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Examining Potentiality in the Philosophy of Giorgio Agamben

Elizabeth Balskus

I. Introduction

"There is something that all people, whether they admit it or not, know in their heart of hearts: that things could have been different, that that would have been possible. They could live not only without hunger and also probably without fear, but also freely. And yet, at the same time—and all over the world—the social apparatus has become so hardened that what lies before them as a means of possible fulfillment presents itself as radically impossible" –Theodor Adorno

Following the publication of his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* in 1995,[1] Giorgio Agamben quickly became one of the most widely discussed thinkers in contemporary European philosophy. Although Agamben's academic career has spanned over three decades, the success and relevance of the political critique found in *Homo Sacer* has led most analyses of Agamben to be centered around the significance of this book. However, attempts to view Agamben's philosophy through the lens of the political theory expounded in *Homo Sacer* seem vastly misguided. Agamben himself has proclaimed: "I could state the subject of my work as an attempt to understand the meaning of the

[1] Agamben, Giorgio. 1995. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

verb 'can' [*potere*]. What do I mean when I say: 'I can, I cannot'?"[2] Agamben later explains that this questioning of the verb *potere* leads him repeatedly to examine the categories of potentiality and actuality. One can see throughout almost all of Agamben's writings this theme of potentiality and a curiosity into the role potentiality plays in all aspects of our existence. Indeed, one of the most central and obscure chapters in *Homo Sacer*, "Potentiality and Law," focuses on the role potentiality plays in the power structures of our systems of sovereignty. It would seem, therefore, that before we can begin to truly understand Agamben's political or moral philosophy we should first attempt to grasp this potentiality that lies at the foundation of Agamben's thought.

Attempting to define potentiality within Agamben's philosophy, however, is an exceptionally difficult task. Leland de la Durantaye writes: "The first challenge to understanding Agamben's idea of potentiality stems from its centrality".[3] Because the term potentiality is used in so much of Agamben's work in various different ways, it is often easier to pinpoint its influence in a particular work, rather than elaborate what precisely this potentiality is. While de la Durantaye has argued (in my opinion, correctly) that potentiality plays a large role in *all* of the major ideas found in Agamben's philosophy[4], I believe that there are three concepts within Agamben's thought that can lead to a richer, more precise idea of this potentiality: inoperativeness, decreation, and profanity. In this paper, I

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[2] Agamben, Giorgio. 1999. *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 177.

[3] De la Durantaye, Leland. 2009. *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 4.

[4] Ibid.

plan to examine Agamben's potentiality, beginning with Agamben's use of Aristotelian potentiality, through the role it plays in inoperativeness, decreation and profanity, showing that potentiality in Agamben's philosophy goes far beyond the possibility to be or not be, but also serves as the foundation for political, creative and moral action.

II. Aristotle and Thought as Potentiality

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the shadow
- *T.S. Eliot*

No analysis of Giorgio Agamben's potentiality can begin without a discussion of the potentiality found in Aristotle's *De Anima* and *Metaphysics.* Agamben begins almost every section of his writing on potentiality with Aristotle and consistently states that his own views on potentiality have their origins in Aristotle. Both Aristotle and Agamben maintain that anything potential is capable of not existing in actuality, and that "what is potential can both be and not be, for the same is potential both to be and not to be".[5] This statement initially seems to be a simple establishment of the contingency of beings and events. However, the *relationship* between the potential not to be

[5] Aristotle. 1986. *Metaphysics*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1050 b 10.

and reality can be seen in various ways. Aristotle writes: "A thing is said to be potential if, when the act of which it is said to be potential is realized, there will be nothing impotential".[6] Agamben uses this definition of potentiality, which has often been interpreted as Aristotle merely stating that if something is not impossible then it can be called potential, as a foundation for a much deeper meaning of potentiality. Agamben interprets Aristotle as saying, "if a potentiality to not-be originally belongs to all potentiality, then there is truly potentiality only where the potentiality to not-be does not lag behind actuality but passes fully into it as such".[7] Agamben finds within Aristotle a "potentiality that conserves itself and saves itself in actuality".[8] This concept of a potentiality that maintains itself even after an event is actualized is difficult to grasp. What exactly can this potentiality consist of if an event has already occurred?

