

## A Strange Proximity\*

### On the Intimate Relation of Disaster and Promise in the Work of Giorgio Agamben

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#### I. Terror and Happiness

In his 1950 portrait of Walter Benjamin entitled “Charakteristik Walter Benjamins”, Theodor W. Adorno emphasizes the twofold character inherent in Benjamin’s criticism: “Before his Medusan glance, man turns into the stage on which an objective process unfolds. For this reason Benjamin’s philosophy is no less a source of terror than a promise of happiness.”<sup>1</sup> In questioning the autonomy of man, Benjamin’s philosophy provokes a certain terror because it subjects the supposedly felicitous model of the human form of life to a thorough destruction. By the same token, however, it opens up the promise of a coming humanity – in Adorno’s terms, which are not always completely true to Benjamin’s intentions: man reconciled with nature. No matter how appropriate Adorno’s characterization of Benjamin might be as a whole, the internal tension of a mode of thinking – as simultaneously a *source of terror* and a *promise of happiness* – defines a most essential and decisive trait of Benjamin’s works. It is quite appropriate to call this trait a “characteristic”, given that character is, as Benjamin himself maintained, a singular but at the same time anonymous feature.<sup>2</sup> Character defines a singular and specific form that is nevertheless not bound to a single individual or person, but is, in a sense, an anonymous feature which can mark the thought of diverse individuals. This trait of character, aligning a present terror and a coming happiness, finds a paradigmatic expression not only in the works of Benjamin – and such different contemporaries of Benjamin as, for example, Adorno and Heidegger – it also leaves a vital trace in the works of the Italian philosopher and editor of Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben. This characteristic is, however, no mere mark of his thinking alongside so many other features, whether they be stylistic properties, recurrent motifs or argumentative figures. To my mind, the way in which Agamben relates to this double structure of terror and happiness is decisive for the whole organization and character of his thinking.

If that is the case, it is of vital importance to understand this twofold character and how it functions in Agamben’s thinking. In this paper, I will try to sketch the surface structure of this twofold character in Agamben’s works and exemplarily in his *Homo Sacer* (II). Secondly, I will

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<sup>1</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “A Portrait of Walter Benjamin,” *Prisms*, translated by Samuel and Sherry Weber (London, 1967), pp. 235-236.

develop a hypothesis concerning the problematic infrastructure of this duality and the nature of its internal relation. I will characterize the relation between disaster and promise, terror and happiness as the question of an ethical displacement (III). Thirdly, I will present three paradigms that inform Agamben's way of putting this structure to work (IV).

## II. Physiognomy:

### The *homo sacer* and the *forma-di-vita*

Paradigms that provoke terror and figures that imply the promise of an eudaimonic life surface in Agamben's work not in the form of a mere juxtaposition or an opposition of perfectly antagonistic terms. They neither co-exist without affecting one another, nor are they solely defined by opposition. Instead these paradigms and figures are determined by a most intimate relationship in which an astonishing similarity and a sharp contrast in value meet each other. It is precisely this strange proximity of figures signifying the worst and figures attracting all hopes (of escaping the worst) that makes Agamben's thinking so fascinating as well as so precarious. The differences between *the state of exception* that defines the political disaster of today and *the "real" state of exception* that defines the messianic time are much more subtle than their structural similarities.<sup>3</sup> Between the *society of the spectacle* and the *communication of pure communicability*, there seems to be only a mysterious shift in perspective.<sup>4</sup> *Sovereign violence* and *divine violence* in Benjamin's sense are determined by the impossibility of distinguishing between them with complete certainty.<sup>5</sup> And the ultimate difference between an anthropological machine *just spinning its wheels* and one that is *brought to a halt* is not so easy to pin down.<sup>6</sup> This is quite irritating considering the fact that the difference between the terms in all these pairs makes the difference between a source of terror and a promise of happiness. Considering the political nature of these distinctions it might even seem detrimental to the whole effectiveness of Agamben's critical enterprise. How convincing will a political analysis be in which the promising paradigms of a coming community

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Walter Benjamin, "Schicksal und Charakter", in: idem, *Gesammelte Schriften II.1*, ed. by R. Tiedemann und H. Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M. 1991), p. 171-179.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception*, translated by Kevin Attell (Chicago 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Giorgio Agamben, *Means without end: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis/London 2000).

