

Creaturally Glory: Transimmanence and the Politics of Incarnation

Vassilios Paipais
vp31@st-andrews.ac.uk

Abstract

The question of transcendence and its relation to immanence is not new in the history of philosophy, theology, and political theory. Two positions seem to demarcate post-metaphysical political thought on this issue. On the one hand, there is the radical view of transcendence, a hyper-transcendence that is ever more beyond, unalloyed by any mundane thematisation. On the other hand, there is the radical view of immanence emphasising that we should put transcendence behind us and be content with a profaned immanent world. This paper explores how the Christian idea of incarnation, if approached as a *transimmanent* hypostatic modality that reveals how the radicalism of transcendence is realised in immanence, may offer insights into the syntagma ‘creaturely life’. Such a perspective is set against Agamben’s alternative elaboration of creaturely life as form-of-life.

Keywords: creaturely life, Agamben, incarnation, hypostasis, flesh, glory

Introduction

The question of transcendence and its relation to immanence or, as some might argue, of the very distinction itself, is not new in the history of philosophy, theology, and political theory. The history of the relation of the two terms in late modern thought has been overdetermined by what has traditionally been described as the critique of metaphysics or ontotheology. The latter alludes to the Nietzschean and Heideggerian demolition of Western metaphysics inherited and practiced by modern phenomenologists and postmodern philosophers. The critique of transcendence as a pseudo-ground, an absolute or indubitable foundation that lies ‘outside’ finitude in a realm that is perceived to be more ‘real’ than the plane of immanence, namely the death of the ‘true’ world, harks at least as back as Nietzsche’s declaration of the death of God.¹ Heidegger’s *destruktion* of the Western onto-theological tradition – reproached for prioritising *beings* rather than *Being*, and for treating philosophy as the art of the forgetfulness of Being – was also part of the attack against an abstract or ‘fake’ transcendence that functioned as an empty shell, a vacant signifier giving itself over to be filled by the familiar idols of Western metaphysics, be it God as supreme being or *causa sui*, Nature, History, Science, the Nation, Human Rights etc.

As immediate heirs to such a Heideggerian sensibility, French antitotalitarian thinkers developed a characteristic aversion to even an inkling of what they called ‘figurations’ or ‘thematised’ incorporations of transcendence, such as God, the Nation, History, or Man which to them only proved the vacuity of grasping transcendence as a type of ‘crossing over’ to some place above or outside the world in juxtaposition to an equally

¹ See Baker, *Nihilism and Philosophy*.

reductionist notion of immanence as a bounded totality divested of any traces of infinity and operating as the former's mirror image.² As Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe have aptly put it, 'if classical totalitarianism [...], proceeds from the incorporation and the presentation of transcendence (as the work of art in Nazism and as the reason of history in Stalinism), new totalitarianism would itself proceed from the dissolution of transcendence, and, henceforth, come to penetrate all spheres of life now devoid of any alterity'.³

In post-metaphysical thinking on transcendence, two positions seem to define the boundaries of the contemporary debate. On the one hand, there is the radical view of transcendence (e.g., Levinas, Derrida, Kierkegaard, Barth), which Caputo and Scanlon call the move towards 'hyper-transcendence' -a transcendence that is ever more beyond, a still more transcendent transcendence, so to speak.⁴ The problems with hyper-transcendence are, amongst others, that it creates a 'too distant' transcendent (unknowable, unreachable, and eventually irrelevant); it creates a nihilistic world because it is the 'other/outside' world which has true meaning; it devalues the immanent on a profane, mundane level while only the exceptional becomes important as it connects with the transcendent/sublime in brief moments of experience (with the rest of our lives deemed less important). On the other hand, there is the radical view of immanence in which thinkers are inspired by Spinoza, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Deleuze. Such thinkers are driven by a move to 'post-transcendence', emphasising that we should put transcendence behind us and be content with our mundane or profaned immanent world. For them, the old concept of transcendence has become redundant, has lost its power and meaning, and has virtually disappeared into immanence.⁵

