

Giorgio Agamben. *The Signature of All Things: On Method.* Translated by Luca di Santo & Kevin Attell. Zone Books 2025. 128 pp. \$25.00 USD (Paperback 9781945861000).

Giorgio Agamben's *The Signature of All Things: On Method* challenges dichotomies such as the particular versus the general and objectivity versus subjectivity through the conveyance of a potentially transcendent philosophical method. Through engagement with a vast array of sources in a concise but dense analysis, Agamben attempts to offer glimpses of three concepts foundational to his proposed method: the paradigm, the signature, and the philosophical archaeology. By offering these concepts that bridge and transcend the aforementioned dichotomies, Agamben presents inklings of an approach that may be able to unite academic disciplines and even resist positivist determinism.

The book's primary purpose is to illuminate Agamben's philosophical approach to help explain and reinforce his other works. Through this illumination, key influences such as Michel Foucault and Walter Benjamin regarding concepts such as genealogy and archaeology are outlined in more detail. The goal of Agamben's method, to "lay claim to originality", can be encapsulated in acknowledging that "every inquiry in the human sciences... should entail an archaeological vigilance", retracing "its own trajectory back to the point where something remains obscure and unthematized" (8).

The book contains three chapters, one for each of the concepts Agamben introduces. The first chapter is concerned with the concept of the paradigm. Agamben states that his work on "*homo sacer*, the *Muselmann*, the state of exception, and the concentration camp" are "paradigms whose role was to constitute and make intelligible a broader historical-problematic context" (9). Agamben traces the idea of the paradigm starting from Aristotle to argue that it should be understood as multiple examples of a phenomenon being linked together as distinct analogic particulars rather than parts of a larger whole (10-19), which "calls into question the dichotomous opposition between the particular and the universal" (19). Through summaries of understandings of the concept from Enzo Melandri to Immanuel Kant, early Christian monks, Victor Goldschmidt, and Georges Rodier, the paradigm is presented as a third option to inductive and deductive reasoning where the act of comparison between a singularity of cases that exposes and makes intelligible something hidden (19-23). Agamben uses the example of grammatical rules where use of a term is suspended when mentioned in linguistic instruction for the purpose of revealing a rule instead of the term itself, such as the act of swearing, meaning the linguist's intention to swear (23-24). Moreover, paradigms are not diachronous or synchronous (24-32), but, as Agamben illustrates with an example of the forty-sixth plate of Aby Warburg's "atlas of images" (28) concerning the idea of a nymph, "the nymph is the paradigm of the single images, and the single images are paradigms of the nymph" (29). Agamben challenges attempts to rationalize paradigms as either objective or subjective by insisting that the paradigm's inherent "ontological character" rest in an ontology that transcends the objective-subjective dichotomy as well (32).

The second chapter explains the concept of a signature. Agamben describes the signature as a type of meaning between sign and "*signator*" (37) that, through language, makes the sign



intelligible, with one notable example being military insignia to distinguish different personnel types (33-39). Agamben draws from interpretations of signature as an act of coining or ascribing value (40-41), something beyond simply “a semiotic relation” to “persisting in this relation without coinciding in it”, effectively displacing and moving “it to another domain, thus positioning it in a new network of pragmatic and hermeneutic relations” (40). Agamben traces the signature through the occult, early medicine, and Christian theology to repeatedly illustrate examples of signatures, with the latter understanding religious sacraments as signatures that make such sacraments efficacious irrespective of personal virtue of the *signator* (41-57). Drawing from Foucault, Agamben situates signatures between semiology and hermeneutics as a necessary intermediary between the two that makes a sign’s meaning intelligible, identifying Foucault’s concept of statement as signatures (57-70). Benjamin’s understandings of mimesis and scholarly acumen are framed as one’s ability to thread together and interpret signatures (70-73). These threads of signatures are not necessarily chronologically bound (73-80).

The third and culminating chapter presents Agamben’s idea of philosophical archaeology. Building from Kant’s ideas of what constitutes and differentiates a history of philosophy as well as Foucault’s concept of genealogy, Agamben argues against archaeology as searching for an origin point, but rather a point when something arises that distinguishes its prehistory from its history (81-87). Conducting such archaeology requires seeing past historiography and other forms of tradition (87-89), which involves “deconstructing the paradigms, techniques, and practices through which tradition regulates the forms of transmission, conditions access to sources, and in the final analysis determines the very status of the knowing subject” (89). This action of seeing past can be understood as navigating Foucauldian *epistemes* “where knowledge finds its condition of possibility” (93). Agamben connects archaeology to the concept of regression in Freudian psychoanalysis, in which “a split between conscious and unconscious” (98) is a prehistory and history divided by an arising (96-99). Tradition is like the repression of traumatic memories, a forgetting that creates a condition of non-experience that manifests in unconscious-driven phenomena that through archaeology can be “revealed” as “contemporary with the present” (103) and made intelligible (100-103). This archaeological processes of achieving intelligibility is liberating in that it conjures “the phantasm, through meticulous genealogical inquiry, in order to work on it, deconstruct it, and detail it to the point where it gradually erodes, losing its ordinary status” (102) and unlocks a “future anterior” (106) in which “the archaeologist’s gesture (or the power of the imaginary) *has cleared away* the ghosts of the unconscious and the tight-knit fabric of tradition which block access to history” (106-107). Agamben likens this to the relationship in Abrahamic religious theologies between redemption and creation where the former is valued above the latter and “the two works are not simply separate but rather persist in a single place, where the work of salvation acts as a kind of a priori that is immanent in the work of creation and makes it possible” (108). The book concludes with a very brief comparison to the evolution of linguistics in the twentieth century that argues that the discipline largely abandoned archaeological methods in favour of formalization through generative grammar, which is emblematic of a larger trend in the human sciences (108-111).

The book is undoubtedly valuable for philosophers and other academic researchers across disciplines, but it feels unfinished, leaving readers before the point where they would be able to easily apply Agamben's recommended approach. I believe a fourth chapter that focuses on operationalization, such as for instance how the three concepts work together, could provide the metatheoretical work necessary to cement the book as an invaluable resource empowering readers to enliven philosophical inquiry beyond arguably stale and limited conventions. Agamben's critique of Noam Chomsky's formalization of linguistics in the last few pages of the book begins to bring the approach into the more practical and toward the feasible, but it fizzles out rather abruptly (108-111). I would like to see more of this critical engagement with philosophical methods underpinning other disciplines, such as those in the social sciences. Such an additional chapter would elevate the book beyond simply an explanation of Agamben's methods to a keystone roadmap for writing philosophy that could inspire future generations of philosophers and academics to use and continue the path Agamben has paved for them.

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