The potential to not be is easiest understood in an example that both Aristotle and Agamben utilize: possessing a faculty. Aristotle specifically writes about the faculty of sight as an ability that always contains within it its own potential to not be. If we were constantly in a state of being where we could see, sight itself would not be a faculty which we possess; it would merely be a condition of our existence. However, we do not simply experience sight itself. We also have the ability to experience darkness. And it is because we can experience darkness and are aware of this sensation as the "not-being" of seeing that we can say that we possess the faculty of sight. This potential of sight to not be maintains itself throughout our experiences, as we are

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[6] Ibid., 1047 a 24-26.

[7] *Potentialities,* 183.

[8] Ibid., 184.

constantly aware of our potential for darkness and can achieve this darkness at any point (for example, by shutting our eyes). At the very core of our ability to see is our potential for darkness, and it is indeed this potential for darkness that allows us to see the light. De la Durantaye aptly states that Aristotle's emphasis on the darker side of potentiality, the "not-to" that accompanies every ability we possess, is significant to Agamben's concept of potentiality because, "it denotes the possibility for a thing *not* to pass into existence and thereby remain at the level of mere—or 'pure'—potentiality".[9] But what can this pure potentiality possibly entail?

The idea of a pure potentiality is made clearer in Agamben's discussion of the intellect. Aristotle states that *nous*, or the intellect, "has no other nature than that of being potential, and before thinking it is absolutely nothing".[10] This statement leads Agamben to establish the intellect as the perfect example of pure potentiality, a potentiality "which in itself is nothing, [but] allows for the act of intelligence to take place".[11] But how are we to think of this potential of the intellect? What does it mean to examine thought's potential to not think? Aristotle devotes a large section of the *Metaphysics* to addressing the complexity of the potentiality of the intellect. The problem is fairly simple: Aristotle wishes to maintain that thought is the highest of all human faculties. It becomes difficult to make this claim, however, if one simply views the intellect either as thinking about objects or not thinking at all. De la

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[9] *Critical Introduction*, 5.

[10] Aristotle. 1986. *De Anima*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 429 a 21-22.

[11] *Potentialities,* 245.

Durantaye explains: "If thought were merely the sum of things of which it has thought, not only would it be inferior to its object, but it would also leave unexplained thought's most singular feature: its ability to reflect upon itself".[12] It is in thought's ability to think itself that Aristotle is able to maintain the supremacy of the intellect: "thought thinks itself, if it is the most excellent of all things, and thought is the thinking of thinking".[13] It is in thinking itself, in detaching itself from any outside object, that the intellect is truly pure potentiality.

Although Aristotle has provided Agamben with an example of pure potentiality, the relationship of this potentiality to actuality still remains ambiguous until Agamben explains in full the extreme significance of thought thinking itself. Agamben writes: "The potential intellect is not a thing. It is nothing other than the *intentio* through which a thing is understood; it is not a known object but simply a pure knowability and receptivity.[14] This "pure knowability and receptivity" of the intellect is, in fact, the pure *potentiality* of the intellect. When viewed as the ability to know or reflect, pure potentiality of the intellect becomes extremely important. This potentiality can exist apart from the actualization of any thought of a particular object because it is, in fact, this potentiality itself that allows for an object to even be thought. Therefore, the potentiality of the intellect not only allows for thought to maintain a supreme position ontologically, it is also the foundation of thought in general. Furthermore, "in the potentiality that thinks itself, action and passion coincide and the writing tablet writes by

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[12] *Critical Introduction*, 5.
[13] *Metaphysics*, 1074 b 15-35.
[14] *Potentialities,* 251.

