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Witnessing the Inhuman: Agamben or Merleau-Ponty

A great part of twentieth-century (continental) philosophy could be characterized as the attempt to solve the conundrum of the demise of humanism. Most of the major thinkers of the second half of the twentieth century believed that humanism had become a category that no longer holds, that it collapsed with the horrific historical experiences of a mad century. They believed that the category is not just epistemologically flawed, but, more pressingly, that it is a category that is ethically and politically tainted, to the point where it can be construed as one of the key categories to deconstruct urgently in order to avoid repeating the horrors of an all-too-recent past, to step out of the possibilities of a dangerous future. The suspicion of all these thinkers is not easy to fathom, because one could apparently argue with good logic that it is precisely the normative meaning of the human that allows one to condemn the horrendous crimes committed by human beings against other human beings as failing the test of humanity. It is not an easy task to convincingly articulate why the repeated extremes of inhumanity perpetrated in the past century, culminating in the industrial planning of the total dehumanization and destruction of
millions of people, also indicts with it the normative category of humanism. The core idea justifying this rejection of the normative category in the name of historical examples is that it is precisely the belief in a special human essence, implying as it does a structural separation between the human and the inhuman that has consistently helped to justify the dehumanization of so many human beings.

Added to the problem of humanism is the difficulty that none of the thinkers who denounce the perils of separation at the heart of the human believe that it would be enough simply to abandon the category. On the contrary, they all think that the task of philosophy, after the critique and the Destruktion of humanism, is to propose a new kind of humanism, a paradoxical posthumanist humanism that would fully acknowledge the nonhuman, yet avoid the mistake of simply erasing the difference between the human and the nonhuman. For these thinkers the most urgent task of philosophy is thus to “witness the inhuman.”

The double signification of this motto highlights the difficulty of posthuman philosophy. Witnessing the inhuman means, first of all, making sure that philosophy does not bracket the historical specificity of the past century, that it sets itself as a primary task the diagnosis of the causes and the extent of the catastrophes. The first meaning of witnessing is simply the denunciation of the logic of separation operating at the heart of traditional humanism. Secondly, however, this program of critical diagnosis is the negative side of a positive witnessing, the one that is well articulated by Giorgio Agamben in Remnants of Auschwitz: “‘Human beings are human insofar as they are not human’ or, more precisely, ‘human beings are human insofar as they bear witness to the inhuman.’”1 For the philosophers mentioned, it is precisely the structure of the epoch that made the witnessing of the inhuman in the human impossible, that made the other inhumanity possible, the utter violence perpetrated by humans on their fellow humans.

This essay engages two attempts at solving this double task of witnessing the inhuman. In the first part, Agamben’s ethics of testimony is situated in his general project of a deconstruction of what he sees as the inherently dangerous metaphysics of Western logos conducive to the destructive biopolitics that found in Auschwitz its fateful realization. Rather than a critique at a conceptual level,2 Agamben’s overall project is questioned here on the basis of its practical consequences, the purely negativistic, “evanescent” ethics, politics, and aesthetics that arise out of his radical critique of
metaphysics. Against such a disempowering of praxis, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s alternative mode of constructing the witnessing of the inhuman is upheld. Merleau-Ponty’s critique of humanism is the most fruitful one, I claim, because it is the one that opens the most promising horizon for truly effective models of ethical, political, and aesthetic praxis.

Witnessing the Inhuman: Agamben

Witnessing the inhuman for Agamben has the two intimately related meanings already mentioned: the critical task of bearing witness to the reality of the time, in all its past and potential horror, and the descriptive task of identifying the inhuman in the human, with the idea that the fateful expulsion of the inhuman from the human has been the origin of those sociopolitical frameworks that produced the inhuman politics of the time.

To the first task, an entire book is famously dedicated, Remnants of Auschwitz. The book has the ambition, as Agamben writes in the introduction, of offering the “Ethics more Auschwitz demonstrata,” which no other book of ethics has managed to provide so far (RA, 13). Agamben does not see in this a pretentious or an overly ambitious claim. For him, there are compelling reasons why no book of ethics has been able so far to grapple with the historical experience summarized in the name of Auschwitz, why no genuine philosophical testimony of testimonies has yet been offered. This is first of all because all other ethical principles—for example, dignity, respect and self-respect, the reciprocity of communication, Nietzschean amor fati—become completely irrelevant in the face of the extreme situation of the Muselmänner, the “drowned” human beings, as Primo Levi famously called them. Since common ethical principles make no sense in the face of the Muselmann, they are simply not adequate for the task: “If there is a zone of the human in which these concepts make no sense, then they are not genuine ethical concepts, for no ethics can claim to exclude a part of humanity, no matter how unpleasant or difficult that humanity is to see” (RA, 63–64). In fact, before the Muselmann, it is normativity itself, the bearer of all other models of ethics, that becomes irrelevant, thus revealing the inadequacy of all ethics that continue to operate as though Auschwitz had not happened.

