not.[20] These traditions converge on the recognition that authentic knowledge of the divine consists in the recognition of the impossibility of such knowledge.

13. The Second Principle: Recurrence

The second principle is recurrence. What the first principle disclosed recurs. Every authentic encounter of consciousness with reality reconstructs the movement of backward inference anew. The encounter with a thing in reality reveals itself as an encounter with a limit, the limit of the thing itself and the limit it sets upon the consciousness encountering it. Through this limit, consciousness finds itself again before the infinite, and the backward inference is renewed. Each such encounter is unique. The inference born of it carries the signature of the specific encounter that enabled it. The value that grows from the inference contains within it the information about the manner of its disclosure. At the political-theological level, the role of the thinker is to trace how specific encounters, personal, communal, or national, activate the principle. From each unique encounter, a political value can be carved, a value that preserves the signature of the encounter and prevents consciousness from forgetting its limits. Through the constant recurrence of encounter and the continuous production of unique values, the possibility of bequeathing opens. The unique value is the form in which the encounter becomes a law that can be transmitted.[21]

14. The Third Principle: Relationship

The third principle is relationship. The sharpest case of the principle of recurrence is the encounter with the human other. Here, the movement of backward inference is performed in its most direct and most penetrating form. The other is a presence through which the self discovers itself as

[19]For the apophatic Christian tradition that grounds this recognition, see Gregory of Nyssa, Against Eunomius II, 264; Pseudo-Dionysius, Mystical Theology 1.B; Meister Eckhart, German Sermon 2, 24–25.

[20]Penini, An Investigation of Causes, chapters 23–24; Nachman of Breslav, Likutei Moharan, 24:8; Kook, Orot ha-Kodesh, 432; Tsadok HaCohen, Tsidkat ha-Tsadik, 23b; Schneerson, Dvar Malkhut, 79. For models of this kind in Jewish thought, see Author, Critical Educational Theology in the Teachings of a Hasidic Leader, 99–120; Author, Critical Education Based on a Jewish Theological Principle, 11–22.

[21]For the development of this principle in educational contexts, see Author, Creative Love in Education: Deriving Educational Values Based on Expanded Apophatic Theology, 289–290.

something distinct, as a separated consciousness. The structure runs in both directions. The other, in turn, encounters the self as the very same incomprehensible boundary that constitutes its own distinct consciousness. Each of the two holds this role with respect to the other. From this reciprocity grows an existential humility, a mutual recognition that no human consciousness can appropriate an all-knowing perspective on reality. Levinas touched on a similar structure when he wrote of the way "the same and the other at the same time maintain themselves in relationship and absolve themselves from this relation, remain absolutely separated." The principle here rests upon the recognition Levinas developed and departs from it on one specific point.[22] Levinas places the relation as asymmetric, the other always higher than me, commanding me. The third principle places the relation as reciprocal, each side carrying the role for the other. From this departure, existential humility grows as a mutual condition shared by both sides.

15. The Fourth Principle: Political Humility

From the existential humility of the third principle grows political humility. This political humility carries no resemblance to a moral disposition of an individual. It is the structural finding that every claim to absolute political authority collapses from within the very structure of the one who advances it. Absolute political authority is authority that lays claim to a position of full knowledge of the good, of justice, and of reality, and by force of that claim justifies the imposition of its values without limit. Political humility removes the ground beneath such a claim. If human consciousness is structurally limited, and if the encounter with the other gives rise to humility as a mutual

[22]Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 97. The departure on the point of reciprocity opens onto two further departures, each of which the principle requires. The first concerns presence. For Levinas, the epiphany of the face obligates the self but does not command from a presence; the source of obligation passes to the human as an existential value of great depth, without a direct present authority. The third principle places the inference toward the incomprehensible at a different position. The inference reaches a divine presence, a presence that remains incomprehensible in the fullest sense, while still standing as present in the positive register. Where the self in Levinas encounters obligation without an accompanying source, in the third principle the self encounters a source that exceeds apprehension while remaining a source. The second departure concerns the chain of inference itself. In Levinas the transcendent is bound to the infinite, and this binding closes off the further movement; the structure cannot continue past the infinite. The third principle holds the incomprehensible as exceeding the infinite, and the chain remains open. From the encounter with the other, the consciousness moves through the limit, through the paradox of the infinite, and to a divine presence that the infinite itself cannot contain. The other, on this account, sustains and constitutes consciousness as a separated finite existence, and turning away from the other is therefore a local extinguishing of existence itself and a closure of the very possibility of disclosure. The reciprocity announced in the body of the third principle rests on these two further departures. Without the positive presence reached through the inference, reciprocity would have no anchor to sustain it on both sides. Without the chain that exceeds the infinite, the encounter with the other would close upon itself in the way Levinas closes it. The principle preserves Levinas at the point of the face-to-face, and develops past him at the points where the structure requires further movement.