itself or, rather, writes its own passivity".[15] This idea of "action and passion coincid[ing]" and impotentiality giving itself up to a realized action is a theme frequented in Agamben's writing. For example, Agamben believes that perfect writing does not come from the desire to write any thing in particular, but "from an impotence that turns back on itself and in this way comes to itself as a pure act".[16]

This impotence that denies itself for the sake of actuality is quite abstract and difficult to understand. However, there are clear examples of the type of passion at play in Agamben's philosophy, most notably, in his discussion of Glenn Gould in *The Coming Community*. Agamben writes: "even though every pianist necessarily has the potential to play and the potential to not-play, Glenn Gould is, however, the only one who can not not-play, and, directing his potentiality not only to the act but to his own impotence, he plays, so to speak, with his potential to not-play".[17] This comment could refer to the notorious reputation Glenn Gould held as one of the most technically gifted pianists in the world, one of the most renowned performers of the 20th century, who did not, however, practice the piano regularly and, if he did practice, often did so without the use of an actual piano by miming the motions and playing the songs in his mind. While every concert pianist has the skill to exercise his ability to play the piano, Glenn Gould, in exercising his ability to not play the piano by "playing" without his instrument, maintained his *impotentiality* as a pianist. This impotentiality was turned

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[15] Agamben, Giorgio. 1993. *The Coming Community.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 36.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., 34.

back towards itself the minute Gould's fingers touched a piano at a performance, when the skill and technique acquired by *not* playing the piano allowed Gould to play Bach better than any pianist in the world. It is this act of impotentiality turning back on itself that is often lauded in Agamben's writings as the highest action possible, and it is important to keep this concept of impotentiality giving itself to itself as the highest act in mind when examining Agamben's views on ethics and politics.

III. The Inoperative

"There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part" – Mario Savio

Leland de la Durantaye correctly states that, "no single term in Agamben's writing is so easy to misunderstand as *inoperativeness*".[18] When Agamben writes in his book *The Coming Community* that inoperativeness should be "the paradigm for the coming politics"[19], the reader's initial reaction is most likely confusion. While in English, the word inoperative has negative connotations of being useless or non-functional, the way in which Agamben uses the term is anything but negative. Agamben is led to the topic of inoperativeness through examining the question of the purpose of mankind. Agreeing with many contemporary philosophers that, "there

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[18] *Critical Introduction*, 18.
[19] *Coming Community*, 93.

is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize"[20] Agamben establishes in a section of *The Coming Community* entitled "Ethics" that, "there is in effect something that humans are and have to be…*It is the simple fact of one's own existence as possibility or potentiality*".[21] For Agamben, therefore, the potential nature of human existence is the foundation of all moral and political actions.[22] But how can human potentiality translate into moral activity? And how is this potentiality related to inoperativeness? The potentiality to act and its relation to the inoperative becomes clear when examining two examples Agamben frequents in his writings: Bartleby the scrivener, and the 1989 protests at Tiananmen Square.

Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby the Scrivener" details the life of Bartleby,[23] a scrivener who decides to stop writing without any expressed reason other than his constant refrain: "I prefer not to." While Bartleby's decision to cease writing (and performing most tasks of everyday life) eventually leads to his incarceration and death, Agamben points to Bartleby as a hopeful figure of pure potentiality, who "exceeds will (his own and that of

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[20] *Coming Community*, 43.

[21] Ibid.

[22] It is important to note: "That ethics and politics should not be treated as separate and distinct disciplines is one of the guiding ideas in Agamben's philosophy" (*CI* 13). Therefore, in this paper I will often use the terms ethical and political interchangeably due to the belief I share with Agamben that the ideal political theory is simply people living together ethically.

