

Deactivating Use, Deactivating Theology

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Inception

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The naked, simple human body is not displaced here into a higher and nobler reality; instead, liberated from the witchcraft that once separated it from itself, it is as if this body were now able to gain access to its own truth for the first time. In this way the mouth truly becomes a mouth only as it is about to be kissed; the most intimate and private parts become a place for shared use and pleasure; habitual gestures become the illegible writing whose hidden meaning the dancer deciphers for all.

—Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*

One of the key features of modern philosophy is the way it leaves the material body unthought. This often happens with attempts to determine the transcendental conditions of thought and being.¹ Philosopher Giorgio Agamben deals with a similar problematic from within Christian theological archives. Rather than leave the body unthought, the Christian tradition has thought the body most rigorously as the glorious body. My contention is that Agamben's account of the glorious body opens a way of deactivating the theologico-political

¹ Nahum Chandler calls this the problem of 'pure being'. See Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

apparatus by deactivating the teleology that comes with conceptualizations of the body.

In his essay “The Glorious Body,” Agamben covers patristic and medieval discourses on the nature and purpose of the resurrected body. Agamben seeks to articulate ways to return the body to common use and to think of creaturely life beyond teleology. While much of what follows will be exposition of “The Glorious Body,” I will also discuss the relation between that essay and Agamben’s major corpus, the *Homo Sacer* project. This discussion will help determine the relation between “The Glorious Body” and contemporary theologico-political problems, specifically the problem of “the human” as such. I argue that what is at stake in the deactivation of the glorious body is the deactivation of the human, a deactivation which also has implications for politics and social life in general. In conclusion, I will discuss the shortcomings Agamben’s analysis, and how we might think otherwise about the body and about materiality in general.

Homo Sacer

Giorgio Agamben’s philosophical project is a genealogical enterprise. It is an investigation that seeks to identify the roots of the Western onto-theo-political machine.² Agamben is concerned with the way Western ontology creates inclusions and exclusions. Agamben seeks to deactivate the necessity of an exclusion that operates as the basis of the political. By engaging with the work of Carl Schmitt, Agamben tracks the way in which exclusion is the ground of sovereignty. It is the sovereign who decides on the exception and whether one has standing

² Adam Kotsko, “Dismantling the Theo-Political Machine: On Agamben’s Messianic Nihilism,” in *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2010).

within the political order is determined by the sovereign, on the condition that what you are is what the “excluded” is not.³ This is the premise of his *Homo Sacer* project. The *Homo Sacer* is a figure from Roman law who can be killed—but not murdered—precisely because the *Homo Sacer* is a “sacred” figure.⁴ This means that the life of the *Homo Sacer* is divided from political life and constitutes what Agamben calls “bare life.” Agamben has the concentration camp in mind when he makes the figure of the *Homo Sacer* central to his thought.⁵ For Agamben, the camp is the paradigmatic site in which the divisions that produce “bare life” are most clearly operative.

Agamben’s subsequent turn to economy and glory is important.⁶ He turns his attention to the way that Western political structures operate as both government and economy and he identifies the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as the root of this arrangement. In Christian theology the doctrine of the Trinity is articulated as an economy of divine life, which serves as the solution to the problem of how a threefold God governs and administrates the world without

³ Agamben uses “the ban” as an example of how the political order operates through the creation of “exclusionary inclusion.” By banning someone, you have included them within the law for the sole purpose of excluding them. The exception is figured as a threat, but a threat that is necessary to the (sovereign) political order.

