

Key Contemporary Thinkers

# AGAMBEN

claire colebrook & jason maxwell

# Agamben

Claire Colebrook and Jason Maxwell

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# Contents

Introduction: Agamben and the Present	1
1 Language	34
2 Sovereignty, State of Exception, and Biopolitics	48
3 <i>Homo Sacer</i> , Sacred Life, and Bare Life	75
4 New Ethics, New Politics	91
5 Politics Beyond Good and Evil	116
6 Power Beyond Recognition	135
7 Indifference	156
<i>Conclusion</i>	195
<i>Notes</i>	203
<i>References</i>	207
<i>Index</i>	217

# Introduction

## *Agamben and the Present*

Why read Agamben today? At first glance it would seem that the dominant themes addressed by Agamben's already extensive corpus deflect attention away from the most urgent questions of the twenty-first century. In an era of mass media and information overload, what sense does it make to think about poetry and the emergence of humans as speaking beings? And why, when working on questions of sovereignty and life, does Agamben turn to theological problems and the history of Church government? As the irreversible and catastrophic effects of climate change become increasingly evident, and as more racialized forms of violence mark a world of neoliberal expediency, are Agamben's stated goals of community and practical thinking only going to intensify anthropocentric myopia at the expense of a life beyond organisms? One of the most scathing and often-cited objections to Agamben's work is that his unified theory of power as sovereignty (or the "top-down" model of power over life and death) precludes us from understanding the specific and acute problems of different power operations that occur throughout historically, culturally and institutionally unique and dispersed sites (Rabinow and Rose 2006). Although Agamben is critical of the sovereign paradigm, he nevertheless – against the work of Michel Foucault – sees sovereignty and its negativity as still dominant not only in politics but also in some of the twentieth century's most radical theorists.<sup>1</sup> Sovereignty is not only a political paradigm but intersects in Agamben's work with some fundamental concepts and experiences, including time, language, happiness, and life.

Indeed, both the difficulty and value of Agamben's approach lie in what we might refer to as his politicization of ontology (Abbott 2014): sovereignty *is* a political structure but is expressive of a deeper rupture of negativity.<sup>2</sup> One might say that Agamben's work is fruitful because

of its attention to the political forms taken by our abstract experiences of language, being, time, and what it means to be human; but one might *also* object that this grounding of political events in grand abstract motifs (such as potentiality) has the tendency to generate a catastrophic monomania, where *the* overarching and non-negotiable focus of the present must be toward modernity's most extreme point of despair which is, in turn, the outcome of a history of thought and being going back at least as far as ancient Greece (Whyte 2013). Agamben is committed to a critique of contemporary biopolitics (or the reduction of human political being to formless "life") *and* to a diagnosis of biopolitics that grounds the present in fundamental concepts of Western philosophy and theology.<sup>3</sup>

For this reason, despite the seemingly distinct focus of Agamben's books – from language and poetry to Auschwitz and the narrative of Pontius Pilate – each work uses a slightly different lexicon to explore different ways of thinking about the relation between the relational and non-relational, or a politics that will "put the very form of relation into question" (HS 29).<sup>4</sup> One way of thinking about sovereignty is not so much as a specific political form – where there is a single top-down and centered power – but as a modality of thinking about what *is* (or has form, identity, and a proper way of being and acting), and that which is merely or barely existent until it takes on form. Here, too, Agamben's work appears oddly divided between arguing for a primacy of language (where all problems of politics and ethics come down to man's distance from life because he speaks) and his criticism of those who focus only on the constitutive power of language, without thinking about language as a milieu, medium, or *medio* that humans at once occupy but that divides everything without any division being graspable. As Alexander Garcia Duttman notes:

One will wonder, however, whether attaining communicability is a question of touching upon the limit of a "sublime hesitation", a limit at which the exteriority of communication disappears and continues to manifest itself, or whether it is a question of establishing an integral actuality of language, an actuality without hesitation, an actuality that would no longer betray a separation between potentiality and act, between possibility and reality, between essence and existence, between communicability and communication, between the midst, the milieu, the medium, the "between" in which philosophy and poetry come to stand. (Duttman 2008: 30)