[23] Melville, Herman. 2004. *Great Short Works of Herman Melville*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics.

others) at every point" and is truly able "neither to posit nor to negate".[24] When asked to write, Bartleby, although he is fully capable of writing, simply replies that he would prefer not to. By becoming a scrivener who does not write, Bartleby preserves his potentiality in its purest form. Bartleby's stance also directly relates to the inoperative because Bartleby, in neither affirming nor negating the requests of his employer when he asks Bartleby to write, has effectively removed himself from the power structures at play. At a very basic understanding, for Agamben, "to be 'inoperative', it would seem, would be to refuse to be an operative part of the state's machinery".[25] However, the example of Bartleby shows a more dynamic view of the inoperative that reaches beyond political action. "Inoperativeness… represents something not exhausted but inexhaustible—because it does not pass from the possible to the actual".[26] The reason that Bartleby is so disturbing to his employer (who is the narrator of the short story) is that, in removing himself from the constraints of reason and, indeed, the constraints of society as a whole, he is the paradigm of the inoperative, of "the other side of potentiality: the possibility that a thing might not come to pass".[27] And because Bartleby never offers a reason for his refusal to work and never actually denies the requests made of him, the authorities at hand are completely bewildered as to how to deal with the scrivener.

Bartleby is not the only example of a figure of the inoperative utilized by Agamben. Agamben often cites the

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[24] *Potentialities*, 255, 257.
[25] *Critical Introduction*, 18.
[26] Ibid., 19.
[27] Ibid.

demonstrations at Tiananmen Square as an example of political activism similar to that he envisions for the coming politics. Agamben notes: "What was most striking about the demonstrations of the Chinese May was the relative absence of determinate contents in their demands".[28] The demonstrators at Tiananmen Square presented themselves as "something that could not and did not want to be represented, but that presented itself nonetheless as a community and as a common life".[29] It is this coming together of people without any presupposition of belonging to a group united by a common identity that the Chinese government found so dangerous. If the protestors had demanded any particular goals, the government could have found a way to defend itself and deny them, but the group of protestors at Tiananmen Square were simply removing themselves from the "machinery" of the Chinese government, declaring themselves inoperative until their situation could become bearable. Successful political action in the future, therefore, would be to embrace one's potentiality and declare oneself as inoperative within the sovereign structures of one's society.

IV. Decreation

"Don't play what's there, play what's not there." – Miles Davis

Potentiality in any context can easily be seen as a creative force. In the individual's ability to act or not act, create or destroy, there is a level of creative potential within

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[28] Agamben, Giorgio. 2000. *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 88.
[29] Ibid.

every person. "For [Agamben]," de la Durantaye points out, "*potentiality* is indeed to be understood in the context of creation, but seen from a strange side—one that he calls *decreation*".[30] The word decreation is not a term commonly used and therefore requires closer examination. Agamben once defined decreation as a "threshold between doing and not-doing", a limit that is reached in the creative process where the artist "no longer creates but decreates".[31] De la Durantaye is quick to assert that this ambiguous notion of decreation should be viewed neither as an "undoing of creation" or a "deconstruction".[32] How, then, are we to conceive of this strange idea of decreation?

A greater understanding of decreation can be found in a section of Agamben's essay, "Bartleby, or On Contingency" called "The Experiment, or On Decreation." Agamben begins by recounting Leibniz's conception of contingency and potentiality. Leibniz states in his essay, *On Freedom*, that he was "brought back from this precipice [of fatalism] by a consideration of those possibles which neither do exist, nor will exist, nor have existed".[33] When Leibniz considered the problem of free will and moral responsibility, he originally came to the conclusion that, if God created everything and had foreknowledge of all that he created, then everything that has existed, exists and will exist must exist necessarily. If every action I perform must necessarily occur, then none of my actions could have been otherwise. And if it was completely impossible for me to have done otherwise, blaming me for my actions by sending me to Hell

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[30] *Critical Introduction*, 22.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] *On Freedom,* 106.