There is a second, deeper reason explaining the lack of relevance of ethics to date when confronted with the extreme situation of the “drowned.” This is the difficulty of testimony itself. The difficulty of second-order testimony,
the one encountered by ethical thinkers contemplating the testimony of life in the extermination camps, seems to stem from the difficulty of the first testimony (RA, 33–34). But soon the specific analysis of the improbability of normative ethics in the context of Auschwitz rejoins a deeper strand in Agamben’s thought, one that demonstrates the “impossibility of bearing witness” (RA, chapter 3) in general and eventually is synonymous with his definition of subjectivity. It is the very structure of all true testimony that it is simultaneously an absolute command, the true ethical imperative, and also essentially impossible. Auschwitz thus brings to light in the face of the most horrible of human experiments the structural impossibility of bearing witness in general, not just of bearing witness to the horror of the camps. This startling slide between the witnessing of a special event and the alleged general ontology of testimony that is also supposed to lead to a general theory of subjectivity and language, if the differences between those separate questions and two separate realms were left unjustified, could appear as an abhorrent conceptual confusion, as an irresponsible metaphysical play with an event with which it is not possible to be playful.4

In fact the connection between the witnessing at Auschwitz and witnessing in general is supported by a strong immanent justification within Agamben’s work. Remnants of Auschwitz and the other volumes on homo sacer were informed by most of his many previous books. Many of the disturbing aspects of Remnants of Auschwitz dissolve when the book is relocated in this more general context. To fully grasp the startling slide in Agamben between testimony in general and Levi’s testimony, one needs to return to his theories of language and the subject. It is his complex relationship with Martin Heidegger’s account of metaphysics and the implications of this for language, subjectivity, historicity, and politics (to name but the most important fields) that justifies this slide.

The general movement of Agamben’s thought is inspired by Heidegger first of all in the sense that its most fundamental premise is that of a history of Being consonant with the history of metaphysics. At the same time, however, Agamben aims to overcome what he considers to be Heidegger’s failed attempt at stepping out of what, like him, he sees as a disastrous history ending in catastrophe. The most decisive task of thinking, for Agamben, consists therefore in a gesture characteristic of poststructuralist thinking, in deconstructing the remnants of metaphysical thinking that continue to operate within the Western world, in warning of the pernicious effects still
to be expected from an uncritical use of discredited categories: “We live today at the extreme edge of metaphysics, at the point where it returns—as nihilism—back into its very own negative foundation.”

The originality of Agamben’s position on this stems from his interpretation of the nefarious content of metaphysics, from the highly sophisticated and idiosyncratic way in which he interprets the nihilism of Western subjectivity and history. The central problem that he diagnoses in Western metaphysics concerns the inherently nihilistic nature of its definition of the subject and language, what he calls the “metaphysics of the Voice.” The argument underpinning this denunciation has remained constant throughout his development from *Infancy and History* (1978), to *Language and Death* (1982) until *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1998) and the other books on homo sacer, right through to *The Open* (2002).

The starting point of his reflection lies with Émile Benveniste and the theory of enunciation. In his later work, the great linguist had corrected Ferdinand de Saussure’s famous distinction between parole and langage by radicalizing it into the distinction between semiotics and semantics. The semiotic order designates the order of language as a system of established signs, while the semantic order designates the order of discourse where the semiotic elements become meaningful by being used in actual speech acts. The problem is the one attached to that passage to discourse: the semiotic order in itself does not contain the explanation for the possibility of semantic use, of a meaningful discourse addressed meaningfully by one locutor to another who understands it. This is the idea most crucial for Agamben, so much so that it reappears, probably in a highly unexpected way, at the end of *Remnants of Auschwitz* (RA, 113–17).

Enunciation, for linguistics, is the answer to this problem of the passage from the semiotic to the semantic, as it indicates and fixes the instance of discourse, the discursive reference point, from which all other reference systems within discourse (to objects, specific spatial and temporal orders, first-, second-, and third-person perspectives) take their bearing and subsequently enable the meaningful use of language in speech. Agamben’s theory of language and subjectivity is the result of an emphasis on enunciation and its link with language and speech. The originality of Agamben’s take on the question of enunciation, with profound implications in many other areas of his thinking, is that he interprets the shift from language to speech in a nonpsychological, indeed, an ontological, way. What this difference and this shift point to, according to him, is a “taking place” of
discourse, an event of language to be distinguished from discourse itself, as meaningful content (*RA*, 114). The actual, “existential” (Roman Jakobson) reference point from which language is used in actuality does not designate an individual standpoint, a specified, human point of reference, but a “structural” dimension of language, that is to say, a dimension of language irreducible to the order of meaning and grammar, a dimension prior to it. This is the simple yet necessary moment in which language shows itself to “take place,” language “indicating” itself as a meaningful event prior to any consideration of the content and meaning of discourse. Agamben uses several expressions to help us understand this difference between language and speech, between semiotics and semantics, which he interprets in terms of a structure of language, by characterizing it as a difference between saying, the event of language, and the said, the content of discourse, or as the difference between indication and signification, or between showing and saying (*IH*, 46).