existential condition, then every claim to absolute authority rests upon a premise already undone in the prior movement. The collapse occurs from within the structure itself. The cause is structural, internal to the apophatic recognition already established. Political humility is therefore a structural outcome. It appears that the moment a political system tries to ground itself in a position of full knowledge. Agamben's critique of the structure of sovereign authority finds here its apophatic-theological ground.[23] Sovereign authority operates by claiming a position outside the law, a position of knowledge and decision answerable to nothing. Political humility dismantles that claim from within, through the first three principles.

16. The Fifth Principle: Resistance

From political humility follows resistance. Resistance, on this account, is a continuous political movement that prevents absolute authority from arising in the first place. Resistance operates at the moments before authority converts into absolute authority. The moment a regime, an ideology, or a doctrine tries to place itself in a position of full knowledge, resistance activates principles one through four. The authority claiming an absolute position is asked to disclose the theological ground of its claim. Once that ground is disclosed, it is found collapsing from within. Resistance demands only the disclosure of the authority. The force lies in the disclosure itself. In this way, political-theological resistance operates apophatically.[24] It activates the recognition that every

[23]Political humility addresses the structural problem Agamben himself diagnosed. He defines sovereignty as "the originary structure in which law refers to life and includes it in itself by suspending it." Agamben, Homo Sacer, 28. The state of exception, on his analysis, has become the fundamental political structure of the modern order, "an anomic space in which what is at stake is a force of law without law." Agamben, State of Exception, 39. Agamben calls for a critique that "will necessarily have to put the very form of relation into question, and to ask if the political fact is not perhaps thinkable beyond relation and, thus, no longer in the form of a connection." Agamben, Homo Sacer, 29. He extends this further, asking us to think "ontology and politics beyond every figure of relation, beyond even the limit relation that is the sovereign ban." Agamben, Homo Sacer, 47. The call is for a critique from the ground. Political humility supplies the ground Agamben's call requires. Through the apophatic recognition built across the first three principles, the very ground of the sovereign claim is found absent, the claim of full knowledge is found incompatible with the structure of consciousness. The collapse of the sovereign claim is therefore structural, the form of relation that grounds the sovereign ban dissolves at the very point of its alleged foundation. The principle here answers Agamben's call by providing what he could only gesture toward, a critique of sovereignty that operates as a structural finding produced from within the apophatic-theological recognition itself.

[24]The form of action that political-theological resistance carries is one that Agamben himself names as a structural possibility. He places at the center of his thought the human capacity that he describes as "the greatness—and also the abyss—of human potentiality is that it is first of all potential not to act." Agamben, Potentialities, 182–183. The potential not to act, on Agamben's account, is the form in which human freedom appears. He extends this through his analysis of the apparatus, which he defines broadly as "literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings." Giorgio Agamben, What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford:

positive position of full knowledge is structurally impossible. The activation is its work. This resistance is the form in which the fourth reading performs the revise and resubmit upon Agamben's critique. Agamben identified that the structure of modern government falls into absolute authority through a theological mechanism. Resistance, grounded in a sharpened apophatic, activates theology in order to dismantle that very authority. The revision Agamben sought comes to performance.