Language is at once the first of all things – the "thing itself," because it is by way of language that there *is* anything at all, or a relation, and yet language is given only in relations: "The thing itself is not a thing; it is the very sayability, the very openness at issue in language, which, in language, we always presuppose and forget, perhaps because it is

at bottom its own oblivion and abandonment" (P: 35). This strange doubleness of language that simply is, and yet also gestures to something not itself – this strange immediacy that we live only in mediating and communicating – is played out in various registers by Agamben, including art, politics, theology, animality, and law.<sup>5</sup>

In each case Agamben occupies a "scission": there is a split between two terms, but this is not the division of some prior unity; it is by way of splitting that distinction comes into being, and this scission then creates the milieu or medium that appears as the ground of the split. Language seems to be privileged by Agamben as exemplary of the operation of the scission, a process that divides and differentiates but is also haunted by the indifference that it discloses and from which it seemed to emerge. Language appears frequently in Agamben's work as the first of all things, and just as frequently as that which "we" must think beyond. In part one might explain this ambivalent relation to language as a shift of emphasis in his work and method, moving from an interest in language, toward law and politics. But one might also say that his work is defined by an under- and over-investment in language as such. On the one hand, everything in Agamben's work seems to turn back to the emergence of language, or how it is that life becomes relational, able to take up a distance and relation to itself by way of voice; and, on the other hand, this problem of *language* is possible because of something that language intimates but can never itself grasp. As an example of this hyper- and hypo-linguistic tendency in Agamben's thought, one might consider the significance he grants to gesture:

gesture is not absolutely a linguistic element but, rather, something closely tied to language. It is first of all a forceful presence in language itself, one that is older and more originary than conceptual expression. ... Linguistic gesture [is] the stratum of language that is not exhausted in communication and that captures language, so to speak, in its solitary moments. (P: 77)

Agamben grants a pre-linguistic importance to gesture, thereby challenging the primacy of language's formal and systemic difference, and yet he refers to *linguistic gesture*, suggesting that beyond language as a system of formal or sovereign difference language is itself something like a movement or bringing into being of relations.<sup>6</sup>

One might say that only language as a system of differences and relations allows us to think of the world in terms of distinct identities; but, for Agamben, simply accepting language as differential and constitutive fails to confront the threshold of language. For some readers of Agamben, it is this question of language and its outside that is *the* motivating drive of Agamben's work (and this would explain why so

much time has been devoted to comparing Agamben to Jacques Derrida and deconstruction and the limits of language (Attell 2009; Fiovoranti 2010)). In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben reiterates an observation about language that marks his earliest work, whereby language seems to generate what is other than itself: "Hegel was the first to truly understand the presuppositional structure thanks to which language is at once outside and inside itself and the immediate (the nonlinguistic) reveals itself to be nothing but a presupposition of language" (HS: 21). Language is therefore like sovereign power, requiring and producing what is other than itself. But language is also akin to a dominant way of thinking about the divine, as a force that generates (but is never definitively other than) what it brings into being. Language is at once full actuality – that which simply *is* – and also potentiality or virtuality (it gestures to what is not itself, and which is always marked as known or defined by language). It is this "sovereign" structure of language that Agamben will increasingly criticize, and that allows him to connect abstract conceptions of difference and existence to politics and theology. One might say that God creates the world according to distinct essences (what something *is*) and that it is life that brings essences into existence, or allows something potential to become actual; but, for Agamben, the division between essence and existence, and potential and actual, covers over a deeper and more profound problem of "pure potentiality," or a mode of existing that is not exhausted by essence or proper form (P: 251).<sup>7</sup>

The question of potentiality has, as often as language, been identified as Agamben's primary concern (and reading Agamben this way situates the value of his work in an abstraction from language and *actual* politics for which he has been criticized (Power 2010)). Or one might say that there is only a polity because of a sovereign domain of law, and that without law life would fall back into chaos and indistinction; but thinking life beyond law is one of Agamben's often stated goals. To render law inoperative would require recognizing that the very notion *that there is law* is generated from all those figures who claim to guard the gate of law. What needs to be overcome is precisely the notion that one cannot think or act beyond the systems of speech, sovereignty, or theology that seem to be in command of the terrain over which they reign. The gate or door of law – sovereignty as instituted – needs to be rendered inoperative. Writing on Kafka, Agamben argues:

The door of the law is the accusation through which the individual comes to be implicated in the law. But the first and supreme accusation is pronounced by the accused himself (even if in the form of self-slander). This is why the law's strategy consists in making the accused believe that the accusation (the door) is destined (perhaps) precisely for him; that the court demands (perhaps) something from him; that there is (perhaps) a



trial underway that concerns him. In reality there is no accusation and no trial, at least until the moment in which he who believes he is accused has not accused himself.