<sup>5</sup> This is the case because divine violence cannot be recognized with certainty according to Benjamin's analysis. Agamben underscores this fact: "Benjamin in fact offers no positive criterion for [...] [the] identification [of divine violence] and even denies the possibility of recognizing it in the concrete case" (Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford 1998), pp. 63-64). As sovereign violence and divine violence both cannot be reduced to law-making or law-preserving violence, they become very hard to distinguish. The distinction between them can manifest itself only in the *effect* of the violence: Divine violence *upsets* law (*entsetzt*), whereas sovereign violence in the last instance still preserves law (even if it conserves it in suspending it and posits it in excepting itself from it). It is obvious, however, that any violence which upsets a law can turn into or be affiliated with a violence reestablishing or preserving a new law. In that regard, divine violence can always turn out to be just a disguised form of sovereign violence.

<sup>6</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, translated by Kevin Attell (Stanford, Cal. 2004).

share so many structural features with the paradigms which define the radically criticized present state of affairs?

This strange proximity and its precarious effects become especially prominent in Agamben's most famous and explicitly political book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. In my understanding,<sup>7</sup> this work contains three interrelated projects: First, Agamben proposes a structural and formal theory of the political that is to be understood according to the logics of sovereignty and to be determined as biopolitics. Secondly, Agamben pursues a genealogy of forms of bare life that are a correlative effect of this structure of the political. Thirdly, Agamben presents a diagnosis concerning the political formation of modernity that is marked by a radicalization of the biopolitical nature of politics. I will briefly sketch the main theses of the first and the third endeavour in order to make clear in which way a disastrous constellation and a promising figure are entangled in Agamben's description. According to Agamben's first project, a structural account of the political, the sphere of the political can be defined by the distinction of political life (*bios*) and natural life (*zoe*). The political can constitute itself only by means of differentiating itself from its own outside: by distinguishing *bios* from *zoe*, *polis* from *oikos*. In order to do this the political repeatedly produces states of exception in which it includes and confronts its own outside and forms a zone of indistinction in which the political and its outside merge. Life under the state of exception is in this sense a zone of indistinction between *bios* and *zoe*. This life that is neither *zoe* nor *bios*, that is *bios* just as much as it is *zoe* is, according to Agamben's analysis, the primary political element. It is not the end or destruction of the political sphere; on the contrary, it is the way in which the political includes and masters its own outside and reproduces the originary element from which it engenders its constituting limit. This originary and formative quality is due to the state of exception insofar as its zone of indistinction serves as the medium in which the political can inscribe itself and separate a *bios* from a *zoe*: this state of exception, this zone of indistinction is "a threshold of articulation between nature and culture, *zoe* and *bios*."<sup>8</sup>

This analysis is supposed to pertain to the structure of the political as such – or at least to the political from Aristotle till today. In contradistinction to Foucault, Agamben thus maintains that politics always has been and remains biopolitics. That does not mean, however, that the way in which *bios* and *zoe* have been differentiated and fused has not undergone great changes over the course of time. Agamben's diagnosis of modernity addresses precisely this historical question and proposes a crisis plot in which the problematic and precarious structure of the political reflected in states of exception becomes more radical and pervasive. The radicalization of

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Thomas Khurana, „Leben und Sterben lassen: Giorgio Agambens Buch ‚Homo Sacer‘ und seine Rezeption“, in: *Texte zur Kunst*, Heft 45, 12. Jg., 2002, pp. 122-128.

<sup>8</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, supra note 5, p. 181.

biopolitics in modernity is defined by the fact that the state of exception has become the rule. Whereas in ancient times regular political action concerned the political life alone and states of exception only interrupted this regular political action from time to time, when dealing with a life in a zone of indistinction between *bios* and *zoe*, in modern politics the regular subject and object of politics is a life indeterminate between *bios* and *zoe*. The politicization of life no longer concerns a political life that is separated from the natural life. It concerns a natural life that has become political in itself. In this sense Agamben agrees with Foucault's thesis that modern politics is biopolitics in a preeminent sense – aiming at the regulation, intensification and maximization of the life of a population.