In *Infancy and History*, the implication of the theory of enunciation for the theory of subjectivity is phrased in terms of “infancy.” From Benveniste, Agamben borrows the thesis according to which subjectivity—the capacity for the subject to refer to itself in the first person, to take the “ego” position—is possible only through the use of a potentiality provided by language rather than on the basis of reflective experience. The *I* is whoever says “I” (*IH*, 49). The *I* is thus the paradigmatic example of the system of enunciation: a moment when discourse takes its place, sets itself up, as it were, as the condition for all ulterior meaningful speech. The implication of these distinctions for the theory of subjectivity in its relation to experience is drastic, as it means that there is an irreducible gap between the human and the linguistic. If accessing the order of language entails a moment of enunciation that is only the system of signs setting itself up in a self-referential circuit (the pronouns and deictics make sense only as pointers within the overall system of language; they have no objective reference external to this system), then the whole domain of experience disappears in enunciation. This is precisely what *infancy* means: that state of being human outside of language use. It is important to note that it is prior to language use and not to language in general, as enunciation is only what makes the passage from language to speech possible. In other words, human beings only ever start to speak on the basis of repressing their own experience. On the one hand, “It is through language that the individual as known to us is constituted as an individual” (*IH*, 49). Yet on the other hand:
If the subject is merely the enunciator, . . . we shall never attain in the subject the original status of experience. . . . On the contrary, the constitution of the subject in and through language is precisely the expropriation of this “wordless” experience; from the outset, it is always “speech.” A primary experience, far from being subjective, could only be what in human beings comes before the subject—that is, before language; a “wordless” experience in the literal sense of the term, a human infancy, whose boundary would be marked by language. (IH, 47)

This startling distinction between the human being and the subject, between the human and the linguistic, is construed by Agamben through a logic that is characteristic of his thought, one that anticipates the famous later analysis of exception as including exclusion/excluding inclusion. The subject itself is said to be born out of a suppression that maintains: the subject results from the suppression of an experience that it keeps at its heart as its very condition of possibility. Infancy is not a genetic stage preceding subjectivity—it is the “transcendental-historical” condition of it. Agamben notes: “The experience, the infancy at issue here, cannot merely be something which chronologically precedes language and which, at a certain point, ceases to exist in order to spill into speech. It is not a paradise which, at a certain moment, we leave for ever in order to speak; rather, it coexists in its origins with language—indeed, is itself constituted in the very movement of language which expels it in each instance to produce the individual as subject” (IH, 48; translation modified). As Agamben makes clear, speech and infancy are linked in the most substantial way: as the expulsion of infancy, speech relies precisely on the latter in order to be successful, as the negative that it requires even as it represses it. “Infancy is the origin of language,” infancy is language’s transcendental limit, but on the other hand, language is the origin of infancy (IH, 48), as the event of expulsion that constitutes what it separates through its constitutive boundaries. This is isonomic with the logic of the creation of bare life by sovereign power: each is the origin of the other.

Given that the subject as a whole is seen as the result of the acquisition of deictic and more specifically pronominal expressions, the paradoxical unity between speech and infancy can easily be generalized into an overall anthropological argument. On that account, homo becomes truly human as a being endowed with language, only at the cost of repressing the very experience upon which the use of language was predicated. This, then,
becomes the specific difference of the human being. Whereas animals in fact “are already inside language,” “man instead, by having an infancy, by preceding speech, splits this single language and, in order to speak, has to constitute himself as the subject of language—he has to say I. Thus, if language is truly man’s nature . . . , then man’s nature is split at its source, for infancy brings its discontinuity and the difference between language and speech” (IH, 52). This discontinuity between language and speech is seen not only as the ground of subjectivity, but, in a further generalization, as the point of entry into the symbolic. Agamben holds what is in the end a rather classical philosophical anthropology whereby the theory of the access to language provides at the same time the answer to the puzzle of the symbolic function (IH, 59–60). The shift from nature to culture itself is grounded in the split within language. From that point, a further generalization is made possible, as the theory of language leads (as in Heidegger) to a theory about the ground of historicity: “It is infancy which first opens the space of history” (IH, 53).

The step that leads to a negativistic theory of human history is now easy to anticipate. It reminds one of the arguments in the Dialectic of Enlightenment. If the process of hominization and the ontological ground of historicity are to be found in a violent separation (or rather, suspension, “exception”), then historicity and historical development are vitiated from the outset. The erasure of experience in modernity is only the realization of the structural repression of the infant within the adult, which is at the heart of all symbolic use.

The ethical and political aspects of Agamben’s thought flow directly from these deep anthropological/ontological meditations. They locate the cause of the catastrophe of modernity at the deepest root of subjectivity itself: in a hidden chasm between the human being and the subject, between language and discourse. Only a human praxis that will retrieve the infant in the subject will avoid the fateful structural foreshortening of human experience, which is the origin of, and is brought to its terrible completion by, Western modernity. Given the decisive, indeed, exclusive, role played by language in Agamben’s theory of subjectivation and hominization, the privileged form of such a praxis will be an alternative experience of language, an “experimentum linguae” as the preface to the French edition of Infancy and History puts it: “what one experiences in this experimentum linguae is not simply an impossibility of saying,” since speech is predicated on the suspension of experience, but “rather an impossibility of speaking
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on the basis of language; via this infancy which rests in the chasm between language and speech, this is the experience of the very faculty of speaking, or of the power of speech itself,”11 before or beyond actual speech. This is the experience of language as opening of Being: “It is the unhiddenness without presupposition which humans always already inhabit and where, by speaking, they breathe and move.”12 Already in the writings of the late 1970s, Walter Benjamin’s theory of messianic revolution, premised as it was on an idea of “pure language” through which human language would reconnect with the language of things, would open authentically onto Being, formed the horizon of Agamben’s political writings.