While the above distinction is inevitably schematic and suggestive,⁶ it does express a distinctive predisposition within post-metaphysical philosophical thought to fall back on these two options in its rather commendable effort to transcend the transcendence/immanence dichotomy. While both lines of philosophical thought seem to subscribe, with different starting points and aspirations, to the idea that the radicalism of transcendence resides precisely in it having its traces or roots within this world, their arguably limited success in credibly sustaining such a perspective may be a function of their common awkwardness towards the idea of an *incarnate existence* being the sole vehicle of infinity. In this paper, I investigate what the syntagma '*creaturely life*' may mean, if it is approached as the *transimmanent* modality that dissolves the schism between transcendence and immanence. Such an enterprise is constantly threatened by either a misplaced emphasis on a radical, inaccessible, and otherworldly hyper-transcendence (and a concomitant experience of creatureliness as 'alterity') or an overreliance on radical immanence eventually resulting in a defence of pantheism (and a concomitant experience of creatureliness as 'becoming-animal'). It is rather the experience of creatureliness as a becoming-divine human form of animality that I would like to explore in this paper while critically juxtaposing it to the

² See Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought*.

³ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Retreating the Political*, 129.

⁴ Caputo and Scanlon, *Transcendence and Beyond*.

⁵ Or, as Esposito, (*Two: The Machine of Political Theology*, 197) puts it, in his reference to Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*: 'it is not, therefore, a transcendence in the immanence, as is sometimes said, but an immanence that fills the transcendence to the point of removing it as such.'

⁶ See also Stoker and Van der Merwe, *Culture and Transcendence*

recent alternative elaboration of creaturely life found in Agamben's intriguing idea of a form-of-life.

From hyper-transcendence to post-transcendence

In our current so-called postmodern, post-metaphysical predicament, the interest in transcendence is expressed not as a return to (or rehabilitation of) transcendence qua principle or ground beyond question or critique, neither as an authority beyond reason, nor as a totalitarian deity. Given the many crimes and usurpations that have been committed in the many names of transcendence, the chief impulse seems to be to abandon its classical conceptualisation and re-draw its territory away from totalising implications. And yet, few seem to argue in favour of its total rejection or suppression and, thereby, risk its vengeful return as the repressed. Thus, in her introduction to a collective book on *Transcendence*, Regina Schwartz remarks that the dimension of transcendence is reintroduced by various philosophers in that book as 'a crack in immanence, a resistance to it, a primordial inconsistency, a resistance to symbolization' and that even radical materialists rediscover transcendence in new guises such as

the postmodern notion of transgression, the phenomenological notion of the other, the scientific notion of the impenetrable mystery of an infinite universe, the aesthetic notion of excess, the psychoanalytic notion of subjectivity, the political notion of revolutionary ecstasy.⁷

The postmodern fascination with notions, such as the sublime, the ineffable, the Real, the radical alterity of the Other and so on, has by now assumed a culturally iconic dimension. What is not always fully appreciated, however, are the assumptions behind such formulations and their implications for the critique of an ontotheological understanding of transcendence.

Take, for example, Levinas' damning diatribe against Hegel's Absolute and Heidegger's *Mitsein* in *Totality and Infinity*,⁸ both attacked for being two, equally irredeemable, expressions of a violent assimilative totality. Transcendence is here identified with a movement of thought that surpasses the violence of a homogenising totality towards a hyper-'reality' Levinas terms the *ethical relation*. The very title of his masterpiece, *Totality and Infinity*, foregrounds the radical disjunction of the two terms setting up two irreconcilable experiences of relating to the world, the ontological and the ethical. The former, for Levinas, reduces the Other to the imperialism of the Same, while the latter places the 'I' in an asymmetrical relationship of radical interdependence with the Other. Similarly, for late post-Husserlian Derrida, transcendence is not only about God as the wholly other, but 'every other (in the sense of each other) is every bit other (absolutely other)'.⁹ In other words, the infinite alterity of the wholly other belongs to every other. The transcendent is, therefore, no longer found in a vertical relation to God, but in a horizontal relation to others as the Other. It is true that this transcendence (hospitality, otherness, undeconstructible justice) is never as unconditional in Derrida as it seems to be in Levinas¹⁰ but it does

⁷ Schwartz, *Transcendence*, viii

⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*

⁹ Derrida, 'Force of Law', 78; see also Derrida, *The Gift of Death*

¹⁰ See Paipais, 'Self and Other in Critical International Theory'; Baker, *Hospitality and World Politics*.

become, especially during his late Levinasian period, the experience of a (tainted) unconditional (*différance*) that surpasses one's expectations, demolishes one's self-centred autonomy and operates on the horizon of an open, unpredictable future ('messianicity without messianism').