I shall confine myself at this point to giving only this rough sketch of Agamben's argument because my interest here is not in the analysis itself but in the precarious proximity of disaster and promise it embodies. The "disaster", so to speak, is constituted by the radicalization of biopolitics, a state of exception that has become the rule and a correlative form of life that is regularly – and not only in distinct states of exception – indeterminate between *bios* and *zoe*. It is, to be more precise, indeterminate in the sense that political life is *reduced* to *zoe*, to natural life.<sup>9</sup> The political differentiations do not concern the difference between *bios* and *zoe* any more, but differences within *zoe*: alive/dead, sound/ill, productive/unproductive and so on. Correspondingly, the economic paradigm that stems from the *oikos* – formerly the sphere distinctive of *zoe* – becomes dominant as the paradigm of the political.<sup>10</sup> Agamben presents this contemporary state of affairs as the catastrophic end point of a continuously radicalizing politics of which the concentration camp has become the hidden paradigm. It is very hard to imagine a stronger and more extreme attempt to discredit the present political sphere than by holding that the *nomos* of our time is the camp. To maintain that all of us are virtually *homines sacri*, structurally speaking living in a large camp, is a way of setting the political stage in such a way that anybody has to yearn desperately for a way out of this malign, ever more radical and fatal constellation.

And indeed, there are some indications of a counter-figure to the paradigm of bare life: namely the "form-of-life" or "forma-di-vita". Given the radicality of the critique of contemporary political life, one will expect the form-of-life to be a totally different configuration of life corresponding to a wholly different constitution of the political sphere. It has engendered a great

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<sup>9</sup> It is precisely this fact that accounts for the way in which, time and time again, Agamben fails to distinguish between the natural life of *zoe* and the bare life in the state of exception that is defined as a zone of indistinction between *bios* and *zoe*. For a first example of this tendency in Agamben to assimilate natural life and bare life, compare the following passage from the *Introduction* of *Homo Sacer*: "The fundamental categorial pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political life, *zoe*/*bios*, exclusion/inclusion." (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, supra note 5, p. 8)

<sup>10</sup> Cf. especially Giorgio Agamben, *Il Regno e la Gloria. Per una genealogia teologica dell'economia e del governo* (*Homo Sacer* II.2) (Vicenza: Neri Pozza 2007).

amount of irritation and frustration among critics that precisely the opposite is the case. As has been noted several times, the “form-of-life”, a life inseparable from its form, shares the most decisive structural characteristics with its disastrous counter-figure, the *homo sacer*.<sup>11</sup> Neither allows for a clear distinction of *bios* and *zoe* – and the way in which they foreclose this distinction seems to differ only in subtle ways. Even the theoretical resources for thinking the deep structure of the *homo sacer* and the *forma-di-vita* appear to be the same at central points in *Homo Sacer*. The philosopher that is, in Agamben’s analysis, balancing on the knife’s edge is Martin Heidegger in his thinking of facticity. This thought is not only the main source for the conceptualization of the *forma-di-vita*<sup>12</sup>, it is simultaneously associated, as Agamben states with an astonishing emphasis, with the Philosophy of Hitlerism. Agamben speaks of an “originary proximity” between Nazism and Heidegger’s thinking and underlines the fact that “Nazism is rooted in the same experience of facticity from which Heidegger starts out.”<sup>13</sup> They converge, as it seems, in the most decisive question concerning the political quality of life. Agamben writes: “For both Heidegger and National Socialism, life has no need to assume ‘values’ external to it in order to become politics: life is immediately political in its very facticity”<sup>14</sup>. The “radical divergence” of them that Agamben names some sentences later appears rather faint against this backdrop. At first sight, it seems uncertain whether it mightn’t just be a verbal difference: “Nazism determines the bare life of *homo sacer* in a biological and eugenic key”, Agamben states, whereas Heidegger’s *homo sacer* is conceived in the key of existential ontology as “Dasein, the inseparable unity of Being and ways of Being”. In which way these two languages or keys differ with regard to the politicization of life, remains to be shown and is anything but self-evident. It is no wonder that many critics have failed to see the difference between these two figures. Given that many already have a problem in following Agamben in picturing the present political state in the disastrous colors he paints it, his approach appears even more dubious in light of the fact that the putatively positive alternative seems to be indiscernible in many structural regards from the state he is so eager to reveal as a disaster.

