

Giorgio Agamben. *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Lorenzo Chiesa. Stanford University Press 2017. 136 pp. \$55.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781503602205); \$18.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781503602212).

Giorgio Agamben's recent book *What Is Philosophy?* marks a (re)turn to theories of knowledge and linguistics, and a decisive point in the scholarship of continental Europe's greatest living thinker. Through five short reflections on Voice, beatitude, the sayable, poems, and muse, Agamben demonstrates the links between his early scholarship on language, theology, and politics, and his more recent works (in the second division of *The Use of Bodies*) where he focuses intently on ontology. By linking together these diverse threads of inquiry into one short volume, Agamben presents his readers with a complex, rich investigation into the nature of philosophy—not by defining or explaining what it is, but by demonstrating how it ought to be undertaken.

While the title of the work may make it appear as an introductory text to Agamben's work, or to philosophical inquiry in general, it is much more useful as a bridge between the logic and method of the political turn with the subject matter of his earlier literary works. Indeed, *What is Philosophy?* should not be approached as an introductory text but as a sort of preliminary capstone: a synthesis of lines of thought if not directly a continuation of a given strand. Scholars in the humanities and social sciences drawn into Agamben's canon by the Homo Sacer project here find a bridge from politics to language, with the humanity of voice as the point of contact.

The opening essay, entitled 'Experimentum Vocis,' is an example of the balance between familiarity and originality that typifies the essays contained in *What is Philosophy?* Agamben's discussion runs parallel to earlier work on the 'Voice' in *Language and Death* and the 'Experimentum Linguae' that prefaces *Infancy and History*, yet also offers a new primary focus: understanding the voice through the relation of *grammata* and *logos*. Agamben traces the development of the speaking human along the divisions between *langue* and *parole*, semantic and semiotic. What he finds is that 'the articulated voice is nothing other than ... a voice that has been transcribed and com-prehended—that is, captured—by means of letters' (19). It is only this inclusive exclusion of the *exceptio*, familiar to readers of the Homo Sacer project, 'that makes possible the capture of life into politics' (19). History and politics take root in nature because they capture bare voice within the *logos* of language systems.

Another familiarity of the 'Experimentum Vocis,' in a gloss on the implications of his argument, is the reference to Jacques Derrida. While works like *Language and Death*, *What is an Apparatus?* and 'Pardes' have seen Agamben address Derrida in the past, the dialogue between the two thinkers has been most often in subtext. This changes in *What is Philosophy?*, with the direct accusation that one of Derrida's most celebrated works, *On Grammatology*, and with it 'the Derridean critique of metaphysics is therefore founded on an insufficient reading of Aristotle, which fails to question precisely the original status of the *gramma* in *On Interpretation*' (20). Derrida's grammatology is thus hardly a liberating insight, because 'metaphysics is always already a grammatology' since 'Western metaphysics sets in its original place the *gramma* and not the voice' (20). The recent attention to the dialogue between Agamben and Derrida, in the work of Kevin Attell and Virgil Brower, receives an important contribution as Agamben offers a brief but acidic polemic against one of the fundamental works of Derrida's oeuvre. This point, as well as the 'Experimentum Vocis' as a whole, will prove provocative, not only for Derridean readers, but for theorists of language more broadly, in both human and posthuman frames.

The essays following the 'Experimentum Vocis' similarly offer models of philosophical inquiry, except that the domain of linguistics is displaced for demands, ideas, writing, and music. At each turn, Agamben demonstrates rather than demarcates the practice of philosophy.

Characteristically, this involves both attention to the minutiae of each concept, as well as drawing out the broad theoretical implications of his archaeologies. In this sense, the various essays of *What is Philosophy?* represent a sort of casebook companion to his reflection on method, *The Signature of All Things*.

Agamben tells us that without demand, there is no philosophy. That is, because philosophy demands a definition of demand that is not a necessity, ‘if there were no demand, but only necessity, there could not be philosophy’ (29). Given the immense power of the concept of demand, it will be of little surprise to readers that in a short essay, Agamben nevertheless canvasses ontology, memory, messianism, and theology, referencing an array of thinkers from across the Western canon: Benjamin, Leibniz, Plato, Plotinus, Spinoza, and St. Paul. He demonstrates philosophy as an ontologically necessary response to the existence of demand rather than necessity.

The longest of the essays, ‘On the Sayable and the Idea,’ sees Agamben return his attention to the relation between language and life as a philosophical inquiry, but with his attention paid to a particular abstracted level. Agamben sketches out the schemata of words and being in the Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic models, and notes that the two concepts in the title, the Stoic notion of the ‘sayable’ and Plato’s concept of the ‘idea’ or ‘the thing itself,’ lack any homology in Aristotle’s work. This is problematic for Agamben because it is precisely a reflection on this element of the thing that refuses capture within language that allows for philosophical inquiry into the world around us. The level of the idea, the thing itself, the sayable is precisely the point of contact where ‘the world and language ... are united only by an absence of representation’ (65). This point of contact represents ‘the truth that is expressed in language,’ and is of central importance to humanity because, ‘given that we do not have other ways of expressing it,’ the only relationship that humanity can have to any truth is through the idea or the sayable (89). Philosophy is therefore the pursuit of humanity’s truth, not seeking to capture it in the words of a philosophical treatise, but the activity of pursuing that which can never be captured. This dictum, equating the thinking of the thing itself with the limits of philosophy, represents the closest example of a definition of what philosophy is in the entire volume; however, even here, the definition only makes sense within the system of philosophizing that Agamben has demonstrated throughout the essay on the sayable.

The final two essays continue the investigation into the fracture at the heart of language and thus of philosophy. In his investigation of proems, Agamben seeks to ‘distinguish a proemial element from a properly discursive or prescriptive element’ (93). This search for the unsaid element of language continues the inquiry into the sayable and the bare voice described in the ‘Experimentum Vocis,’ but it also continues his discussion of creation from *The Fire and the Tale*. Philosophy, we are told is not mystical but proemial—the discourse that shows the insufficiency of the nonphilosophical. As proem, philosophy is always, then, at the limits of language, and the written philosophical text is only the proem or epilogue to the actual activity of philosophizing. In this way, it occupies a similar position to music, which expands on the boundaries of language. As proof of this innate expansive mission of music, Agamben turns to the role that music played for Aristotle and Plato in the education of good citizens. Recalling his discussion of *poesis* and *praxis* in *The Man Without Content*, Agamben urges ‘artists and philosophers [to] join forces’ to counter the ‘loss of the experience of the music in contemporary politics’ (106). We conclude where we began, with philosophy as an examination of the limits of language.

Agamben’s brief series of investigations in *What is Philosophy?* continue his theoretical project at the threshold of life and language, politics and philosophy. The volume is not so much an exposition as an apprenticeship, building on the various lines of thought that tie together Agamben’s corpus. As a thinker unique in his lack of self-reference (Adam Kotsko, *Agamben’s Philosophical*

Lineage, Edinburgh University Press 2017, 303-313), *What is Philosophy?* offers readers an important opportunity to bring Agamben's linguistic and political works into conversation through the discussions here, at the threshold of language and philosophy.

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