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁵ His reflections on this are at their most poignant in Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, (New York: Zone Books, 1999). While not part of the *Homo Sacer* series, this book is also relevant: Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

⁶ This turn takes place in Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

compromising divine transcendence. This turn to questions of economy marks a shift away from Agamben's singular focus on sovereignty.⁷ Economy is future-oriented, which is to say that at some point the divine economy will reach completion. The completion of the divine economy is the endless glorification of God. One of the key aspects of glory is the way it obscures the groundlessness of glory.⁸ Agamben notes that it is glory that glues economy and government together, and this has implications for how human life is lived. All of life is subsumed into glory (and therefore into economy) through the liturgical apparatus. Attention is given to political (or divine) power through worship and liturgical acclamation. Worship obscures the fact that the throne of the sovereign is in fact empty. In other words, the centre of political/divine economy is inoperative. With the turn to economy and government, Agamben seeks to articulate a non-economic or non-glorious "form-of-life."⁹ These forms-of-life are modes of living in which "use" does not have the teleology or divisions that are endemic to modern life. Agamben's account of the glorious body is a key site in which an alternate conception of "use" is articulated.

⁷ Agamben is not turning away from sovereignty; rather, he is moving instead beyond a Schmittian framework. Agamben makes this clear in the opening chapter of *The Kingdom and the Glory* in which he identifies two paradigms of political theology. He does this as a way of inserting himself into the debate between Carl Schmitt and Eric Peterson. While drawing on both, Agamben's genealogy ultimately moves beyond them.

⁸ This is discussed in terms of the "anarchy of the son." See: Devin Singh, "Anarchy, Void, Signature: Agamben's Trinity Among Orthodoxy's Remains," *Political Theology* 17, no. 1 (2016): 27–46, doi:10.1177/0896920514552535.

⁹ Agamben, defines "form-of-life" as "a life that is linked so closely to its form that it proves to be inseparable from it"; Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), xi.

The Glorious Body

The problem of the glorious body, that is to say, the nature and characteristics—and more generally the life—of the body of the resurrected in Paradise, is the paramount chapter in theology, and is classified in the literature under the rubric *de fine ultimo*.
—Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*

The question of the glorious body is the question at the heart of theology. What is at stake in the question is the fulfilment of salvation history. The resurrection of the body is the final chapter in the drama of creation, reconciliation, and redemption. While not mentioned in the essay, another reason the glorious body is important is because it marks the fulfilment of the divine economy.¹⁰ The glorious body affirms the fulfilment of the promise of redemption (the resurrection of Christ). Another area of significance is what the glorious body has to say about the body as such. That the glorious body ultimately gives us insight into the body is why Agamben takes the glorious body to be the starting point for his reflection on the body.

One of the main issues that Agamben deals with is how to articulate the relation between the earthly body and the resurrected body. To what extent are they the same and to what extent do they differ? Or stated otherwise, what are the continuities and discontinuities between the earthly and the glorious body? In terms of continuity, the continuity has been articulated in terms of two things: material and identity.

The material continuity between the two bodies refers to the fact that they are one body. The glorious body is the glorification of the earthly body. Glorious organs are not a set of organs that replace earthly organs; they are the perfection of earthly organs. Agamben turns to the early Christian theologian, Origen of Alexandria (185–254 CE), to

¹⁰ Fulfilment of Divine economy and resurrection of the body are the same event.

explain the problem of identity. Origen articulates the continuity between earthly and glorious bodies in terms of personal characteristics such as “the image.” It is the image that remains constant, and thus ties the earthly body to the glorious body. Commenting on Origen, Agamben writes, “That which remains constant in each individual, he suggests, is the image (eidos) that we continue to recognize every time we encounter the individual, despite inevitable changes. This same image will also guarantee the identity of the resurrected body.”¹¹ The image for Origen more or less translates into soul, which is distinct from the body, according to his Platonist worldview.