... It is a question, not of the study of the law, which in itself has no guilt, but of the "long study of its doorkeepers" ... to which the man from the country uninterruptedly dedicates himself in his sojourn before the law. It is thanks to this study, to this new Talmud, that the man from the country – unlike Josef K. – succeeded in living to the end outside the trial.

What might become of the high and the low, of the divine and the human, the pure and the impure, once the door (that is, the system of laws, written and unwritten, that regulate their relations) has been neutralized... (K: 26)

For many defenders of Agamben's work it is this aspect of his writing (of "pure law" or "law beyond law") that opens the possibility of a new politics beyond simply accepting constituted traditions (Crockett 2011: 114; Prozorov 2014). To think of what lies outside the law as indistinct and non-relational is to accept a negativity that, for Agamben, marks everything from an understanding of language (as formal differentiating structure) to twentieth- and twenty-first-century death camps.<sup>8</sup> In concrete terms, one way of thinking about the difference between humans and animals is that animals are so bound up with their environment that they do not bear a relation to the world, whereas humans are at a distance from their world and have the freedom to think and speak. But rather than accept or reject this distinction, Agamben's work renders the difference between relational and non-relational being problematic (O: 60). How does such a distinction come into being, and how might we think about moments when such a distinction is *not* so distinct? So, rather than accept a binary between the differential systems of law or language, and the supposedly lawless or undifferentiated worlds that can only be known as other than (or as the negative of) law and language, Agamben looks to experiences of law and language that are inoperative, or that expose the threshold of indifference between difference and its other: "The messianic end of history or the completion of the divine oikonomia of salvation defines a critical threshold, at which the difference between animal and human, which is so decisive for our culture, threatens to vanish" (O: 21). If it is the case that it is the non-relational or indifferent that needs to be thought, then *no* division – human/animal, law/life, actual/potential, language/life – can be the starting point for theory. Instead, Agamben takes his lead from a quite different type of method, whereby one takes up an inscribed figure that seems to mark out a difference, and then looks at the ways that an apparent differentiation conceals a complex history that is given in further distinctions and insecure divisions. For all his philosophical and theological learnedness, it often

seems that Agamben, as he himself suggests, is most indebted to the work of Aby Warburg, where artworks are neither works of individual artists nor representations of the world but “signatures of things,” or vestiges and remnants of an inherited archive that can *and must* be illuminated:

The history of humanity is always a history of phantasms and of images, because it is within the imagination that the fracture between individual and impersonal, the multiple and the unique, the sensible and the intelligible takes place. At the same time, imagination is the place of the dialectical recomposition of this fracture. The images are the remnant, the trace of what men who preceded us have wished and desired, feared and repressed. And because it is within the imagination that something like a (hi)story became possible, it is through imagination that, at every new juncture, history has to be decided. (N: 79)

It is possible to discern a regal aestheticism and catholicism to Agamben’s work whereby every text and problem needs to be taken from the domain in which it currently resides, or torn out of the art gallery of the present, and then set alongside a completely different set of figures and inscriptions so that a past that was never present might be created, or – to borrow a term from Simone Weil, the subject of Agamben’s doctoral dissertation – “de-created” (Ricciardi 2009).