for eternity seems, at the very least, unjust. At the very moment the entire universe seemed devoid of any contingency, Leibniz remembered that there are literally an infinite number of events that could occur or actions that could be taken in a person's life that are never realized in actuality but nevertheless exist as possibilities. This consideration led Leibniz to the realization that everything that exists in the actual universe (with the exception of the laws logic and geometry) could have been otherwise. And it is due to this realization that Leibniz conceived of the principle of sufficient reason, which states that everything that occurs happens for a reason. From the principle of sufficient reason, Leibniz comes to the conclusion that the universe in which we live is the best possible universe, because God, containing perfect reason, had to have created this universe because it was better than all of the other possible alternatives. Leibniz's conception of the contingency of the universe is best articulated in the final pages of Leibniz's *Theodicy*, which he describes a chamber containing all of the possible worlds that could have existed instead of the actual world. The potential worlds exist in what Leibniz describes as "an order succession of worlds, which shall contain each and every one the case that is in question, and shall vary its circumstances and its consequences"[34] which God sometimes examines, admiring his decision to create the world as it is. These potential worlds will never be actualized, but the principle of sufficient reason necessitates the eternal existence of these potentialities in God's understanding. The worlds continue to exist in God's understanding, because if they were to

[34] *Theodicy*, 371.

disappear, there would be nothing to compare the actual world to—it would simply exist.

These necessarily existing possible worlds are the reason why Agamben draws upon Leibniz when discussing pure potentiality and the idea of decreation. In fact, one can easily see in the figure of Leibniz's God the same potentiality of Bartleby the scrivener—this ability to maintain the potential for an event to happen and not happen at the same time. Leibniz's God can look at the world as it is in actuality and also the potential for other worlds, thereby forever maintaining the contingency of the universe, as, for God, everything could eternally happen or not happen. This is the reason that God returns to the "ordered succession of worlds"—in his ability to view all of the possible worlds, he is also, in a way, negating the actual act of creation. All possibilities still exist within his understanding, and will continue to exist for all eternity.

However, Agamben does find fault with Leibniz's conception of contingency and God asserting his freedom in revisiting the moment prior to creation, because in returning to the moment of decision, before the actual became actualized, God has to "close his own ears to the incessant lamentation…from everything that could have been otherwise but had to be sacrificed for the present world to be as it is". [35] It is at this point when Agamben's take on potentiality differs from that of Leibniz, and this is where Bartleby again becomes useful in our understanding of Agamben. In never explaining himself or actually stating "yes" or "no" to any of his employer's demands, Bartleby "calls into question this…supremacy of the will over

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[35] Ibid.

potentiality".[36] And as the will, for Leibniz, is necessarily determined by reason, Bartleby also calls into question the supremacy of reason and asserts his potentiality as a man without will or reason for his actions. Through his phrase "I would prefer not to," Bartleby challenges the principle of sufficient reason. If the laws of reason do not apply, then there is no legitimate justification for why this world exists and the infinite number of potential worlds were never actualized. This is why Agamben refers to Bartleby as a messiah who has arrived to "save what was not".[37] Because the laws of reason do not apply to him, Bartleby asserts the right of those possibilities that have never and will never exist to be actualized.

The value of Bartleby as a messiah for all of the possibilities that are never actualized can easily be called into question. If God, as Leibniz argues, creates this world because it is the best, then what is the use of invoking these potential events that were not chosen because they were inferior? It is this inferiority of the possible worlds that Agamben wishes to challenge. While Leibniz can argue that God must have rationally chosen the best of all possible worlds, Agamben is clearly using Bartleby to call into question the supremacy of rationality as a justification for creation. Bartleby asserts that, while this world may be the most rational, that does not necessarily make it the *best*. Rationality, which for so long has been almost synonymous with morality within the Western philosophical tradition, particularly in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, may, in fact, be as arbitrary of a gauge for the merit of an action as anything else. By championing the cause of events that have

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[36] *Potentialities*, 254.
[37] Ibid., 270.

never and will never exist, Bartleby calls into question on a fundamental level why things exist as they do, why the world was not and is not otherwise.

