

# The Open: Man and Animal<sup>1</sup>

Review by Maria O'Connor

1. Agamben, G. (2004). *The open: Man and animal* (K. Attell, Trans.). Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

2. Bartoloni, P. (2004). The Stanza of the self: On Agamben's potentiality. *Contretemps* (5, December).

To contextualise this description that traces Agamben's thinking on the spatial-temporal condition of the open, Bartoloni seeks to excavate Agamben's interstitial moment between literature and philosophy: the dispute between literature and philosophy that culminates as two different positions of the genres of a self, i.e., we exist either in (poetic) language, or through (philosophically enquiring) language. The writer's attention to a more radical position on subjectivity is thought of with respect to Agamben's project of language and the self, whereby the potentiality (the openness of a radical other presence) for being is characterized by "the zone of presence that is determined to play its own potentiality, including inpotentiality, to the full, that is prepared to let

The open is nothing but a grasping of the animal not-open. Man suspends his animality and, in this way, opens a 'free and empty' zone in which life is captured and abandoned [*ab-bandonata*] in a zone of exception.

—Agamben (2004: 79)

They all inhabit the *interim*, the interzone of the 'meanwhile' where action and process are rejected for what I like to call the 'waiting'; that is the interstitial time in which, and this is essential, the notion of what-one-is-waiting-for is all of a sudden unimportant and irrelevant. The 'waiting' is that zone in-between concrete and tangible 'homes' in which [language] investigates the meaning of an absence, of that which should have come, or should come or will come but is not here yet.

—Bartoloni (2004: 13)<sup>2</sup>

## Caesura: Standing Still in an Opening

Perhaps Agamben's central motif in *The Open* is that of the *caesura*—the stand-still—that holds our thinking, across any thinking of regions between man and animal; for in this book these regions are, in some way, always intimately linked—not only serving philosophical enquiry, but all enquiry that has questioned this relationship (theology, ecology, medicine, biology etc.)—and, for Agamben, a radical re-entry, ethical in its impetus, into a genealogical analysis for an outside to humanism and all its problematic implications. Let us enter *The Open* in the middle that demarcates a shift in the book's intonation; a tonal register that has implicitly shifted from retroactivity to potentiality. Here Agamben concludes the section on the *Anthropological Machine*, a machinic characteristic of instrumental humanist thinking that we associate with the epoch of modernity (and linking this work to his earlier concern with bare life, from the Aristotelian distinction between *bios* and *zoe* to Foucault's concerns with the advent of the biopolitical).<sup>3</sup>

Like every space of exception, this zone is, in truth, perfectly empty, and the truly human being who should occur there is only the place of a ceaselessly updated decision in which the caesurae

and their rearticulation are always dislocated and displaced anew. What would thus be obtained, however, is neither an animal life nor a human life, but only a life that is separated and excluded from itself—only a bare life. (Agamben, 2004: 38)

### Osmotic Languages of Agamben's Waiting

We hover in a reading-understanding of questions of style that asks for another time; another paradigm of thinking, neither wholly constative nor wholly performative: rather a thinking between both moments, oscillating without the desire for a claim on either position. This thinking of style, style of thinking marks Agamben's *The Open*—a writing style that produces in its brevity something of an interstitial difference—a *waiting*—that allows the reader to gauge what is *really* at stake. *Really?* We wait whilst something surprising reveals itself through this playful performing, whereby each section accounts for a slice of thinking (Foucault suggests knowledge is not for understanding but for cutting) that has radically placed itself into some official doxa on the relations between man and animal. Agamben's *open* lies waiting between each section inasmuch as it reveals the linkages which build upon modernity's (humanist) prioritizing of (man's) mastery over things (animals-*himself*) in the world, thereby closing down (or forgetting) the contingent nature of our being.

Indebted to Heidegger, Agamben's *open* is a revealing of a shift in thinking that holds open the wonder of thinking; the *as such* that opposes, as it reveals, the dominance of instrumental logic wherein a culture of technology has become our central way of relating to the world. Here animals are *ex-positioned*, revealed as things (not beings) that we relate to insofar as how we can use them; and in using them (as in the way of technicity), our own enslavement is produced—a reference to Heidegger's warning in his essay "The Question Concerning Technology", for instance, that the forgetting of being is paradoxically dangerous, for in the essence of technology (which is nothing technological) humanity can be saved, as what is acutely recognizable is the way in which we have forgotten being. And in *The Open* Agamben does something akin to Heidegger, whereby the essence of man is revealed through our relation (a kind of non-relation) to animals. And more so here, in the open—interstitial *waiting*—style of this small book, where between the brevity of each section we find a larger field opens up around the middle of the book. This larger moment of openness structures the book into two marked parts. The first is marked by a kind of wisdom that revisits dominions of thinking (philosophy, theology, politics, medicine, biology etc.), exposing through their singular question the secured borders between human and animal: an exposure of thinking of difference both culminating in, and producing constative accounts of man's placing himself over and above all other beings in the world. In short, this is an effect of Western thought that has produced *the* humanist condition, which Agamben names efficiently as the *anthropological machine*.