Agamben is as critical of the present and its failure or abandonment of anything that lies outside law and language as he is of pre-modern conceptions of absolute power and the sacred that grant law a constitutive function. Rather than accept that law brings order into being and allows life to be lived in a human and political manner, Agamben theorizes a new form of politics that would not begin with the polity (as a structure) nor with some constituted form of the individual or person, but with a life that can constantly be experienced as the potentiality *for form*, as allowing form to come into being – and where each member of this community experiences each other *not* by way of some law or form but as nothing other than a potentiality for forming: “what is a life outside the law, if it is defined as that form of life which makes use of things without ever appropriating them?” (HP: 144). In order to break with a present where “life” is increasingly nothing more than the bare means through which power secures its ends, it is not sufficient to turn back to some golden age of communitarian politics, for although Agamben *does* insist that the present has lost all sense of a life lived according to its own form, most conceptions of formed political being have operated by way of a relation to the formless and supposedly non-relational. Communitarians and neo-Aristotelians argue that it makes no sense to speak of a self outside its social and shared form (MacIntyre 1981), while liberal individualists insist that the only fair social form is one that each individual would imagine as rational for

any other individual (Rawls 1972). Agamben sets himself apart from both these traditions, and instead defines a “new politics” that would not rely upon any single term such as the polity or the self:

There is politics because human beings are *argōs*-beings that cannot be defined by any proper operation – that is, beings of pure potentiality that no identity or vocation can possibly exhaust... politics might be nothing other than the exposition of humankind’s absence of work as well as the exposition of humankind’s creative semi-indifference to any task, and might only in this sense remain integrally assigned to happiness. (MWE: 141–2)

Agamben’s historical work looks back to the earliest stages of Roman law and Christian theology, and even to ancient conceptions of sacrifice and oaths; but this is not so much to find an outside to the present as to discern something already harbored within the tradition that has never been realized. If his work is messianic this is not because it focuses on a future that is always “to come,” but rather because the present already harbors the potentiality for redemption if only redemption be seen *not* as radically at odds with life (Attell 2014: 214). The question is, then, not so much how abandoned and bare life might be redeemed, but how the distinction between life and its supposedly other state of blessedness might be rendered inoperative. How might life be lived in its natural sweetness without accepting all the divisions and moral oppositions that have marked notions of nature?

It is precisely this problem of curious divisions and contrary tendencies that Agamben’s entire corpus confronts and works through. His investigations at once concern the curious relations among law, magic, and religion alongside acute contemporary crises. To take perhaps the most prominent example: the most pertinent theme throughout Agamben’s work is the “state of exception,” where sovereign powers suspend the constituted law. This is at once highly relevant to current uses of state power that fly in the face of law and constitutional limits at the same time as it requires us, Agamben argues, to consider the origin and ambivalence of the sacred: “The principle of the sacredness of life has become so familiar to us that we seem to forget that classical Greece, to which we owe most of our ethico-political concepts, not only ignored this principle but did not even possess a term to express the complex semantic sphere that we indicate with the single term ‘life’” (HS: 66). The main claim of his major work, *Homo Sacer*, is that the untheorized conception of the sacred still inflects politics and must be dealt with in order to reconfigure politics; interestingly enough, certain dimensions of Agamben’s own political thought remain similarly untheorized. One of Agamben’s translators and most astute commentators recently made the audacious claim that, “if and when Guantanamo is closed down

permanently, it will in no small measure be due to the thought of Giorgio Agamben," and yet it is only pages later that Timothy Campbell laments the extent to which in some respects Agamben remains indebted to an almost nostalgic conception of a proper language that would heal the gap between human beings and alienated writing: "The uncomfortable conclusion that emerges from this reading of Agamben would be its deep indebtedness to a Heideggerian ontology of proper and improper writing" (Campbell 2011: 41).

One could make sense of the political trajectory of Agamben's work by noting a shift of emphasis from earlier works on poetry and language, through a middle period concerned more with law, to the conclusion of the *homo sacer* project that focuses increasingly on the relation between abandoned life and life that is able to be lived in relation to (rather than outside) form and that is exemplified in Franciscan monasteries. Agamben's relation to language, and to life and the proper, shifts dramatically from his earlier to later work; if there is, as Campbell notes, an apparent yearning for language to be authentically emergent from the world and *not* operating at some sovereign and negating distance, Agamben's work moves progressively away from an attention on language toward finding a new mode of practical politics that is not so much restorative as it is oriented to a future quite different from a history of thought grounded in loss or negativity.