That said, both Levinas and Derrida are perfectly aware that the experience of transcendence is linked to immanence. Levinas finds transcendence only in the appeal of the face of the Other, which is the trace of the absent God - a moment of infinity that is purely this-worldly – while, for Derrida, the experience of alterity may point to a radical transcendence (absolute otherness) but is fully informed by the perspective of the impure origins, or already mediated quality, of this experience (relative otherness). What, however, seems to remain unaddressed is the tendency to view the chasm between immanence and transcendence, not as a double split internal to both terms, but arguably as a one-sided formalisation that keeps the purity and self-sufficiency of transcendence unaffected and uncaptured, even if contaminated, by the uncertainties and vulnerabilities of its dramatic embodiment within concrete, thematised existence.¹¹

A similar tendency is exemplified in a recent Badiou-inspired attempt at socio-political critique based on the critical potential of 'Void Universalism'.¹² Indeed, the concept of the 'void'¹³ is an interesting and necessary critical resource that reveals the impermanence of all social arrangements and the necessity of contingency in politics. Yet, a looming temptation that accompanies its employment is that it can equally be reified and transformed into a new idol, a convenient shibboleth of critical thinking both reflecting and reproducing the constitutive aversion of French post-Heideggerian thought to 'figuration'.¹⁴ Such a critique does not only rest on the objection that the void cannot be represented, and so any temptation to 'operationalise' it ends up being a reification that defeats its own purpose. It also issues a cautionary note that the evocation of an unscathed invisibility may often operate as the guarantor of the infinite distance between an inexorable structural impediment and our less-than-perfect actual political engagements. The implicit depoliticisation here is produced by the temptation to see the void as a hyperreality that condemns all subjective enactments or historical figurations of collective life to apriori failure.

Arguably, caught in the double bind of a similar dualism between a deformed creation and an impossible redemption, Agamben's messianism may be seen to exhibit such a tendency. I have argued elsewhere¹⁵ that his antinomian identification of lawlessness with the messianic¹⁶ betrays a similar Gnostic purism that reduces the law to a

¹¹ See Kearny and Treanor, *Carnal Hermeneutics*.

¹² Prozorov, *Ontology and World Politics*.

¹³ Badiou, *Being and Event*.

¹⁴ Paipais, 'Towards a Formal Political Ontology'.

¹⁵ Paipais, *Political Ontology and International Political Thought*.

¹⁶ Agamben (*The Time That Remains*, 108-112) backs this claim with a wilful reading of Paul's disputed Second Letter to the Thessalonians where the contested figure of the *Katechon* is introduced. In a counterintuitive reading that supports his unqualified condemnation of sovereignty as by definition murderous and inauthentic, Agamben identifies the Messiah as the agent of the mystery of lawlessness (*anomia*), the act of rendering every biopolitical apparatus inoperative. A more plausible reading would identify this mysterious figure with the Antichrist who will appear prior to the *Parousia*. Agamben's reading, however, is symptomatic of his intention to radicalise the distinction between law and life in order to let life shine in its unalloyed absolute detachment from the violence of the law. For an equally