Published four years after *Infancy and History,* *Language and Death* works with very similar ideas but also introduces the three fundamental notions of the Voice, death, and the animal, and thus completes the diagnosis of the nihilistic metaphysics of *logos* at the background of the well-known analyses conducted in the different volumes of *Homo Sacer* and in Agamben’s recent book *The Open.*

With the theme of the Voice, Agamben fleshes out the intuition at the basis of his messianic ethics and politics: the idea of the “taking place of language” that is different from, indeed, that is the condition of possibility, if a repressed one, of signifying language. As we saw, the great linguists had identified the necessity, for indication to be at all possible, that there be a “contemporaneity” (Benveniste), an “existential relation” (Jakobson) between the indicators (of time, of presence, etc.) and the “instance of discourse” expressing the message. Agamben’s key innovation is to argue that this existential contemporaneity can be thought properly only in terms of a Voice as the locus in which the “event of language” takes place (*LD*, 68).

Agamben differentiates between the vocal aspect of speech in its transformation of language, from the Voice, as that aspect of language in which language truly shows itself as taking place, as the pure intention of signifying before the text of signification. This Voice is the medium of the “taking place” of language, the dimension of language that exceeds animal articulation (*phone*) but precedes signification (*logos*) (*LD*, 72). With this, Agamben simply reiterates the crucial distinction noted between *significability,* the potential to signify, and *signification.* He once again isolates a pure potentiality of signification as a dimension not always already encompassed in the signification itself. This opening of significability as separate from signification has extremely important resonances in his entire work. Since, following Heidegger, he sees the opening of Being in the experience of
language, the experience of pure significability beyond signification corresponds to ontological difference itself \((LD, 58)\). But Agamben’s added twist is that the new *experimentum linguae* is also an experience of the irreducibility of potentiality to actuality, an experience already characterized by Heidegger in his readings of Aristotle.\(^{13}\) Agamben’s negativistic narrative of Western *logos* and his search for an alternative metaphysics that would not be grounded on a nihilistic foundation is predicated upon this critical reading of potentiality. It points to an experience of language as the experience of the power of language before its reduction in speech and discourse. This in short indicates an alternative experience of the Voice as the locus of the pure event of language.

Agamben, however, does not spare Heidegger himself, despite his strong reliance on him. The Voice, as the “category of categories” \((LD, 73)\), is the name for the clearing of Being itself, but according to him, it has only ever been analyzed in terms of negativity by the Western tradition, including and most especially by Heidegger. It is the fact that, through an interpretation of the Voice as the voice of death, negativity has been made constitutive of Being itself, which ultimately is responsible for the nihilism at the heart of metaphysics.

This negative core of metaphysics is to be found first of all in the double negativity structuring the Voice, as an instance in between the no-longer-being animal, the Voice as *phone*, and its not-yet-being signifying language, the Voice as *logos*. Agamben focuses especially on the two grand attempts at devising a postmetaphysical metaphysics, Hegel’s logic and Heidegger’s ontology. In both cases, a constitutive negativity operates at the heart of human subjectivity, the instance in and through which the spaces of truth and Being are to be opened. From the special place of these two grand reconstructions of metaphysics within the latter’s long history, Agamben can conclude that the Voice, as the category of categories, as the locus of enunciation (of Being), has always been thought in that tradition as negativity, as the Voice of death. Given the absolutely central place of the Voice in the very process of hominization and for the passage to second nature, Agamben can conclude to the essential nihilism of Western metaphysics, to the fact that its theory of subjectivity and its characterization of the “clearing of Being” is based on a deadly foundation: “The mythologeme of the Voice is the original mythologeme of metaphysics; but inasmuch as the Voice is equally the original locus of negativity, negativity is inseparable from metaphysics” \((LD, 162)\).
Against the background of these early reflections, the later texts on biopolitics take on a specific light. They elaborate in the political and the juridical the general narrative of the nihilism of Western metaphysics that was developed in studies on subjectivity, language, and historicity. At the basis of Agamben’s analyses of the law, the state, and the citizen lies this fundamental premise that Western metaphysics is a metaphysics of death, a deadly metaphysics. The structure of sovereignty and the fundamental operations of the law are perfectly isonomic with the more general structure of the metaphysical construction of language, which also provides the key to the most general structure of the passage from nature to the symbolic. In all those cases, the same vicious “transcendental-historical” logic is at play, whereby symbolic institutions (signification, normativity in the figure of moral norms and political laws) rely on the repression of that which makes them possible. In all these cases, the live principle (the Voice, \( \textit{bios} \), significability) is included through its expulsion by the institutions (language, the state, culture). In other words, the dialectic is at the heart of Western culture and spreads its deadly negativity over it, culminating in radical death at Auschwitz.

The solutions to this deadly metaphysical logic presented in Agamben’s later studies are the same as those suggested in the first two books: to step out of history since history itself is premised on repression and negativity; to step out of the logics of law and sovereignty as they operate in the same way as logos capturing/negating its own “infancy.” Instead, salvation is to be sought in a different \textit{experimentum linguae}, which has its prime examples in particular works of poetry that operate beyond the distinction of \textit{signifier} and \textit{signified}. Instead, salvation is to be sought in a different \textit{experimentum linguae}, which has its prime examples in particular works of poetry that operate beyond the distinction of \textit{signifier} and \textit{signified}.¹⁴ The aim is to establish a new “ethos,” in the sense of Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism,” a new relation to Being, one, however, in contrast with Heidegger this time, which is no longer mediated by death.¹⁵ This is where \textit{Remnants of Auschwitz} ends: to speak the impossibility of speaking, to find redemption in a new use of language, which will be the testimony to the impossibility of being a subject.