Agamben notes that as time went on, greater emphasis was placed on the problem of material continuity, and a solution was to insist that the body is immutable in terms of “species,” but changes in its material composition.¹² This is not a matter of achieving material sameness, but of thinking the commonality, form, and likeness of the body. Agamben notes that even if we determine the continuity of the earthly and the glorious body, “it remains to be ascertained what distinguishes the one from the other.”¹³ To do this, the meaning of “glorious” must first be established. Agamben says that for the theologians the four characteristics of the glorious body are “impassibility, subtlety, agility, and clarity.”¹⁴ What is important is that the impassibility of the body “does not mean that it has no capacity to sense, which is an inseparable part of the body’s perfection.”¹⁵ Once again we are brought back to the materiality of the glorious body. Most of the church fathers affirmed the presence and functionality of the senses regarding the glorious body, over and against the idea that paradise—and by implication the glorious

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

body—would be devoid of the capacity to taste and smell. The point is to affirm that those in paradise will have the same body that they had on earth (even if the glorious body is better in quality). Agamben states that “The body, as we have seen, is resurrected as a whole, with all the organs it possessed during its earthly existence. Therefore, the blessed will forever have, according to their sex, either a virile member or a vagina and, in cases, a stomach and intestines.”¹⁶

Agamben proceeds to raise the key question: Why have any of these things (genitals, digestive organs, etc.) if they no longer have an end or purpose? Why eat or have sex when there is no need for procreation or nourishment of the body? On the one hand, they seem to lack a telos in paradise; while on the other, Agamben notes that for the theologians, “it is impossible, though, that the corresponding organs are completely useless and superfluous (*supervacanei*), since in the state of perfect nature nothing exists in vain.”¹⁷ What this means is that organs are not superfluous even if the organs are not operative. However, the question remains: If they are not operative, then what is their use? Agamben, echoing Thomas Aquinas, states that an organ is not rendered useless if it does not fulfil its operation or intended function. On the contrary, an organ that does not fulfil its function can still be a sign of its operation. A kidney that does not work is still identifiable as a kidney, and can still exemplify or “showcase” its function. Agamben says that, “The organ or instrument that was separated from its operation and remains, so to speak, in a state of suspension, acquires, precisely for this reason, an ostensive function; it exhibits the virtue corresponding to the suspended operation.”¹⁸

All the organs of the glorious body are without use or operation, so what is said of the organs can be said of the body as a totality, “The glorious

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

body is an ostensive body whose functions are not executed but rather displayed.”¹⁹ Elaborating on this, Agamben discusses Augustine’s contribution to a debate over what happens when the blessed eat food. Given that those in paradise have no need for food (at least for the purpose of nourishment), what happens to the food that they ingest?²⁰ The Eastern tradition (as exemplified by Basil of Caesarea) argued that the food ingested by the risen body of Christ was instantly assimilated into his body.²¹ The conclusion reached by others (Augustine and the Western tradition in general) was that “in the glorious body of Christ, just as in the bodies of the blessed, food is immediately transformed into a spiritual nature by means of a sort of miraculous evaporation.”²² What is interesting about this for Agamben is that the blessed will eat and digest without needing any kind of nutrition and therefore eating is not for the fulfilment of an end. In short, “the blessed will eat and digest their food without having any need to do so.”²³ To emphasize this, Agamben turns to Augustine’s remarks on “glorious defecation.” For Augustine, no operation or function within nature is inherently vile (due to the fundamental goodness of nature as God’s creation). Grace does not destroy nature; it completes it. Therefore, the glorification of the body does not destroy even the functions or operations that we find disgusting; they (in this case, defecation) persist, because they were created—and remain—good. If the glorious body is without need of nutrition (or digestion for the sake of nutrition), then defecation exists in order to highlight, or exemplify a natural function, even if it has no use. What Agamben finds striking about all of this is that the theologians have nothing to say about use regarding defecation. “There is a glorious defecation, which takes place only in order to show the perfection of

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ The church fathers assumed that it was possible for a glorious body to eat, because risen Jesus does so in the gospels.