If the strange proximity of disaster and promise is, however, an essential characteristic of his thinking, it remains improbable that this problematic constellation surfaces in the *Homo Sacer*

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. especially the analysis of Eva Geulen, “Form-of-Life/Forma-di-Vita”, in: E. Horn / B. Menke / Ch. Menke, *Literatur als Philosophie – Philosophie als Literatur* (München 2006), pp. 363-374.

<sup>12</sup> The definition of the *forma-di-vita* presented in *Means without end* is almost a word-to-word citation of *Being and Time*. Heidegger writes: „Dasein...is ontically distinguished in that the very Being of such a being is an *issue* for it“ (§ 4) and continues to say that „Dasein *is* always its own possibility“. (§ 9), whereas Agamben says: „A life that cannot be distinguished from its form is a life, for which its life is an issue for its mode of living and its mode of living is its first and foremost concern in life. ... [This claim] defines a life [...], in which individual modes, acts and processes of life are never simply facts, but are always and foremost life-*possibilities*“ (Giorgio Agamben, *Lebens-Form*, in: idem, *Mittel ohne Zweck. Noten zur Politik* (Berlin 2001), p. 13).

<sup>13</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, supra note 5, p. 152.

<sup>14</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, supra note 5, p. 153.

by accident or on account of the lack of a more careful analysis. Consequently, my question is: Is there a deeper necessity for this strange proximity? To my mind, there are two possible strategies that might justify the way in which Agamben configures the closing constellation of *homo sacer* and *forma-di-vita* at the end of his book. Firstly, there is a strategic argument that Agamben states explicitly: the point of departure for the articulation of a new politics has to be the state we are in. It is as useless to try to restore a distinction of *oikos* and *polis*, *zoe* and *bios* – like Leo Strauss and Hannah Arendt attempted to – as it is idle to envision a utopian new political life – as Foucault did in *Sexuality and Truth* II and III according to Agamben. The restoration remains useless because this distinction led to the constellation we are in, and the utopian state of affairs remains ineffective as long as it cannot relate to the present form of life. The only strategies that can produce a new constellation have to begin from the state we are in and have to begin by *taking up* this very state.

If that were the whole reason for the proximity, it would still appear dysfunctional and irritating that the positive counter-figures remain so close in content and structure to the criticized state of affairs. With regard to a political project, one would need far more clear alternatives: functionally equivalent contents or structures that can be substituted for the disastrous forms of life. The decisive point resides in the fact – and this is my hypothesis – that Agamben’s project ultimately cannot be made intelligible as a “political” one (in the usual sense), but has to be understood first of all as an “ethical” one.<sup>15</sup> He does not propose different social structures, institutions or systems to be substituted for older ones, but a different way of dealing with the existing structures, institutions or systems. It might be the case that this move is meant to be a proto-political one, an attempt to regain a position from which a new definition of the political might emerge; but it is not a political move in and of itself. Part of the irritation that is produced by the proximity of figures of disaster and figures of promise stems from the suggestion that these figures as such are supposed to constitute a political alternative. Their relation, however, is not one of *political alternative* but one of *ethical modification*.<sup>16</sup> This is strongly suggested by the fact that the *Homo Sacer* is not at all the only instance of the proximity we are investigating. It is just as much to be found in Agamben’s aesthetic, philological, linguistic and

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<sup>15</sup> At this point, I want to leave aside the fact that the promising forms of life additionally cannot be described consistently as *political alternatives*, if one holds (as the Agamben of *Homo Sacer I* does) that the structure of the political as such is to be equated with the logics of sovereignty and biopolitics. In this sense any alternative worthy of the name would have to be designated as a step beyond the political, if only for reasons of terminological consistency. When the Agamben of *The State of Exception* describes our task as one of re-constituting the space of human action that “once had the name of the political”, he introduces a new notion of the political that lies beyond the political he has analyzed and criticized in *Homo Sacer I*. And it remains notoriously unclear what concrete time and conception Agamben hints at by this “once” if already in Aristotle the darkening of the political must have begun with the separation of *bios* and *zoe*.