biopolitical instrument for the production of bare life and then accords to the messianic the task of deactivating the juridical seizure of life. In a radical reversal that evokes Benjamin's 'Theological-Political Fragment', Agamben connects the messianic with the profane and the political-theological with the forces of pseudo-transcendence (hence the incrimination of 'glory' in his work as the afterglow of sovereignty) that hold life captive. For this reason, the problem with Agamben's sharp either/or is not entirely captured by those who think that he tends to separate the order of creation from the order of the messianic.¹⁷ Rather, Agamben seems to think that the messianic life can only be the proper restoration of creaturely life.¹⁸ Such a life abandoned to its creatureliness, however, is always a form-of-life, a life unseized by the machinations of the law or an existence where life's form and life's content would not be experienced as decoupled by the law's (or language's) hidden violence. The life of blessed creatureliness is a return to 'infancy',¹⁹ to the unalloyed beginnings of an existence prior to (not chronologically but ontologically) the nullifying effects of the apparatuses of law and language (Agamben's 'original sin').²⁰ Agamben then envisages a space of indeterminate virtuality - prior to the act of naming that set in motion the negative nihilist machine of Western metaphysics - which is the 'saving' dimension of human being's pure (*im*)potentiality retroactively enacted by the experience of modern nihilism.²¹ Eventually, such an inverted redemption (or, otherwise put, the ontological coincidence/indistinction of salvation and creation) suggests a form of immanent materialism that seeks to radicalise theology by opening it up to a new use; a new theology that is perhaps inexorably drawn towards pantheism: 'The world -in so far as it is absolutely, irreparably profane- is God'.²²

In a paradoxical way, it seems that, for Agamben, the road to absolute immanence or pantheism is taken through a detour to antinomianism or, what I have termed in this

antinomian treatment of the Christian concept of glory, at once ambivalently caught in the governmentalities of an economic theology and pointing to the possibility of an undefinable 'coming community', see Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*.

¹⁷ See, for example, Critchley (*The Faith of the Faithless*, 200): 'There are moments when Agamben seems to want to push Benjamin's Messianism towards a radical dualism of, on the one hand, the profane order of the created world and, on the other hand, the Messianic order of redemption.' In this respect, Agamben (*The Time That Remains*) does go beyond the Benjamin of the 'Theologico-Political Fragment' where this tension seems implacable. That said, a radically nihilistic reading of Benjamin would find no rift between the Benjamin of the 'Fragment' and that of the 'Theses on the Concept of History', rather interpreting the radical separateness of the messianic in the 'Fragment' as paradoxical proximity already acting 'weakly' towards the profanation of life, which is Agamben's argument.

¹⁸ See Agamben *Means without End* and *The Open*.

¹⁹ Agamben, *Infancy and History*.

²⁰ The nature of Agamben's nihilism can be elucidated by reference to the difference between the messianic nihilisms of Benjamin and Scholem as manifested in their correspondence on the work of Franz Kafka (Scholem, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*). In their quarrel over the precise meaning of the 'Nothingness of Revelation' (*Nichts der Offenbarung*), the crucial point separating them was 'whether the fading of the Law, its receding into nothing, ends the story of revelation (so Benjamin) – or whether it merely marks a point of erasure, a yet another *tsimtsum* of God, which also bears a hope of the revelatory renewal (so Scholem)' (see Bielik-Robson, *Jewish Cryptotheologies of Late Modernity*, 279). Agamben (*Potentialities*, 47) sides with Benjamin's thorough-going nihilism: 'Nihilism experiences this very abandonment of the word by God. But it interprets the extreme revelation of language in the sense that there is nothing to reveal, that the truth of language is that it unveils the Nothing of all things. The absence of a metalanguage thus appears as the negative form of the presupposition, and the Nothing as the final veil, the final name of language'.

²¹ This is the familiar romantic trope of salvation amidst the greatest danger one finds in Hölderlin and Goethe, only in Agamben the very experience of abandonment to one's irreparability *is* salvation itself.

²² Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 90.

paper, hyper-transcendence. Granted, this is not an antinomianism that seeks to efface the law but only to render it inoperative, dismantle its attachment to violence and hence achieve its true fulfilment as Love.²³ And yet, Agamben's soft-antinomianism-turned-pantheistic-immanentism arises as symptom of the same mystery that led Benjamin to pose the messianic as a force that through acting increases the force of the profane, itself acting in the opposite direction.²⁴ And while, for Benjamin, it is the tension between the messianic and the profane that is productive of human beings' happiness; for Agamben, taking it one step further, happiness is the result of the revelation of the true nature of the messianic as profanation. The messianic, having served its purpose, dissolves into the profane revealing the secret that redemption has been with us since creation: redemption *is* creaturely life.²⁵ But why is it that to attain creaturely life one is obliged to venture what appears to be a mysterious and uncertain leap to post-transcendence by way of a hyper-transcendent detour?²⁶ Is the transition from a subtle antinomianism (that does not subvert the law but dwells in the ongoing process of it becoming superfluous) to a tensionless, almost hyper-profanity, pantheism (inoculated from the vagaries of historicity) ineluctable or perhaps the only available to us? Or, equally, is it the only faithful to the syntagma 'creaturely life'?

Transimmanence and the mystery of incarnation

I have sketched the *prolegomena* to such a daunting question in the last chapter of my *Political Ontology* book.²⁷ My guide to this quest was Henri de Lubac's *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, a work of historical theology perhaps comparable only to the lasting influence of Ernst Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies*, a treatise that relied heavily on de Lubac's book. In his extraordinary study, de Lubac tells the story of how during the High Middle Ages the mystical body of Christ ceased to be identified with the united body of the believers summoned around the cup of the Eucharist and started signifying the fictitious corporate body, or the invisible aura of a visible sign, first of the Church, and then of the Christ-like figure of the sovereign or the body politic with the king at its head (as famously depicted, for instance, on the frontispiece of Hobbes' *Leviathan*). For Kantorowicz who followed in the same vein, the idea of sovereignty began to be modelled around Christ's two natures with the sovereign being 'Man by nature and, through his consecration, god by grace'.²⁸ In that context, grace became a fictional legal abstraction employed to consecrate the power of the secular state. Eventually, while previously the Eucharist revealed the body as the dynamic effectuation of the spoken word and the Church/sacrament as the *elongatur* (extension, actualisation) of the Incarnation,²⁹ by the seventeenth century 'the mystical body ceased being

²³ See Agamben, *The Time That Remains*.

²⁴ Benjamin, *Reflections*, 312

²⁵ 'Redemption is...the irreparable loss of the lost, the definitive profanity of the profane' (Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 101)

²⁶ Suffice it to say that this transition may not always be as smooth or as riskless as Agamben may imagine it. For one of Agamben's major inspirations, Jacob Taubes (*Occidental Eschatology*), (as much as for Voegelin, Löwith, Cohn and others), in the new era that dawned with Joachim of Flora several religious radical movements, especially in the late Middle Ages and early modernity, imagined the profane realm as God's Kingdom, almost paradise on earth, thus violently forcing the full accomplishment of the spirit in the temporal.

²⁷ Paipais, *Political Ontology and International Political Thought*.

²⁸ Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 141.

²⁹ Peterson, *Theological Tractates*.

transparent of meaning; it became opaque, the mute setting for a ‘je ne sais quoi’ that altered it, a lost land equally alien to speaking subjects and to the texts of a truth’.³⁰

For de Lubac, however, the original understanding of the ‘mystical’ implied a more transparent and dynamic -rather than secretive and static- idea, closer to what one today would call a *speech act*. In this performative sense, then, the ‘mystical’ does not simply signify the superimposition of one entity over against the other (Church vs. sacrament), but rather evokes a state of affairs in which the relation between these two figures is ceaselessly dynamic in line with the true meaning of the word ‘mystery’ which in its original meaning, as de Lubac reminds us, referred to ‘more of an action than a thing’, a way of life and a communal experience, rather than a supernatural, magical intervention from the outside.³¹ This dimension of an invisibility which is visible, not as a thing or a fictional representation of a transcendent beyond, but as a transimmanent comportment, a genuinely incarnate spirit, is de Lubac’s vehicle to a critique of the present by reference to an experience in which the discontinuity between ‘mysticism’, belief, and practice did not obtain. Even so, is it possible to access such a sensibility from within the phenomenological parameters that the break with such an experience (that, in its acute expression, takes the form of atheism) made available (which, in turn, raises the enormous question of how one is supposed to relate to and appropriate tradition)?³²