Against this rich and complex construct, the task of “witnessing the inhuman” has two dimensions that can be discussed separately for the sake of analysis. The inhuman is, first of all, that ground of subjectivity that is repressed as the subject becomes itself by accessing symbolic structures, foremost among them, language. Agamben calls this “experience” and “the human” in contrast with the linguistic. But if by “human” we understand the common notion of a separate creature arising from nature through
its access to symbolic functions, then the prelinguistic human must be designated as inhuman. Witnessing the inhuman in this sense is the task to which Remnants of Auschwitz is also dedicated, beyond the testimony of radical dehumanization through the horror of the camp.

But there is a second aspect to witnessing the inhuman that Infancy and History and Language and Death have already discussed at some length. This time, the rupture that leads to subjectivity, culture, and historicity is not considered as the rupture within the human between the presubjective and the subjective, the infant and the subject. It is the rupture, within the human, between the human and the animal.

These two different ruptures correspond to the two possible meanings of anthropology: first as the study of the different ways of accessing and making use of the symbolic function, and second as the comparison between the human and the animal. The analyses in Agamben’s first books are not just prolonged and developed in his studies in Homo Sacer. They are also pursued in The Open, with the deepening of the problem of the human’s relationship to the animal.

The structure of negative suspension is again at play here, the logic of an inclusive exclusion, which creates a zone of indistinction where the law of exception—that is to say the possibility of total violence—is sovereign. In this case, the indistinction is that between the human and the animal: the human being becomes human by separating within itself the human from the animal and by founding the former on the repression of the latter. This is what Agamben calls the “anthropological machine”: the nonhuman is produced by separating and expelling outside of the human what is supposed to be beneath, yet also somehow immanent to, it. Again, negativity is the core motor of this dialectic: the human opening of and onto the world is possible only on the basis of the negative experience of a capture and repression of animal life.

This logic has a harmless face when it functions as the production of the animal as that which exists within the human (logos) as the not-yet-human (life). It is the same logic, however, that continues to operate when a less-than-human is identified as a being with human traits who is not fully human. It is obvious, given the metaphysical underpinning of these distinctions, that for Agamben there is a seamless continuity between the two “productions.” Given the logic of the anthropological machine, it is a mistake to think that one can escape it first by acknowledging the animality of
the human and then, in a second moment, by passing on to humans’ “sec-
ond nature,” in other words, their sublimation of animality in the produc-
tion of a truly human, historical world.¹⁶ This mode of argument fails in the
same way and for the same reason as does the overcoming of metaphysics.

Instead, what is required is an exit from the anthropological logic, one
that will bear the same formal traits as the new experience of language
beyond enunciation and the new experience of the community beyond
sovereignty. Like those other emancipatory experiences, the new anthro-
pological experience entails a paradoxical relationship to its opposite, one
that is no longer dialectical. This is another witnessing of the inhuman,
no longer the transfiguration of the inhuman, but a new experience of the
separation that does not end up in “suspension” or “exception.” Agamben
states: “To render inoperative the machine that governs our conception of
man will therefore mean no longer to seek new—more effective and more
authentic—articulations, but rather to show the central emptiness, the hia-
tus that—within man—separates man and animal, and to risk ourselves in
this emptiness: the suspension of the suspension.”¹⁷

Witnessing the Inhuman: Merleau-Ponty

To oppose Merleau-Ponty’s late work to Agamben on the specific issue
of witnessing the inhuman might appear arbitrary and difficult to justify.
However, a number of considerations make this confrontation plausible.
Merleau-Ponty also aimed to overcome what he saw as the inherent contra-
dictions of contemporary humanism.¹⁸ Like Agamben, his final aim was an
alternative ontology that would not repeat the contradictions of traditional
as well as Husserlian and Heideggerian metaphysics. Merleau-Ponty’s
alternative ontology involves, like Agamben’s, a rethinking of the human in
its relation to other beings and especially in its relation to animals. It is also
premised on an original philosophy of language. Like Agamben, Merleau-
Ponty saw the core issue in critiquing metaphysics and in establishing an
alternative, ethically and politically more satisfying ontology in the correct
characterization and location of negativity. In fact, it could be argued that
this, the importance accorded to negativity, is the precise point where the
two projects are most comparable, and where they diverge the most. It is
also the point where Merleau-Ponty’s alternative proposal uncovers the ori-
gin of the limitations in Agamben’s ethics, politics, and aesthetics. Their
radically differing understandings of negativity lead to two extremely contrasted ontologies: one, Agamben’s, structured around transcendence, and the other, Merleau-Ponty’s, built on immanence.

The first step in characterizing this opposition is to start by noting that Merleau-Ponty’s fundamental methodological premise is the rejection of ontological difference as difference. What he calls in his lectures on Nature the “binocularism” and the “strabism” of all philosophy (including Edmund Husserl’s and Heidegger’s) is the dichotomy between the total order of Being (God, the in itself, Nature, the realm of objectivity) as opposed to the order of existence that escapes the total immanence of Being (the created world versus the principle of creation, beings and not Being, the subject and not the object, etc.): “What is given is the metamorphosis of brute being, the giving birth. We are going to Being by passing by beings. . . . There is a circular relation between Being and beings.”