<sup>16</sup> Ethics is concerned in this sense with *attitudes* towards actions, *ways* of performing, *modes* of behavior – in short with *ethos* in the sense that Michel Foucault has reminded us of (cf. Michel Foucault: „À propos de la généalogie de l’éthique“, in: *Dits et écrits* IV, S. 609-631.)

modal investigations.

### III. Infrastructure:

#### The ethical displacement between disaster and promise

The difference between figures of disaster and figures of promise in the work of Agamben is not a difference between distinct entities or structures, it is a difference in the *way* in which one deals with certain entities or structures. In this sense, the difference is not a difference in essence, but in *ethos*: in *ways, modes or attitudes* of behaving and performing. As Aristotle maintained in the Nicomachean Ethics, the ethical quality of *arete* is neither a *pathos*, nor a *dynamis*, neither *affect* nor *capacity*, but a form of *relating to* actions and affects. Virtue as an ethical quality thus has a relational and reflexive structure, by which it modifies the actions and affects of a person. My thesis is that the promising figures in Agamben – the *forma-di-vita*, the divine violence, the suspension of the anthropological machine and so on – all possess such a relational and reflexive structure. The entities towards which they establish a reflexive distance are precisely the disastrous figures. The reason for the strange proximity of figures of the worst and figures of promise is due to the fact that the promising figures *contain* the figures of the worst – suspended and transformed by the reflexive distance of a specific *ethos*. In this sense the promising figures are not only in a strange way similar to the destructive constellations; they even owe their very potential to these constellations. To say it in a rather flat-footed way, promise is nothing other than disaster fully grasped.<sup>17</sup> This, of course, seems to be a paradoxical formulation approaching unintelligibility. However, one has to take into account that to *grasp* a disaster implies transforming it into something wholly different. This can be understood if one starts out from a specific notion of disaster, proposed by Maurice Blanchot: Disaster is „a paradox practically unbearable“<sup>18</sup>. That is to say, a disaster is not only something bad or horrible or detrimental but an aporetic constellation paralyzing action and cognition. If one can indeed manage to grasp such a “disaster”, some kind of deep transformation has to take place that turns the unbearable paradox into something graspable.

In which way are the elements and the structural features of a disastrous constellation

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<sup>17</sup> This is, as I have already remarked, a very influential topos in cultural criticism, that has crystallized in many slogans. Heidegger is never tired of citing Hölderlin's saying „Wo Gefahr ist, wächst das Rettende auch“, while Adorno states „[D]ie vollendete Negativität, einmal ganz ins Auge gefaßt, [schießt] zur Spiegelschrift ihres Gegenteils zusammen“ („The completed negativity, once fully brought into view, recoils into the mirror image of its opposite“.) (Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (Frankfurt a.M. 1951), p. 334). Compare for this topos also Eva Geulen, *Agamben zur Einführung* (Hamburg 2005), p. 121-123. Agamben's own slogan in this regard reads as follows: “Ethics begins only when the good is revealed to consist in nothing other than a grasping of evil” (Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, translated by Michael Hardt (Minnesota 1990), p. 13).

<sup>18</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, translated by Ann Smock (Lincoln and London, 1995), p. 24.

modified if they are grasped in the reflexive mode of an *ethos*? This is hard to determine in an abstract fashion, independent of the specific constellation concerned. There are, however, two fundamental determinations that Agamben names repeatedly in connection with the notion of ethics as such: potentiality and happiness. Firstly, he states that ethics is possible and necessary because the human being has no essence, vocation or biological determination and instead is only its own existence as potentiality. Ethics, then, springs from the fact that the human being is and has to be “*the simple fact of one’s own existence as possibility and potentiality*”<sup>19</sup> Against this backdrop, the only possible ethical experience consists in the “experience of being (one’s own) potentiality, of being (one’s own) possibility – exposing, that is, in every form one’s own amorphousness and in every act one’s own inactuality.”<sup>20</sup> If a disastrous figure is modified by the reflexive distance of an *ethos*, it dissolves the subject from this disastrous constellation as fate and re-accesses its elements in their state of potentiality.