The entirety of Agamben's work, and the responses it has provoked, are marked by ambivalence, and by being at once directly engaged with striking issues of twenty-first-century power, while at the same time operating with such a wide historical sweep that questions of race, class, sexuality, and historical difference are occluded.<sup>9</sup> The points of deepest despair in Agamben's work – such as the modern condition where "we" are all reduced to bare life and subjected to the immediate force of the state (where the state is a law unto itself) – is also intriguingly close to the redeemed future where there will be no law opposed to life, and life will be experienced in its singular "thisness," without requiring the sanctification of rights and personhood.<sup>10</sup> "Life," then, when it is known and managed as bare life (or a life outside the law, or at odds with our communicative political being), is a symptom of an ongoing and intensifying negativity in Western thought:

The first act of investigation was therefore the identification of bare life as the first referent and stake of politics. The originary place of Western politics consists of an *ex-ceptio*, an inclusive exclusion of human life in the form of bare life. Consider the peculiarities of this operation: life is not in itself political, it is what must be excluded and, at the same time, included by way of its own exclusion. Life, that is, the Impolitical (*l'Impolitico*), must be politicized through a complex operation that has the structure of an exception. The autonomy of the political is founded,

in this sense, on a division, an articulation, and an exception of life. From the outset, Western politics is biopolitical. (DP: 2)

However, it is also life – not as differentiated but as *indifferent* – that increasingly provides an opportunity for a post-biopolitical future. This would not be a life set apart from politics and form (mere animality), nor a fully formed political life, but a life that experienced its relations with others as an ongoing potentiality, as a “form of life” (Bailey, McLoughlin, and Whyte 2010). If biopolitics operates by managing a bare life that it posits without law, then it is life conceived beyond negativity – life as the threshold from which law and language emerge but which can never operate with the systemic force of sovereignty – that promises a new future. If it is a redeemed relation to language that seems to hold promise in Agamben’s early work, it is life that increasingly becomes the focus of the threshold of indifference or indistinction that will take politics beyond its oppositional mode; such a new mode would be immanent, where the form of life is not something toward which life is oriented (as though life had some proper end of which it was the mere means), but life’s own potentiality that is also exposed in impotentiality (or the absence of any proper or necessary form):

It will be necessary . . . to embark on a genealogical inquiry into the term “life.” This inquiry, we may already state, will demonstrate that “life” is not a medical and scientific notion but a philosophical, political, and theological concept, and that many of the categories of our philosophical tradition must therefore be rethought accordingly. In this dimension, there will be little sense in distinguishing between organic life and animal life or even between biological life and contemplative life and between bare life and the life of the mind. Life as contemplation without knowledge will have a precise correlate in thought that has freed itself of all cognition and intentionality. *Theōria* and the contemplative life, which the philosophical tradition has identified as its highest goal for centuries, will have to be dislocated onto a new plane of immanence. It is not certain that, in the process, political philosophy and epistemology will be able to maintain their present physiognomy and difference with respect to ontology. Today, blessed life lies on the same terrain as the biological body of the West. (P: 239)

As Agamben’s work develops over decades, certain motifs that he originally endorses (such as Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of “eternal return,” in which one might live the present liberated from any negative or mournful distinction between the world as it is and the world as it is ideally represented) are subsequently seen as symptomatic of an unworthy nihilism. It is the same Nietzsche whom Agamben targets for having elevated the will (and therefore act, force, and power) to a supreme principle, thereby losing all sense of a more profound

conception of power that would be intertwined with *not-doing* or inoperativity (ER; Thurschwell 2004; de la Durantaye 2009: 273–4).<sup>11</sup> Rather than see the shifts and reversals in Agamben's work as just another instance of a change of opinion, it is possible to see such dynamism as expressive of the problem that unites his corpus. What unites early work on language's negativity (or the irreducible distance between word and world) with sovereignty (or the law's creation of itself as a power that transcends life), with ongoing but intensifying interests in visual experience and gesture, and what it might mean to live well without following a rule, is an attempt not only to *think* outside the moral divisions of Western thought, but to make thought *practical* rather than disembodied, logical, or propositional.