²¹ Ibid., 101.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

natural functions. But as far as its possible use is concerned, the theologian remains silent.”²⁴

What is of interest to Agamben is finding or creating new uses for the body (and for material more generally) once operativity has been deactivated. In other words, what has captured Agamben’s attention is precisely what the theologians have been silent about this entire time. It is not that Agamben has any “new use” in mind; what he is focusing on is the very capacity to have other uses at all. Agamben is specifically interested in forms of use that deactivate, or at least do not rely upon the division between functional and non-functional (or what I would call non-teleological) use. This is also known as the division between operative and inoperative. The division between operativity and inoperativity manages to cover up and over-determine the inoperativity that is at the heart of being.²⁵ This division is introduced and maintained by glory; it is glory that grounds the liturgical apparatuses that cordon inoperativity off into its own sacred sphere. By deactivating this division, inoperativity can be contemplated as the real itself.²⁶ Using material for the sake of fulfilling a telos is incommensurable with the inappropriability of material as such.²⁷ What is needed is an account of

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ This is also argued *The Kingdom and the Glory*. Glory obscures the fact that the throne of the sovereign is empty.

²⁶ The role of political action in Agamben’s work is an important question. I mention this because it is not clear whether ‘contemplation’ can deactivate things in the way that Agamben wants them to. On this point, see Daniel Colucciello Barber, “The Power of Nothingness,” *Symposium* 15, no. 1 (2011): 49–71.

²⁷ When Agamben uses the term ‘inappropriability’ what he is trying to do is articulate an account of ‘use’ that explains the impossibility of appropriating things and making them sensible within discourses of property. Most importantly, for Agamben, ‘the inappropriable’ refers to a state of the world, and as such is a statement about the nature of things: “use appears as *the relation to an inappropriable*, as the only possible relation to that supreme state

action that does not rely upon the movement from potential to actual, or upon necessity,

It is not potentiality that is deactivated in inoperativity but only the aims and modalities into which its exercise had been inscribed and separated. And it is this potentiality that can now become the organ of a new possible use, the organ of a body whose organicity has been suspended and rendered inoperative. To use a body, and to make it serve as an instrument for a particular purpose, are not the same thing. Nor are we dealing here with a simple and insipid absence of a purpose, which often leads to a confusion of ethics and beauty. Rather, at stake here is the rendering inoperative of any activity directed toward an end, in order to then dispose it toward a new use, one that does not abolish the old use but persists in it and exhibits it.²⁸

What Agamben articulates is an account of action without teleology and without supersession. I say without supersession, because “new use” is not a break with something in the past, but a reconfiguration of material. It is not a matter of moving from old to new; it is more like switching to a different key on a piano than it is like switching instruments. Agamben will say that the glorious body is in fact the body itself. Not a perfect or luminous body, but the vulnerable and precarious bodies that we currently have. The glorious body is the body once “glory” has been deactivated. What are the theological implications of what Agamben is doing here? More precisely what are the theologico-political implications? If Agamben is right when he says that the glorious body is the central problem of theology, then what does it mean for theology when this body has been returned to common use?

of the world in which it, as just, can be in no way appropriated”; Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 81.

²⁸ Agamben, *Nudities*, 102.

Colby Dickinson argues that the category of the human is the central problem of onto-theology. Dickinson refers to this problem as “anthropological machinery.”²⁹ Dickinson echoes Agamben, when he states that the theologico-political apparatus is produced through the division of spheres. Dickinson takes the human/animal division to be the central onto-theological division (the division between human and Divine is also important). Dickinson writes, “Humankind establishes (“signifies”) itself as sovereign within (“over”) the animal kingdom through the exclusion of animals, indeed even of its own animality within, as it alone can draw a distinction of some sort between the human and the animal.”³⁰ The division enabled and sustained by glory, obscures the inoperativity of being and grounds the division of creatures. Creatures that fall on the wrong side of the human/animal divide are rendered disposable. Being rendered non-human, or inglorious, can have damning effects. Dickinson states that the human/animal division is a fundamental component of biopolitics, because it is the human as sovereign, the human as functional, the human as operative (and we might add productive) that is synonymous with life itself. Some “life” ought to be protected, and some “life” is expendable.