This first abstract determination is directly connected to the second one: the contention that ethics is the doctrine of a happy life. This is, in the first place, of course only the Greek commonplace of an eudaimonistic ethics.<sup>21</sup> The specific form it acquires in Agamben is, however, directly connected to the way in which ethics restores to every actuality its own potentiality. In a reading of Derrida’s concept of the trace, Agamben hints at the fact that this Derridean figure deals with an *aporia* and turns it into *euporia* – a good or felicitous way. The aporias are turned into euporias not by being brought to a solution, but by being displaced onto a different level: precisely “the level of potentiality”<sup>22</sup>. And this is precisely the situation of the strange proximity of disaster and promise: an *aporia* which is practically unbearable is transformed into the promise of happiness, an *euporia*, by restoring the potentiality that was petrified and paralyzed in the aporetic disaster.

#### IV. Articulation:

##### Three Paradigms of an Ethical Displacement

This is, of course, as I am eager to admit, only the most abstract, formal and empty way to describe the structural necessity of this strange proximity in Agamben’s work. It does not in any way decide the question whether this constellation is appropriate in this or that analysis, or if it is useful in reformulating specific problems of political philosophy, the philosophy of language or

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<sup>19</sup> Agamben, *The Coming Community*, supra note 17, p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> Agamben, *The Coming Community*, supra note 17, p. 44.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Giorgio Agamben, “Walter Benjamin and the Demonic: Happiness and Redemption”, in: idem, *Potentialities. Collected Essays in Philosophy*, edited and translated by D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford 1999), p. 138.

<sup>22</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “Parades: The Writing of Potentiality”, in: idem, *Potentialities*, supra note 21, pp. 217-218.

the philosophy of cultural processes. The formal description can, however, help to clarify the specific nature of this characteristic proximity in Agamben's thinking. This structural alignment of terror and happiness, disaster and promise is not to be conceived of as organizing the field of *political alternatives*, but as describing *movements of ethical displacements* aimed at transforming situations that paralyze cognition and action. The concrete kinds of displacement that surface in the analyses and the appropriateness of describing them in terms of a relation between disaster and promise, is not to be determined in advance. In order to indicate, however, at least the way in which the figure of an ethical displacement is put to work in Agamben's thinking I would like to sketch, in closing and very briefly, three essential paradigms of this kind of displacement.

### **A – *Eigentlichkeit* (Heidegger)**

The first prototype of the ethical displacement between disaster and promise is Heidegger's concept of propriety or authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*) in the specific reading Agamben has proposed. Agamben sharply criticizes the common idea that impropriety in Heidegger is supposed to be a derivative and accidental state in which man deviates from his proper being. Instead, the impropriety is as originary as propriety. It is a way of articulating Dasein that constitutes one of its ownmost possibilities insofar as Dasein is essentially fallen.

On this reading, Agamben's most important intention is not to rehabilitate the improper being that merges into the "Man" and loses itself to everydayness. It concerns the way in which propriety has to be thought if it does not possess a given primacy over impropriety. Propriety is, as Agamben holds, nothing other than impropriety seized upon. The central passage from *Being and Time* that can corroborate such an astonishing thesis reads: "[A]uthentic existence is not something which floats above fallen everydayness; existentially, it is only a modified way in which such everydayness is seized upon."<sup>23</sup> Agamben concludes: "Authentic existence has no content other than inauthentic existence; the proper is nothing other than the apprehension of the improper."<sup>24</sup>

As astonishing and original as this reading of Heidegger might be, it is not against the grain of Heidegger's thought and finds support even in Heidegger's early lectures on the *Phenomenology of Religious Life* from 1920/1921 in which Heidegger proposes a reading of Paul's Letters. The originary Christian religiosity is to be understood according to Heidegger as a factual experience of life, a practical way of living and not as a dogmatic system. In this lecture it is described in a way that reminds one of *Dasein* in the mode of propriety. The turning to propriety

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<sup>23</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 224, cited according to Giorgio Agamben, "The Passion of Facticity", in: idem, *Potentialities*, supra note 21, p. 197.