17. The Sixth Principle: Transgressive Sanctity

The performance of resistance gives rise to a property of a particular kind. That property is transgressive sanctity. It is the property of sacred separateness that belongs to the incomprehensible divine presence, a separateness that belongs to it by the very fullness of its incomprehensibility. This sanctity arises retroactively. Before the apophatic act of disclosure, it has no place. Only after the backward inference reaches the incomprehensible divine presence does the sacred separateness of the divine pass back to the act that made the disclosure possible. In this structure, no content is available for apprehension prior to the act, no doctrine can be carved from it, and no position of authority can be founded upon it. Transgressive sanctity exceeds the ordinary category of sanctity. Ordinary sanctity precedes the act, granting its signature to what is already known. Transgressive sanctity terminates the moment someone tries to convert it into something known. Agamben identified that ordinary apophatic theology can fall into a tool of authority when the hiddenness of the hidden divine translates into an aura of unchecked authority. Transgressive sanctity is structurally immune to that reversal. With no prior content, nothing remains upon which to build authority. With no doctrine before the act, nothing remains to bequeath as an element of full knowledge. The sanctity arises only in the fullness of its retroactive emergence, the signature of the act that enabled the disclosure.

Stanford University Press, 2009), 11. The apparatus is the structure that converts the potential not to act into compliance, the very structure that resistance must address. Agamben formulates the response in The Use of Bodies as a metaphysical operation, "Contemplation and inoperativity are in this sense the metaphysical operators of anthropogenesis, which, in liberating living human beings from every biological and social destiny and every predetermined task, render them available for that peculiar absence of work that we are accustomed to calling 'politics' and 'art'." Agamben, The Use of Bodies, 278. The principle of political-theological resistance carries this form to its sharpened theological articulation. The activation it performs is the operation Agamben names, the disclosure of the absent ground of the apparatus, the apophatic recognition that no apparatus can ground itself on full knowledge of the good. Resistance, on this principle, is the form in which Agamben's potential not to act becomes a continuous political movement, sustained by the apophatic structure that the first four principles built.

18. The Seventh Principle: Sanctifying Profanation

The seventh principle is sanctifying profanation. The six principles converge in it, and it carries the name of the article as a whole. The term rests on the concept of profanation Agamben formulated, and opens it one step further. When a human act sets aside false sanctities whose source is the appropriation of an all-knowing position, this setting-aside also removes the obstacle that had prevented consciousness from meeting its real boundaries. In this renewed encounter, the very chain that the first and second principles developed becomes active again. Consciousness meets its ultimate boundary, the infinite, and there the paradox of the infinite being bounded by the finite is once more disclosed, a paradox that gives rise to the backward inference toward the incomprehensible God. The human act, in this way, opens the ontological space within which the incomprehensible God comes to be disclosed. In this disclosure, God preserves his property of sacred separateness, and in being preserved, this property is conferred upon the very act that made the disclosure possible. The act participates in the sacred separateness of God, and in carrying this property, it stands immune to being turned into human authority, the very turning that Agamben himself anticipated as a risk of the profanation he formulated.[25] The paradoxical character of the name, the joining of profanation with sanctification, is itself the linguistic form of the structure. The paradox in the name carries within it the signature of the structure, in the same way that the paradox of reality testifies to the incomprehensible God who established it.

19. The Seven Principles as Revision

[25]The structural difficulty Agamben himself identifies in profanation provides the very ground from which sanctifying profanation receives its name. Agamben distinguishes profanation from secularization, writing that "Secularization is a form of repression. It leaves intact the forces it deals with by simply moving them from one place to another... Profanation, by contrast, neutralizes what it profanes. Once profaned, what was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use." Giorgio Agamben, In Praise of Profanation, trans. Jeff Fort, Log 10 (2007), 25. The neutralization Agamben names sets the act apart from mere relocation, the act removes the seized quality of separation and restores common use. Yet Agamben also identifies a second risk within the very act, the danger that the returned use will collapse into consumption, writing that "the use to which the sacred is returned [in play] is a special one that does not coincide with utilitarian consumption." Agamben, Profanations, 77. The act of profanation, as Agamben formulates it, requires a structure that preserves the special character of the use without re-instituting separation. Sanctifying profanation supplies the structure Agamben's formulation requires. The sanctity that arises retroactively, the transgressive sanctity developed in the sixth principle, is precisely the form of separateness that resists reabsorption into consumption while remaining structurally unavailable for re-conversion into authority. The seventh principle, in this sense, names the form of the act Agamben himself sought.