Second, as the mention of metamorphosis and birth intimates, central to this indirect ontology is a productive conception of negativity. Merleau-Ponty arrives at a productive definition of negativity because he links it directly to a conception of life that goes beyond the traditional antinomy of mechanism and finalism. Finalism is discredited by modern science, even though the correct characterization of the organism verges precariously on it. Mechanism, on the other hand, which seems to be natural science’s logical conclusion, also falls short of the complexity of organic life. For example, it cannot explain animal embryonic development as studied by modern biologists, who highlight the fact that there is at some point of ontogenesis a general organic integration before the full development of the neural system, a fact that proves that it is reductive to describe animal ontogenesis in terms of neurological causality (N, 139–67). Instead, one must conclude that the animal organism is, in fact, best explained in its functioning and genesis as the locus of behavior, in which the totality transcends the parts by integrating them into one general “theme,” the idiosyncratic, “melodic” mode of being in and coming to grips with that entity’s environment.

Merleau-Ponty’s negativity stems from this notion of a general behavioral scheme specific to each organism, which is anticipated in the development of the organism and retroactively, but not teleologically, guides it: “We must place in the organism a principle that is negative or based on absence. We can say of the animal that each moment of its history is empty of what will follow, an emptiness which will be filled later” (N, 155). And in
a later passage, he writes: “The true nothingness is not *nichtiges des Nichts* [the nothingness of the Nothing], but an *Etwas* [something] always on the horizon, the positive determinations of which are the trace and the absence” (N, 255). This definition of negativity as the absence of a meaning to come, which haunts the present and guides it already, characterizes organic life. Crucially, it has the exact same structure as expression. This is Merleau-Ponty’s fundamental intuition: that life is expressive and expression is life, however sophisticated or primitive the forms of life, to whatever degree of complexity this power is incarnated; in other words, life is the origin of meaning and symbolism.

As life is expression, all living organisms can be shown to be expressive in terms of their behavior. An even more radical implication of this principle of expression is that the most complex forms of organic integration (“higher animals”) share a fundamental faculty with the lower ones. Higher organisms replicate and complicate in their interactions with the world and among themselves an expressive capacity that was already at play, however crudely it was effected, in lower organisms.

The view of organic life as opening, qua behavior, a dimension of meaning within the material world enables Merleau-Ponty to develop an immanentist philosophy of nature, where the superior levels actualize potentialities that were already inscribed in the lower ones. In the *Nature* lectures, for example, the reading of G. E. Coghill’s study on the axolotl leads to the fundamental insight that the organism and the behavior are one, which makes the body no longer an inert mass of anatomy but a carrier of meaning. This then leads to the reading of Jakob von Uexküll and the well-known comparisons between lower and higher animals. Here the already complex reaction of lower animals to the external world, understood no longer in the causal terms of stimulus response but as the specific theme of that animal’s organic schema, leads without discontinuity to the even more complex delayed and fine-tuned response of higher animals. These, Merleau-Ponty argues, react no longer to stimuli but to signs, in such a way that without their active involvement (their movements, their behavior) those signs would not exist as such. In other words, higher animals create forms of meaning, a protosymbolism within nature. This is one way of interpreting Uexküll’s famous notion of *Umwelt*. The upshot is: “At the stage of higher animals, the Umwelt is no longer a closing-off, but rather an opening. The world is possessed by the animal. The exterior world is ‘distilled’ by the animal, who, differentiating sensorial givens, can respond
to them by fine actions, and these differentiated reactions are possible only because the nervous system amounts to a reproduction of the exterior world, as a ‘reproduction’ or ‘copy’” (N, 171). Merleau-Ponty does not hesitate to characterize the perception-reaction of higher animals as the first opening, or clearing, of the world, before human intervention. This is in direct contradiction to Heidegger and, following him, Agamben, for whom “the open” is the reserve of Dasein. More generally, Merleau-Ponty locates the origins of symbolism, culture, and communication in the instinctual behavior of higher animals (N, 195). This, obviously, is in stark contrast with Agamben’s logocentric philosophical anthropology, which identifies in the acquisition of language, in enunciation, the passage to second nature.

Merleau-Ponty’s ontology is thus an ontology “in spiral,” which seeks to highlight the “verticality” of Being, such that no discontinuity or transcendence needs to be introduced between any of its successive “layers.” The vector carrying from one “layer” to the next, from nature to spirit, is life itself, in its indivisible power as expressivity, and the fuel of that vertical continuity is “negativity” understood as meaning-to-come. In this immanentism, negativity is not equated with death but as the principle of expressive life. The special “ontologies” are not only continuous but isonomic; they “concern the leaves of one sole Being which can be globally defined as what is not nothing” (N, 220). To put it in terms of the interpretation of Hegel (an essential moment in Agamben’s diagnosis of metaphysical nihilism), Merleau-Ponty, contrary to Agamben, simply accepts Hegel’s idea that negativity is the heart of life and meaning.