Rowan Williams³³ has recently grappled with this question from a Wittgensteinian perspective that puts emphasis on the *language* through which, what Heidegger³⁴ calls Pauline faith (*pistis*) to the ‘Jesus phenomenon’, was communicated in the early Christian tradition. Williams argues that if we study the linguistic novelty through which the syntagma ‘Lord Jesus’ or ‘Jesus Messiah’ was spoken about, we discover not a superhuman agency in human form or a great heavenly mediator of divine action akin to the angelic high priests in whom divine presence and power reside - and there was no shortage of apocalyptic language in that period whereby exceptional individuals were presented in those terms. Instead, what is distinctive about how Paul and other early Christian fathers talked about Jesus is paradoxically the emphasis on a ‘continuous human subject, born, maturing, dying’.³⁵ Even more so, what is in Jesus the sign of divine power and glory, evoked as confirmation and paradoxical reinforcement of Paul’s message, is the extremity of Jesus’ human suffering. The Christological language, used by the early Christian community up to the end of the second century, again resists the temptation to employ the ‘heavenly power’ model and insists on accepting without ambiguity the ‘vulnerability of Jesus to suffering’.³⁶

³⁰ De Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, 6.

³¹ De Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 37-54.

³² For the correlative understanding of theism and atheism that this paper adopts, such possibility is afoot, made available by the horizon of the ‘death of God’ within which both faith and atheism are opened up to a new use. As Nancy (*The Dis-enclosure*, 36) argues, ‘the atheist who firmly refuses all consoling or redemptive assurance is paradoxically or strangely closer to faith than the ‘believer’, which paradoxically makes atheism itself ‘Christianity realised’. For similar sensibilities, see Ricoeur, ‘Religion, Atheism, and Faith’, and Kearney, *Anatheism*.

³³ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*.

³⁴ Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*.

³⁵ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 51.

³⁶ Williams only mentions Ignatius of Antioch in this context, but the same purpose was served by the doctrine of ‘divine passibility’ championed by Cyril of Alexandria.

Indeed, Williams insists, Jesus' actual history matters too much, which makes his various images as a charismatic teacher, healer, divine messenger, embodied angel, or embodied patriarch only secondary to Paul's recognition of Jesus by his crucifixion. The upshot here is that Jesus' human narrative, including his death, is not understood as a staged drama that operates as a witness to, or promise of, divine action 'but *that action itself*' is divine action, 'it is *as* human passivity, freely accepted, that his death becomes divine agency'.³⁷ The point Williams wants to drive home is that the mode of divine agency is not to be correlated with an inflation or reinforcement of human action that is bestowed extrinsically, restoring human frailty, and leading to superhuman invulnerability and triumph. Instead, it is coincident with the human act of self-surrender and its presence is expressed as such, not as the evacuation of human freedom or the supernatural maximisation of human creaturely capacity, but as an act of full openness to divine purpose and love (the Logos' mode of relating to the Father). Christ's act of *kenosis*, then, the supreme act of self-emptying

is not that it involves a sort of collision between divine action and human action, such that one or the other element must be denied, qualified or diminished, but that a certain mode of finite life (self-sacrifice, other-directed love) is so attuned to the eternal mode of divine action that it becomes the occasion and vehicle of that infinite agency within the finite world.³⁸

With Williams, we are invited to rethink the relationship between immanence and transcendence not as one of juxtaposition, neither as superimposition nor as complementarity, but as one determined by the non-coincident interpenetrability of the finite and the infinite, abandoned in their mutual vulnerability. The language of analogical theology is recruited by Williams to describe this reality (he draws extensive insights here from the work of Anglican theologian Austin Farrer and the Jesuit Eric Przywara) as well as the Chalcedonian language of Christ's incarnation as unity without confusion, division or changeability (*hypostatic union*). However, the language of theology is not here legitimised through the invocation of tradition, but is primarily approached as the *linguistic eccentricity* of a particular kind of phenomenality or as the limit-condition of (the possibility of) phenomenality itself that Jean-Luc Marion has termed donation or *givenness*.³⁹ What it means for an infinite causality/agency to be at work is that a system of finite causes is operating - not that a more impressive instance of finite causality (God as the prime mover or *causa sui*) is invoked to complete the picture. Thus, the world of interlocking finite causes (whether envisaged in terms of linear causal chains or as emergent properties out of the complex interaction of overlapping layers) is not closed in a mechanistic

³⁷ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 55

³⁸ Ibid., 56.