The title for Agamben's book is ultimately taken with respect to Heidegger's reciprocal gesturing for a revealing of being through positions of openness and closedness, or unconcealedness and concealedness. In Heidegger's thinking of animal as 'poor-in-world', within its poverty the animal possesses openness through captivation. Man is not poor-in-world as *he* is able to recognize other beings in the world (that is not environment).

the 'in language' free to roam within the 'through language'". To quote Agamben (on such radical presence): "Only when we succeed in [...] experiencing our own impotentiality do we become capable of creating, truly becoming poets. And the hardest thing in this experience is not the Nothing or its darkness, in which many nevertheless remain imprisoned; the hardest thing is being capable of annihilating this Nothing and letting something, from nothing, be" (Agamben, 1999: 253). So, in writing a 'review' (some kind of interpretation through and in reading), on Agamben's *The open: Man and animal*, it is important to sense in what language we dwell in order to move through, not so that some kind of progression as an account of man's dysfunctional relation to animal is confirmed as producing some kind of nihilistic cultural condition (marked in particular by the epoch of modernity), but rather to become productive in experiencing our own impotentiality as a not remaining in the darkness of the Nothing but a coming into an open relationship with it such that letting something, from nothing, be. This presence is not the presence associated with metaphysics but rather is the promotion of a crossing of communities (for example, those of philosophy and literature) that dislocates knowing through the attempt at possessing (language and its object of) or keeping it (object of language/language of object) at a distance in order for possession to take place. Rather, Agamben's openness brings the near and the far together in a rearticulation of singularity and subjectivity into a domain in which 'suchness' (Agamben's such as it is, or, being-such) acquires its own possible actuality; an actuality which is obviously incommensurable with the universalizing concepts of authenticity and inauthenticity. Agamben's such as it is or being-such is characterized by a community of self. This condition or state is not calculable (i.e. we think

again of a turn—not towards something but a turn/move simply in itself); it is incomplete, in the sense that it is something unstructured by the universal. “Suchness”, according to Agamben, is that which “presents itself as such, that shows its singularity. ... The antinomy of the individual and the universal has its origin in language”. *The Open* collects many singular recountings of discursive practices, of disciplinary genres, of relations between men and animals, and in multiplying the as such of brief interstitial accounts we (readers) arrive in and at the same time through Agamben’s language: “an extra-temporal ... the time of pleasurable plenitude ... a time not, in other words, the eternal” (Bartoloni, 2004: 12). We read Agamben’s language as an attempt at the coming community of a pure ‘now’, the interim—not dependent upon a projected future point at which it will be come whole. And so, we may read *The Open* as Agamben’s performative genre, whereby the question of community is bound to his ethics of a taking-place that celebrates the pleasure of difference; each insight into man and animal offers something intelligent and stupid, authentic and inauthentic, potential and impotential.

3. See Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life* (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans.). Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Although, as Agamben states, Heidegger’s ontological paradigm of truth is the conflict between concealedness and unconcealedness, it is a paradigm of thinking that has its originary thinking in a paradigm of politics. Agamben wants to point to two things here that ultimately address his *Open*.

First, Heidegger is still ensnared by the oppositional thinking that he seeks to overturn. Even though animal is poor-in-world (occupying some small place in man’s ‘world’), animal is truly outside the zone of the *polis* (the essential place of man) with its discordant dialectics between concealedness and unconcealedness. For example, “in our culture, the decisive political conflict, which governs every other conflict, is that between the animality and the humanity of man. That is to say, in its origin Western politics is also biopolitics” (80). And second, since animal is only capable of (non)recognizing the being of man through being closed in/to *his* world, then it is truly through the (thinking of the humanist) *anthropological machine* that animal is allowed to be: “If humanity has been obtained only through a suspension of animality, and must thus keep itself open to the closedness of animality, in what sense does Heidegger’s attempt to grasp the ‘existing essence of man’ escape the metaphysical primacy of *animalitas*?” (73)

### Idling

Locating the thetic moment of *The Open* in the middle of the book with Heidegger’s paradoxical *holding* pattern that keeps *humanitas* and *animalitas* (of man) quite separate, we sense how Agamben is indebted to Heidegger’s thinking with respect to a closure to metaphysical thinking. For a post-historical enquiry, this has meant a turn that allows for a Foucaudian engagement with respect to genealogical questioning. This, in turn, takes us back to the book’s beginning: the engagement with an image of the Last Judgment, where humans are given animal heads, an image that starts with the end of history (a world after end of the world-post-judgement) and culminates in the metamorphosis of man and animal. And so Heidegger acts as the central hinge, as that moment that (re-)turns thinking from the very ground of Western thought and opens up a new ground. A suspended spike is placed into the wheels of a dominant (perhaps now idling) *anthropological machine*, which has claimed much of the ground for thinking the question of being human, separate from animal. Its rise and history had made possible the most ‘logical’ outcome of a thinking that permits the stripping of humanity from human beings: “From the beginning, metaphysics is taken up in this strategy: it concerns precisely that *meta* that completes and preserves the overcoming of animal *physis* in the direction of human history” (79).

In its concluding moments the book opens onto another kind of relation, outside dialectical and humanist thinking, another caesura, another hiatus of the decidability of man or animal—something truly unnameable (via Walter Benjamin, whose dialectics were always idling, at a standstill): “The machine is, so to speak, stopped; it is ‘at a standstill’, and, in the reciprocal suspension of the two terms, something for which we perhaps have no name and which is neither animal nor man settles in between nature and humanity and holds itself in the mastered relation, in the saved night” (83). For Agamben, as for Benjamin before him, the *anthropological machine* is out of play.