Within the framework of Leibniz's cosmology, Agamben defines decreation as, "a second creation in which God summons all his potential not to be, creating on the basis of a point of indifference between potentiality and impotentiality".[38] In examining this decreation, therefore, we can see that "potentiality truly understood is not only all that came to pass but also all that might have come to pass and did not".[39] In every person's life, there is at least one moment when she asks the simple question: why? Why did I go to Macalester College instead of University of Chicago? Why am I studying philosophy and not music? A large amount of our thoughts and energy are devoted to considerations of options we did not choose and actions we did not take. We often find ourselves wondering how we ended up in a particular situation and what would have happened if we had chosen a different path. Once our decisions have been made, however, we tend to look at the events leading up to them as necessary: I *had* to go to Macalester because University of Chicago wanted me to borrow too much money in student loans; I *had* to study philosophy because I found that studying music made performing and listening to music less pleasurable. I *have* to currently be a student because if I do not get a college degree, my odds of finding a fulfilling career are slim. This after-the-fact necessity we apply to events is what Agamben takes such umbrage with. What we all know and yet constantly try to deny is that we could have acted differently

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[38] Ibid.

[39] *Critical Introduction*, 23.

and the current situation does not have to be as it is now. In decreation, contingency is returned to *all* events, causing us to remember that, along with the few potentialities that are actualized, there are an infinite number of potentialities that will never be and, yet, will continue to shape and influence our lives.

V. Profanity

"In certain trying circumstances, urgent circumstances, desperate circumstances, profanity furnishes a relief denied even to prayer" – Mark Twain

In his book *Profanations*, Agamben attributes Trebatius with the quote: "In the strict sense, profane is the term for something that was once sacred or religious and is returned to the use and property of men".[40] In looking at the distinction between the profane, which can be utilized by everyone, and the sacred, which traditionally belongs to the sphere of the divine and cannot be touched by humanity, Agamben sees great potential for appropriation of the sacred into the profane. One way of reclaiming the sacred for the profane that Agamben believes has been severely neglected in contemporary life is the act of playing. "Play not only derives from the sphere of the sacred but also in some ways represents its overturning".[41] In taking the rituals involved with the sacred and using them for playful purposes, "play…drops the myth and preserves the rite".[42] By

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[40] Agamben, Giorgio. 2007. *Profanations*. Boston: Zone Books, 73.
[41] Ibid., 75.
[42] Ibid.

maintaining the structures of power but imbuing them with new meaning, such as the use of religious rituals in the children's song and dance "Ring around the Rosy", the act of play is a powerful tool. In fact, Agamben states that, "to return to play its purely profane vocation is a political task".[43]

This discussion of profanity and sacredness may initially seem out of place when discussing modern politics. Though the categories of the sacred and the profane may at first seem outdated, Agamben clarifies that, although we may no longer refer to it as the sacred, there is a "religious sphere that assails every thing, every place, every human activity in order to divide it from itself".[1] This sphere is the sphere of consumption. The sacred realm of capitalism is, according to Agamben, consumption, and capitalism in its most pure, extreme form is concerned with making experience unusable or unprofanable by separating our actions from ourselves and presenting them back to us as a spectacle, to be observed and not used. A good example of this attempt to alienate ourselves from ourselves is pornography: the human form is appropriated, filmed, and then presented to us as something that can be watched but never experienced. Agamben calls this phenomenon "museification." "Everything today can become a Museum, because this term simply designates the exhibition of an impossibility of using, of dwelling, of experiencing".[2] It is of extreme importance, therefore, that future politics "wrest from the apparatuses [of power]—from all apparatuses—the possibility of use that they have captured".[3] The reclaiming

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[43] Ibid., 77.
[1] Ibid., 81.
[2] Ibid., 84.
[3] Ibid., 92.

of the possibility of use is, in fact, "the political task of the coming generation".[4]