Where does the glorious body fit in? Theological discourse on the body is implicated because “theology, or rather, onto-theology, has been ceaselessly engaged in the invention of Homo sapiens.”³¹ The glorious body is an articulation of the human as such. The glorious body does not need to be named as such to carry the signature of the theologico-political apparatus. This clarifies the political relevance of admittedly obscure theological debates, for the body articulated within the

²⁹ Colby Dickinson, “Biopolitics and the Theological Body: On the Apparent Absence of Gender in the Work of Giorgio Agamben,” *Annali d’Italianistica*, 29 (2011): 194, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24016421>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 195.

discourses of the Christian tradition has now been secularized, and we can say that this body is the subject of the present.

The fact that life within modernity is understood to be purely biological does not do away with the theological operations that produced the discourse to begin with. The theological body participates in the project of glorification, so that that which is not sacred can be recognized as such. Complimenting the thoughts of Dickinson, Gil Anidjar notes the ways the very concept of life itself, had to undergo sacralisation to become biological or bare.³² In other words, that which falls on the wrong side of the sacred/not sacred, glorious/inglorious divide must still undergo sacralisation in some capacity. This, then, gives insight into the political significance of deactivating the glorious body. We can say that deactivating the glorious body is (at least potentially) a way of thinking outside the notion of the human that is currently hegemonic.

Yet Agamben's project does not pay too much attention to the historical materiality of the human—especially its racialized and gendered characteristics. Theorists such as Jared Sexton, Alexander Weheliye, and J. Kameron Carter have articulated ways to move beyond Agamben, using his insights and applying it to questions of race and gender. Weheliye proceeds by thinking with the work of Black feminist scholars, Hortense Spillers, and Sylvia Wynter.³³ What is central to their work is the claim that Western humanism is produced over and against blackness. The human discussed in the work of Agamben is constituted by anti-blackness.³⁴

³² Gil Anidjar. "The Meaning of Life." *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 4 (2011): 697–723, doi:10.1086/660988.

³³ Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

³⁴ Jared Sexton argues that the key feature of Blackness is its incapacity for sovereignty. See Jared Sexton, "The Vel of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the

Weheliye sharply critiques Agamben for not taking the histories of settler-colonialism and racial slavery into consideration. Such criticism is echoed by Jared Sexton, who suggests that Agamben's genealogy would be more precise if it were the plantation, rather than the camp that was central to Agamben's analysis.³⁵ J. Kameron Carter argues that Agamben's analysis is limited because he does not consider the way that the divine economy is articulated as racial governance in early modernity. Carter then raises the question of whether inoperativity, as Agamben conceives it, is adequate to the task of dismantling this world-order.³⁶ Considering the critiques and thoughts of Sexton, Weheliye, and Carter, inoperativity, if it is to mean anything at all must mean the end of the world. This means that the deactivation of the glorious body should entail more than new modes of use, but instead give rise to the upheaval of the world. Perhaps it is not just a matter of finding new uses, but of creating new conceptions of materiality. Thinking otherwise about use entails thinking otherwise about what we are using. This is something that occurs to Agamben, but what is needed is a breakdown of the discourse in which use (specifically use of the body) has been articulated. Agamben seeks to do this through rendering the Western onto-theological tradition inoperative. But this cannot happen without coming to terms with the modern conditions of possibility for this tradition: racial slavery and settler-colonialism.

Unsovereign." *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 5 (2016): 583–597, doi:10.1177/0896920514552535.

³⁵ Jared Sexton, "People-of-Color-Blindness." *Social Text* 28, no. 2 (2010): 31–56, doi:10.1215/01642472-2009-066.

³⁶ J. Kameron Carter, "The Inglorious: With and Beyond Giorgio Agamben," *Political Theology* 14, no. 1 (2013): 77–87, EBSCOhost.

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