Throughout this book, while moving back and forth from Agamben's early to later work, the focus will be on *indifference*, not as an affective state of not caring but – on the contrary – of taking what appear to be the most arid topics and demonstrating their urgency for how “we” experience ourselves. Rather than think of indifference as a loss of distinction, which is one way in which we might despair the modern tendency to reduce all human being to bare life without any sense of the political life of humans, we might – after Agamben – focus on indifference as a liberation from the moral distinctions that have always located human happiness in some sphere beyond this life. In overcoming the subjection of “life” or “humanity” to something other than itself (including the concepts of life and humanity), Agamben seeks to find a way beyond the generality that negates singular existence, and accordingly uses the term “whatever” to think a new mode of indifference:

Whatever is constituted not by the indifference of common nature with respect to singularities, but by the indifference of the common and the proper, of the genus and the species, of the essential and the accidental. Whatever is the thing *with all its properties*, none of which, however, constitutes difference. In-difference with respect to properties is what individuates and disseminates singularities, makes them lovable (quodlibettable). Just as the right human word is neither the appropriation of what is common (language) nor the communication of what is proper, so too the human face is neither the individuation of a generic *facies* nor the universalization of singular traits: It is whatever face, in which what belongs to common nature and what is proper are absolutely indifferent. (CC: 19; see also Sayeau 2013: 238; Doussan 2013: 32)

Sometimes this “coming philosophy” (P: 220) requires going back to moments in textual history to reconsider conceptual divisions (in Agamben's work on Greek thought, Roman law, and Christian theology), but it also requires thinking about thresholds between humanity and animality, and between what is seen and what is (or might be)

meant. Looking backward historically is a way not so much of restoring the past as of finding a past that was never fully lived, in order to construct a more open future, one *not* delimited in advance by inherited divisions and negations.

Agamben's work gained purchase in the anglophone world with the translation of *Homo Sacer* in 1998 (published in Italian in 1995); the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York City and the Washington, DC, areas occurred three years later, and seemed to provide a perfect instance of the politics of "bare life" that emerges in supposed states of emergency. An example of such a "state of exception" would be the USA's 2001 "Authorization for Use of Military Force" or AUMF, a joint resolution of Congress that granted the then President George W. Bush the power to use all "necessary and appropriate force" against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines "planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons." The resolution is still in force today and enables the President to circumvent the usual constitutional procedures that would be required to initiate attacks on persons suspected of terrorism. The usual rule of law, which at first glance seems to limit the powers of the sovereign, can be suspended by the sovereign; it is at that point – when there is no longer a constituted law *through which power is exercised and mediated* – that power operates directly and takes hold of bodies who can become what Agamben refers to as "bare" life.

Although sovereignty and bare life are only two of Agamben's key concepts, the structure of sovereignty – its negativity, systematicity, and mode of creating itself by excluding its posited outside – inflects the way in which Agamben generates his more positive conceptions of immanence, *and* the way in which his ambiguous relations to other authors and concepts play out over the course of his career. One of the clearest instances of Agamben's relation to the past and present is his seemingly minor but significant ongoing engagement with Jacques Derrida's deconstruction which, at its simplest, insists both that we cannot reduce justice or law to any of its inscribed actualizations, and yet that we can also only think of justice from the limits of inscription. Justice, for Derrida, would always be "to come," and would therefore be radically different from or beyond the law, even if only given as beyond the law (Cornell, Rosenfeld, and Carlson 1992). For Agamben, deconstruction, far from being a radical departure from metaphysics, repeats what sovereignty exposes in concrete politics: what has been forgotten or abandoned is anything that is not caught up with, or negated by, constituted differences and relations. What needs to be thought, for Agamben, is indifference and the non-relational. This unthought zone can be as arcane as thinking a potentiality that is not yet the potentiality to do any specific act, or as pertinent as thinking

about life that is not already subjected to managerial or efficient modes of power (a life beyond will, self-actualization, and yet not the bare life that is the mere substrate of personhood). "Life," then, in Agamben, operates across his corpus as a way of thinking a series of thresholds; this project of rendering distinctions inoperative ranges from the most well-known and ongoing project of *Homo Sacer*, where life has been increasingly abandoned as nothing more than the bare substance managed by politics, to his early work on language where the event of speaking exceeds the already constituted differences of a linguistic system, to his later work on theology and duty and conceptions of "a" life as an ongoing actualization of a style or figure, rather than a willing subject who decides upon his own moral law. What unites these phases is a path charted between negativity (or abandoning life to what can only be known as other than language and politics) and will (or the assumption that language, law, and culture are pure self-constituting systems without remainder). In relation to contemporary politics and culture this means that one neither accepts the political terrain as constituted, but one also has no normative ground – such as the self, humanity, justice – to which one can appeal as a simple outside factor. When Agamben does refer to happiness it is critically rather than negatively; happiness is not what has been set outside politics, but is a way of thinking a politics that is not structured by law and its managed outside.