We can see, therefore, that potentiality lies at the very heart of this concept of the profane. In examining the current structures of power and the rituals of our time, we have the ability to find within them the possibility for new use. Agamben uses the example of feces to illustrate this point. While, in everyday society, feces are clearly off limits and have only one purpose (that is, to be expelled and then removed) Agamben notes that babies, almost instinctually, like to play with feces, to explore their different uses, until society intervenes and they are conditioned not to. While Agamben does not advocate the widespread movement to promote creative use of feces, his point in invoking such an extreme example is clear: there is the possibility for new use of the objects that surround us. We simply have to recognize these objects' potential for a different purpose than the one they have traditionally held. This potential for new use is the only way to combat capitalism's attempt to make experience unusable. To return to the example of pornography, Agamben notes that while pornography has alienated our own bodily form and sexuality from ourselves, there is potential to negate this effect by engaging with the figures at hand. He cites the example of a pornographic star who, instead of simulating the pleasure associated with the sexual acts in which she is engaged, simply looks, as though bored, at the camera and, in a sense, watches the viewer watching her.[5] In this act of looking at the camera, the fantasy world of the pornographic is shattered; you are no longer watching a torrid affair, but

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., 94.

rather, are distinctly aware of the unreality of the situation being enacted on screen. While this development in pornography has not yet been explored in its fullest capacity, Agamben believes that the potential is there to reclaim the body's sexuality and reengage with our own experience. And indeed, this potential for profanity extends far beyond the realm of pornography. We must simply be willing to look at our world through the eyes of an infant and allow ourselves to glimpse the possibility for new use in everything around us.

VI. Conclusion

"The absolute desperate state of affairs in the society in which I live fills me with hope"

- Giorgio Agamben

In a chapter of his book *The Coming Community* entitled "The Irreparable" Giorgio Agamben describes the world after the final, biblical Judgment Day as, "just as it is, irreparably, but precisely this will be its novelty".[6] Consistent throughout Agamben's political writings is the idea that today's society, in all of its injustice and atrocity, contains within it the means to transform itself into a more just, desirable world. This idea that from the depths of despair we can grab the tools to transform ourselves is not novel to Agamben—Marx's quote from *The Communist Manifesto*, "The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled

[6] *Coming Community*, 39.

feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself" expresses the same sentiment. This theme is repeated again in *The Coming Community*'s chapter, "Halos", in which Agamben characterizes life after the coming of the messiah, saying, "everything will be as it is now, just a little different".[7] This slight difference, the "halo…added to perfection"[8] is "a zone in which possibility and reality, potentiality and actuality, become indistinguishable".[9]

This halo, this recognition of the contingency of our situation, is more attainable than it would at first appear. As Agamben has pointed out, we already possess the means; the key is potentiality. Going far beyond the classical definition of potentiality as the ability of something to be or not be, potentiality becomes, for Agamben, the most significant truth of our existence and the only basis for a coming politics not rife with destruction. We can see in Agamben's conception of the inoperative the call to, like Bartleby, embrace our impotentiality and, instead of demanding specific changes, declare that we will not participate in the modes of sovereignty at play in today's society. We see in the concept of decreation the want to restore to all events their initial contingency or potentiality, to realize that things did not have to and *do not* have to be the way they are. To, according to a quote from Benjamin that Agamben himself employs, restore "possibility to the past, making what happened incomplete and completing what never was".[10] And we see in the profane the need to grasp what is already at hand and *play* with it.

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[7] Ibid., 53.
[8] Ibid., 54.
[9] Ibid., 55.
[10] *Potentialities*, 267.

This hope for change in the face of darkness explains why Agamben, despite the fact that his analysis of the current political situation is dire (some have even said apocalyptic), is often surprised when he is characterized as being pessimistic. Yes, we live in an era with the extreme potential for catastrophe. But, indeed, this potential for despair is always also the potential for hope—this is the beauty of potentiality. What Agamben hopes to accomplish with the potentialization of society is the reexamination of what we believe is truly possible and impossible. In viewing the world and its events as truly contingent, it becomes clear that we cannot and should not wait for the messiah, some future event that will liberate us, or a divine revelation, because, after all, "the life that begins on earth after the last day is simply human life".[11]

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[11] *Coming Community*, 6.

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