<sup>24</sup> Agamben, "The Passion of Facticity", in: idem, *Potentialities*, supra note 21, p. 197.

and the transformation that is linked to this originary Christian religiosity does not require that anybody has to renounce their vocation or give up or abolish the contents of their everyday life. What is changed within this turn is not “the contents” of the actions and not the “worldly significance” of the role a person is in (the so called “Bezugssinn”). Heidegger writes: “These directions of sense which refer to the surrounding world, to one’s vocation, and to that which one is (the self-world), determine in no way the facticity of the Christian. Nonetheless they are there, they will be maintained and first authentically assigned [zugeeignet] there. The significances of the surrounding world become, through having been, temporal possessions.”<sup>25</sup> This facticity of the Christ in a way prefigures the propriety or authenticity of a Dasein that has no other content than impropriety or inauthenticity but seizes it as improper, as “having become”.

If propriety has no content other than impropriety, the apprehension of this impropriety nevertheless changes everything: “something remains unchanged, and nevertheless it is changed radically” as Heidegger writes with regard to Paul<sup>26</sup>. By being apprehended the improper ways of existence are disclosed as founded in the potentialities of Dasein and expose their potential character. This paradigm of propriety seems to inform a number of cultural investigations in Agamben as for example the analysis of fetishism and the society of the spectacle. The extreme inauthenticity of the society of spectacle, usually regarded as a derivative decline of culture, seems to correspond in Agamben’s description to an originary possibility of the cultural being of humans. It also opens up the possibility of a proper apprehension in which the alienated elements of language can be recognized as moments of a pure communicability and potentiality.

## **B – Redemption (Benjamin)**

A second paradigm that influences a number of Agamben’s analyses is Benjamin’s reflection on messianism, redemption, and happiness. Agamben repeatedly recounts a remark of Benjamin concerning the task of the Messiah. It is not to destroy everything, to begin a completely new world or to reestablish a former one – it rather consists in a “small displacement”<sup>27</sup> that seems to leave everything intact: “Everything will be as it is now, just a little different.”<sup>28</sup> The tiny displacement that is introduced by the Messiah cannot, as Agamben writes, refer to the state of things, “but to their sense and their limits”<sup>29</sup>. The displacement happens in the space of ease between every thing and itself, in the self-distance that the reflexive distance of ethos exposes. It

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<sup>25</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, Gesamtausgabe II. Abt.: Vorlesungen 1919-1944, Band 60 (Frankfurt a.M. 1995), p. 119.

<sup>26</sup> Heidegger, *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, supra note 25, p. 128: „etwas bleibt unverändert, und doch wird es radikal geändert.“

<sup>27</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “The Messiah and the Sovereign”, in: idem *Potentialities*, supra note 21, p. 164.

<sup>28</sup> Agamben, *The Coming Community*, supra note 17, p. 53.

is, however, not so clear in which way the Messiah operates in order to achieve this displacement.

In this regard, the constellation of redemption, happiness and the weak messianic power that we ourselves possess with regard to former generations seems to be more instructive. In the second of his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin maintains that the past carries with it a temporal index that is referred to redemption and has a claim to the weak messianic power we are endowed with. The way in which we can grant the past a certain form of redemption is by making it citable to the highest possible extent. In Benjamin’s view, it is the mark of a redeemed humanity that its past has become citable in all its moments. The way in which the past is saved by becoming citable is, however, not by restoring it in some way or other. Citing has a destructive character in that it separates something from its context. Citing exposes the potentiality of the cited element while destroying its closed actuality in the past. Citing in this regard comes close to the “destructive character” that transmits the past “by making [it] handy and liquidating [it]”. He takes apart the state of affairs not for the sake of the ruins but for the sake of the new ways that open up in this field. He looks at the ruins as a landscape of possibilities just as the angel of history does. We have to consider this angel to be, as Agamben has stated surprisingly, not as melancholic but in a specific way: as happy.