The seven principles, taken together, perform what the article has called the "revise and resubmit," the response to Agamben's critique of apophatic theology, which the article reads as a demand for the internal revision of the apophatic, an invitation to revise the structure while preserving it.[26] The first establishes the incomprehensible God as the ground reached through backward inference. The second renders the inference a recurring movement, performed anew in every authentic encounter. The third locates the sharpest case of recurrence in the encounter with the human other, where reciprocity gives rise to existential humility. The fourth carries this humility into the political register, where every claim to absolute authority collapses from within the structure that constitutes the one who claims it. The fifth makes the collapse a continuous political movement, a resistance that operates apophatically, through disclosure that takes the place of force. The sixth identifies the form of sanctity that grows from this movement, a sanctity that arises retroactively and remains immune to the turning into authority. The seventh names the act that joins all the previous principles into a single complete movement, the act in which profanation gives rise to sanctification, and that sanctification provides the immunity that makes the act available for bequeathing. The structure Agamben identified, in which the theological mechanism sustains modern sovereignty, is met here with a theological structure of a different kind, a structure whose very form makes it unable to sustain sovereignty in turn. The bequeathing question raised at the opening of the article finds its answer in this completed structure. The extraction from the claim of absolute knowledge can be transmitted across generations because the form of the transmission carries within it the same apophatic structure that makes the extraction possible.

20. Conclusion: The Closure of Agamben's Question

The opening question of the article can now receive its answer. The question was how the extraction of the individual from the claim of sovereignty can be transmitted across generations, without the transmission itself restoring the sovereignty against which the extraction was set. Sanctifying profanation supplies the answer. It is a political act whose substance is the removal of false sanctities, and along its course, it gives rise to a transgressive sanctity that cannot be turned

[26]The "revise and resubmit," in its application here, is the hermeneutic position the article has taken toward Agamben's critique of apophatic theology, see paragraph 10 and note 16 above. The seven principles, taken together, perform the revision that Agamben's critique called for, sharpening the apophatic at the very point his critique identified as in need of revision.

into authority. This transgressive sanctity passes onward as the sanctity of the act itself, with no doctrinal content available for translation into a sovereign structure. The transmission, in this form, carries forward the very form of the extraction, with the structure of sovereignty left behind. The fourth reading, in which the article converges, is something beyond an additional interpretive option in Agamben scholarship. It is a specific rescue of his corpus from what threatened it from within, dissolution at the stage of bequeathing. Agamben himself opened this possibility through his critique of apophatic theology and through his sustained continuity with the Benjaminian hunchback. The closure remained for another hand to perform. The article performs it, and in so doing it completes Agamben from within, performing the revision he himself called for.

21. Beyond Agamben Scholarship

The contribution of the article extends beyond Agamben scholarship. The article enters a wider debate on the encounter between apophatic theology and critical political thought. A standing assumption in the critical-political discourse of modernity treats theology and critical thought as opposites, the first taken to be a vehicle of authority, the second its contestation. This assumption is misleading when the theology under discussion is the apophatic at its sharpness. Agamben himself recognized the difficulty. He wrote that the body "is always already a biopolitical body and bare life, and nothing in it or the economy of its pleasure seems to allow us to find solid ground on which to oppose the demands of sovereign power."[27] The difficulty is a difficulty of ground. CPT supplies the ground through a theological-apophatic structure that, in its very form, operates as critique. Political humility, political-theological resistance, and transgressive sanctity are all theological structures at their core. Precisely because they are apophatic-theological, they function as the ground of critical thought. The boundary between theology and critique, at the place where the apophatic is sharpened, dissolves. Where it dissolves, the resources for the non-oppressive politics Agamben himself aspired toward come into being.

22. Sanctifying Profanation as Active Demand

In its full unfolding, sanctifying profanation operates as an active political demand, with the seven principles supplying its form. Each generation is called to perform it anew. This demand is a

[27] Agamben, Homo Sacer, 187.

sustained political-theological obligation. It calls for sustained vigilance, performed across the duration of any political order that resists succumbing to absolute claims. Every time a regime, a doctrine, or an ideology attempts to consecrate itself as absolute authority, sanctifying profanation is activated again. This obligation is transmitted from generation to generation as a form of life. The next generation inherits the form, with the content remaining free. In this way, bequeathing transmits the very tools of dismantling sovereignty, with the structure of sovereignty itself left behind. Sanctifying profanation, as an active revolutionary demand, is the form in which critique crosses generations without losing its edge.

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