The top of the spiral is occupied by the passage from the visible to the invisible, where logos is thus shown to be rooted in life. The privileged point of passage between the visible and the invisible is obviously the human body conceived as flesh. The flesh, as is well-known, is the body as it makes the experience of reversibility, the experience that it is both sensing and part of the world that it senses, the realization that it stands “between what is in front and what is behind me” and is thus “in circuit with the world.” As a result of this, the integrated postures of the body schema are not just “subjective” adaptions to the Umwelt, but they “map out” the world itself, such that the human flesh becomes the indicator of the flesh of the world (N, 223). In the human organism, the feedback mechanism already at play in other higher animals is developed to its full potential and becomes a full “circuit,” such that “perceived things [are] correlations of a carnal subject, rejoined to its movement and to its sensing; interspersed in its internal cir-
cuit—they are made of the same stuff as it. . . . The flesh of the body makes us understand the flesh of the world” (N, 218). This vitalist ontology of the \textit{Ineinander}, where things continually step \textit{into} each other, contradicts frontally the main features of Agamben’s post-Heideggerian project premised as it is on a strict adherence to the ontological difference. The dualism of the human and the animal is no longer needed.\footnote{For Merleau-Ponty, there is a way of conceiving of all life as \textit{bios} without having to resort to any definite separation between the human and the nonhuman. Since for him life is already expressive, human language and all symbolic institutions more generally are rooted in the meaningful totality of organisms that are symbolically, and even semiotically, linked to their external and social worlds, qua integrated forms of behavior. There is no need, therefore, to oppose language and experience. The rejection of such a dichotomy is the basis for all of Merleau-Ponty’s writings on language, from the famous sixth chapter in the first part of \textit{The Phenomenology of Perception} (“The Body as Expression and Speech”) to his later “Saussurian” writings, most notably in “The Phenomenology of Language.”\footnote{His philosophy of language highlights the seamless passage from the experience to language, and his later work is dedicated specifically, as is well known, to this doubling of the visible by the invisible, the “lining” of embodied experience with its symbolic reappropriations, in linguistic, artistic, scientific, and philosophical expressions.}}

Such a philosophy of language has its own take on the question of enunciation. It interprets the “contemporaneity” between indicators of presence and the instance of discourse as the ambiguous relationship between a lived experience that creates the fundamental “field of presence” from which discourse makes sense, and the given, instituted languages that partially dispossess the individual act of speech. Merleau-Ponty does not deny the desubjectifying effect of language use, but instead of concluding from this to a radical chasm, he emphasizes the difficulty of true expression, the difficulty of transforming an impersonal, self-relating language into a vehicle of a unique, embodied experience, a difficulty, or a dialectic that is structurally the dialectic of life itself.

In such an ontology, witnessing the inhuman becomes the task of being true to the structural empathy that allows the human flesh to be in tune with the flesh of the world. This means not just a retrieval of the structural interhuman intercorporeity at the basis of the human flesh. It designates also the \textit{Ineinander} of the human and the animal and, even more radically, that “I am with things in a rapport of \textit{Einfühlung}: my inside is an echo of
their inside” (N, 224). To be fully human on this account is to welcome the nonhuman in one’s flesh, to recognize one’s full presence and participation in the sensible world.

The critical counterpoint to this understanding of the inhuman is that it is inhuman, in the normative, critical sense this time, to establish separations where there are none. Merleau-Ponty has no special theory of Auschwitz. He has no separate moral theory, no theory of evil in particular. This is all linked to his phenomenological method, which describes constitution and can provide only an implicit account of normativity. This it does, however. Merleau-Ponty’s powerful model of the constitutive nonhumanity within the human embodiment points indirectly to an ethics of being in the world, where the ethical duty is to be a full participant recognizing the existence and right of all that participates in one’s own flesh. Critically, this would allow for a diagnosis of those historical phenomena in which individuals and communities have reneged upon their inhumanity by creating abstract separations between themselves and the world, the world of other human subjects, of animals, and of nature itself.

Politically, Merleau-Ponty’s writings on historical praxis simply draw the consequence of the ambiguous status of the human being in the world, as a being that is both able to create institutions and change history (be expressive), but on the basis of a radical passivity, as a being to whom meaning and institutions are also given and who must constantly measure the extent of her own ignorance and powerlessness. This is his understanding of the dialectic at the heart of historical praxis, as a self-criticism that can never be interrupted but that is also conducive to meaning-creative action. This produces a blueprint for a substantive philosophical justification of politics as historical praxis, where the ambiguities and uncertainties of collective and individual action—immersed as they are in the infinitely open and complex horizon of history—are fully acknowledged, yet the necessity and the promise of action are also upheld.

In terms of the content of praxis, the ethical imperative of an active acknowledgement of one’s full participation in the world was interpreted by Merleau-Ponty as synonymous with a critical (Marxist) humanism that would be guided by the goal of the abolition of inequality and injustice. But since the active participation in the world also entails a fundamental empathy with the nonhuman, his politics easily lends itself also to a translation in a radical political ecology. Bruno Latour’s argument in favor of a political representation of all beings involved in, and affected by, our
actions could be seen as one possible development of Merleau-Ponty’s fundamental insights. Finally, a substantive aesthetic perspective is also opened by Merleau-Ponty’s vitalist ontology. This is an aspect of his later thought that is well studied, especially the great incisiveness and originality of his writings on painting, but we should not forget the importance of literature for him, especially of the novel. The ontology and ethics of full participation in the world emphasize constantly, as one of its key operating concepts, the miracle of expression. The works of art and in particular truly creative linguistic expression are used by him as paradigmatic cases, notably in *The Prose of the World*. The expression achieved in works of art stands out as being close to miraculous, because, as in the paradigmatic example of Paul Cézanne, the “expression of what exists is an infinite task,” as it is at first an insoluble problem to be able to do justice through artistic expression to the expression that the world itself is.