In the recent United States practice of targeted killings, humans are executed without trial; both the individuals who are the targets of military drone strikes, and the population that is threatened, become instances of life to be managed (Brennan 2012). In *Homo Sacer* Agamben discusses the case of Karen Quinlan, whose sustained existence on life support exposes life as *zoē*:

We enter the hospital room where the body of Karen Quinlan or the overcomatose person is lying, or where the neomort is waiting for his organs to be transplanted. Here biological life – which the machines are keeping functional by artificial respiration, pumping blood into the arteries, and regulating the blood temperature – has been entirely separated from the form of life that bore the name Karen Quinlan: here life becomes (or at least seems to become) pure *zoē*. When physiology made its appearance in the history of medical science toward the middle of the seventeenth century, it was defined in relation to anatomy, which had dominated the birth and the development of modern medicine. And if anatomy (which was grounded in the dissection of the dead body) was the description of inert organs, physiology is "an anatomy in motion," the explanation of the function of organs in the living body. Karen Quinlan's body is really only anatomy in motion, a set of functions whose purpose is no longer the life of an organism. Her life is maintained only by means of life-support technology and by virtue of a legal decision. It



is no longer life, but rather death in motion. And yet since life and death are now merely biopolitical concepts, as we have seen, Karen Quinlan's body – which wavers between life and death according to the progress of medicine and the changes in legal decisions – is a legal being as much as it is a biological being. A law that seeks to decide on life is embodied in a life that coincides with death.

The choice of this brief series of "lives" may seem extreme, if not arbitrary. Yet the list could well have continued with cases no less extreme and still more familiar: the Bosnian woman at Omarska, a perfect threshold of indistinction between biology and politics, or – in an apparently opposite, yet analogous, sense – military interventions on humanitarian grounds, in which war efforts are carried out for the sake of biological ends such as nutrition or the care of epidemics (which is just as clear an example of an undecidability between politics and biology).

It is on the basis of these uncertain and nameless terrains, these difficult zones of indistinction, that the ways and the forms of a new politics must be thought. (HS: 104)

Life is not the life of *someone* whose intentions, personality, and ongoing mode of behavior are evaluated and judged – as when, in earlier forms of sovereign power, a citizen is tried for having violated a constituted law and must appear before a jury and deliberating judge. In targeted killings humans are immediately executed, sometimes without any sense of who is being killed, as drones target groups or bodies whose movements indicate possible terrorist affiliations. Further, the population protected by these drone strikes, targeted killings, extraordinary renditions, and enhanced interrogation procedures is also posited as "bare life." Rather than thinking of the political order as unfolded from the potentiality of life and its generation of relations, political power operates as immediate force in relation to life that itself is deemed to have no force or order other than that bestowed by the law. It is life that – in its relation to law – is deemed to be non-relational, "bare." The politics of this "life" is a form of negative biopolitics, one that deprives life of any relation to the law by establishing life as non-relational. This bare life is a life *stripped* of relations (and is definitively other than sovereignty); it cannot be challenged by – say – thinking that there is no life other than that which is known through language or power. Bare life is the constitutive opposite of a system of force that is experienced as fully actual, immediate, and requiring nothing other than itself in order to operate; law is nothing other than pure operation. Against this, one might consider the inoperativity of *mere life* – not as that which is nothing more than operation, but which exceeds and allows for (but does not guarantee) relations and operations. In a tradition that runs from St. Paul to Kafka, Agamben identifies a form of "redemption" that is quite distinctive from one of fulfillment, achievement, realization, and arriving at a lawful blessedness; it is not the