## **C – Comedy (Dante)**

The last paradigm I want to hint at is the displacement caused by comedy because it is a preeminent example of a source of terror being turned into the promise of happiness. The form of comedy becomes interesting for Agamben in so far as it is always and essentially the comedy of a tragedy: a new apprehension of a tragic aporia. Agamben has outlined the anti-tragic or post-tragic nature of comedy especially with regard to Dante and the *Commedia dell’arte*, but the scope of this paradigm is not at all confined to these forms.<sup>30</sup> Comedy implies a certain type of artificiality and profanation that transforms the tragic contents it takes up and apprehends them in its own way. The tragic, epitome of disaster, is defined in Agamben’s terms by the complete identification of the actor with his mask, an attitude that is also to be found in the “moral person-subject of modern culture”<sup>31</sup>. The way in which actor and mask identify, the way in which the personal innocence is overridden by a natural guilt abolishes any trace of that space of ease which

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<sup>29</sup> Agamben, *The Coming Community*, supra note 17, p. 54.

<sup>30</sup> A possibly interesting case in point might be Shakespeare’s so-called romances: comedies that can be understood as specific forms of apprehending tragedy. The mode of this apprehension can be described with a term from Shakespeare’s “*The Tempest*” as a “sea-change”. See for the figure of “sea-change” and this specific reading of comedy as romance Katrin Trüstedt, *Secondary Satire and the Sea-Change of Romance*, in: Richard H. Weisberg, Peter Goodrich (Eds.), *Law and Literature*, Vol. 17 (Los Angeles, Cal. 2006); Katrin Trüstedt, *Sea-change der Komödie: Shakespeares Sturm* (Ms., Berlin 2006).

is the mark of the reflexive distance of *ethos*. Comedy instead exposes the division of actor and mask, nature and person. This exposure alone suffices, to Agamben's mind, to displace the tragic constellation.

This way of thinking about comedy does not imply that the comedy just adds a further ingredient to the tragic stage – a specific artificiality or a new distinction between actor and mask. This distinction and this artificiality is already a substantial element of tragedy – but it is not apprehended as such. Just as the state of exception can be thought of as an unrecognized fiction by which law tries to reappropriate anomalousness, tragedy is an unrecognized staging which tries to overcome a certain type of anomalousness rooted in the fracture of nature and person, actor and mask. Comedy, however embraces this very fictitiousness and this fracture and consequently the final incapacity of law to reappropriate the anomalous. In this sense, comedy is, astonishing as this may be, a “*real* state of exception”, a state of exception that takes hold of its own fictional character. By this very act it suspends or even “stops” the machine of exception, as Agamben suggests. To Agamben's mind, we should act to stop the machine of exception, to “let its central fiction become apparent” and to expose “the unrelatedness of life and norm”<sup>32</sup>, the fracture of nature and person (in the terminology of comedy), which is also present, even if unthought, in the tragedy of a state of exception becoming the rule.

## V. Concluding remarks

This brief indication of an ethical, a historico-theological and an aesthetic paradigm operative in Giorgio Agamben's works might give a first impression of the scope and the way in which the strange proximity of disaster and promise function in Agamben. On account of the way in which the promising figures remain tied to the figures of disaster, Agamben's project cannot be understood as having either utopian or restorative intentions. If disaster is an ever more pervasive zone of indistinction between natural life and political life, in which the political life is more and more reduced to natural life, the promising figure can neither be a restored distinction of *bios* and *zoe*, nor a regained unity. The promising figure is constituted instead by the reflective movement of an *ethos* relating to the former constellation. The promising figure, thus, cannot consist in a mere unity, but only in the “unity” of a relation: the relation of an *internal* separatedness. Ethos in this sense is the unity of a life in reflected separation.

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<sup>31</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “Comedy”, in: idem, *The End of the Poem*, translated by Daniel Heller Roazen (Stanford 1999), p. 20.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Agamben, “*Auctoritas* and *potestas*”, in: idem, *State of Exception*, supra note 3.