The ideal of a full embrace of the world that inspires Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of immanence, its resulting ethics and politics of engaged participation, and the substantive forms of praxis that they underpin contrast starkly with the evanescent negativism characterizing Agamben’s ethics, politics, and aesthetics. Because, like Heidegger, Agamben locates the nihilism of modern culture in the metaphysical nature of its logos, his critique is nothing but radical. It approaches with uncompromising suspicion all categories, all logical links between them, all previous modes of thinking reality, of articulating experience, for their suspected collusion with death, as all converging toward Auschwitz, beyond all ontic differences that become insignificant. Conversely, because the critique is pitched at such a radical level, a nonnihilistic approach to the world and to human experience, nonnihilistic forms of praxis that could be based on them are available only by stepping out and going into the beyond. But since the beyond understood in a straightforward sense would simply reinstate the logic of separation and dichotomy, Agamben’s beyonds are paradoxical ones that simultaneously state and deny their attachment to what they leave behind. They all function on the basis of a paradoxical logic, the logic of suspension, which allows him to evoke realms that are beyond the identity or difference of identity and difference, realms that posit and deny at the same time unity and separation. Ethics becomes a practice that is not practical: it involves no action and only contingently attitudes toward others. It is a normative attitude beyond the normative, an experience of the subject’s relation to itself,
where the latter speaks its own impossibility. The experience of language it relies on is to testify to the metalinguistic core of language. Politics is a practice where the notion of praxis is supposed to have been made redundant, a historical experience beyond history, a communal action that rejects the notion of community, a challenging of the law beyond the notion of the law. Poetry and literature are uses of language beyond the signifier and the signified, suspicious of the deadly, hidden ground of expressivity.

It is difficult to brush off the impression that, despite its amazing sophistication and erudition, Agamben’s philosophy only leads to an evanescent theory of praxis that has little to say and indeed is not really interested in having anything to say to and about real practices. Merleau-Ponty’s full-blooded ethics of an engagement with the world—premised as it is on an understanding of dialectic as the challenge of ambiguity, of a negativity that is the promise, possible but always uncertain, of instituting new meanings—seems to outline a much more fruitful grammar for productive practices. If witnessing the inhuman is to remain more than a philosophical exercise, it is in substantial forms of praxis that it will have to be realized.

Notes

3 The ultimate testimony to which he wants to bear witness philosophically is obviously that of Primo Levi. See RA, 59.
7 See also IH, 53–56.
8 The penultimate section of the chapter compares this discontinuity with Claude Lévi-Strauss’s theory of the myth as precisely providing the link between language and speech.
There is no space to compare this theory of infancy with Jean-François Lyotard's late writings (particularly in *The Inhuman*). The overlaps are many and significant. Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).


This idea of a pure potentiality beyond its reduction to actuality (which generalizes the linguistic distinction between *semiotic* and *semantic*) is one of the threads running through Agamben’s entire body of work. It is a key argument in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 44–48. It is substantially related to Heidegger’s late ethics of *Gelassenheit*, of “letting be.” See Giorgio Agamben and Valeria Piazza, *L’Ombre de l’amour: Le concept de l’amour chez Heidegger* (Paris: Payot, 2003).


Agamben, *The Open*, 92.


See also this passage from *The Visible and the Invisible*: “One cannot make a direct ontology. My ‘indirect’ method (being in the beings) is alone conformed to being.” Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 179. Note that in the same passage Merleau-Ponty describes this method as “sigetic,” as an exploration of the “Abyss,” while the very same notion of the “sigetic” is Agamben’s early tag for the nihilism of Western metaphysics (*LD*, 155).

As developed most substantially, for example, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. John O’Neill (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 41. In a later passage, Merleau-Ponty sees in the power of expression the true meaning of dialectic (120).

Note the very different interpretation of the axolotl by Agamben in *Idea of Prose*, trans. Michael Sullivan and Sam Whitsitt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995). In the regressive evolution that seems to be at play in this species, Agamben finds a natural equivalent to his idea of the structural infancy at the heart of the human. Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, following the biologists, focuses on the lessons one learns about genesis from the famous lizard.

Merleau-Ponty does not write “réplique à” (retort or rejoinder to) but “réplique de,” the reproduction, or “replica,” of.
24. “There is a Logos of the natural, aesthetic world, on which the Logos of language relies” (N, 212).
25. Agamben’s position on this is ambiguous since, despite his denunciation of the anthropological machine, he maintains some form of dualism because of his approach to language and his linguistic theory of hominization that separate the human realm from other realms of life.
27. See, however, a passage in a newspaper article in which Merleau-Ponty rejects the identification of fascism and communism and goes on to say, “this means that we have nothing in common with a Nazi and that we have the same values as a communist. A communist, one might say, has no values. He or she only has *fidelities*. We would answer that he or she might do what he or she can to achieve this, but that, thank goodness, nobody can live without breathing. He or she has values despite himself or herself.” Merleau-Ponty, “L’URSS et les camps,” in *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 433–34.
29. Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, for example, ends with a vibrant call to action.
30. See a nice one-line summary, again in the last page of Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*: “Your freedom cannot be willed without leaving behind its singular relevance, and without freedom for all” (456).