³⁹ Marion, *The Visible and the Revealed*. Indeed Marion's perspective is more than relevant here as he grounds the possibility of offering a phenomenology of 'religious phenomena' (what he calls 'revelation') in the 'principle of principles' of phenomenology itself, that is, the fact that the phenomenological reduction involves the return to the 'things themselves' suspending all 'conditions of visibility' (the principle of sufficient reason, the law of non-contradiction, and the stricture of subjective intelligibility) in order to receive the phenomena purely as they give themselves (see Marion, 'The Saturated Phenomenon'). Similarly, Michel Henry (*Incarnation*) talks about the 'arrival in a flesh' as the more radical meaning of incarnation that constitutes the auto-revelation of the arch-passibility of Life itself. For such an imaginary, flesh transcends the body/spirit distinction and becomes "the edge" where the human meets worlds that exceed and entreat it -animal and environmental, sacred and profane' (Kearney and Treanor, *Carnal Hermeneutics*, 11).

way, but infinitely open to configurations that communicate more than their own immanent content.

Agamben's Gnosticising Platonism and the spectrality of flesh

If, for Williams, Chalcedonian Christology may still offer us glimpses into the mystery of incarnate existence in a post-metaphysical era, for Agamben contrarily, the ontological fracture between transcendence and immanence is negatively conditioned by the mainstream Christian theological legacy steeped in Neoplatonism and, subsequently, Aristotelianism.⁴⁰ The priority of actuality over potentiality, God's actions over His essence, and even the complex doctrine of Christ's two natures or the medieval doctrine of *analogia entis* that Williams evokes, are read by Agamben as episodes in a long genealogy of divisions through which the 'presuppositional' logic of *negative foundation*⁴¹ extends the anthropological machine of political theology incessantly producing order through division: '*Ordo* names the incessant activity of government that presupposes and, at the same time, continually heals the fracture between transcendence and immanence, God and the world.'⁴² In many ways, then, it is no coincidence that, as a redemptive response to this predicament, Agamben endorses an idea of 'absolute immanence' along Spinozian and Deleuzian lines nor that his call for profanation of the theological-political signature verges on the affirmation of pantheism.⁴³

⁴⁰ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*. In that sense, Agamben subscribes to a move that Nancy (*The Dis-enclosure*, 150) calls a 'Rousseauism of Christianity', which posits 'a good primitive Christianity' and then proceeds 'to lament its betrayal'. The Protestant reading of primordial Christianity's corruption through Hellenization underpins Agamben's approach to the tradition and is perhaps one of the legacies he inherits from Nietzsche's critique of Christianity and Heidegger's 'atheist Protestantism' as well as from his own take on the revival of eschatology in the twentieth century as a response to the Church's abandonment of her messianic mission (see Agamben, *The Mystery of Evil*). Agamben's ambiguous relation to the Christian tradition might also explain his qualified dismissal of, if not hostility to, the Neo-Platonic/Aristotelian theological synthesis in the East and West (covering the theology of the seven Ecumenical Councils up to Maximus the Confessor's Eucharistic ontology and Aquinas' medieval synthesis) that advanced a, different to his, modal ontology (see Zizioulas, *Being As Communion*; Manoussakis, *God After Metaphysics*; Yannaras, *Person and Eros*; Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*; Loudovikos, *Analogical Identities*). In this tradition, it is the much maligned by Agamben concept of *hypostasis* (or the Greek term *prosōpon* as opposed to the Latin *persona*) that designates a form of life/mode of existence (*τρόπος ὑπάρχεως*) where substance is nothing but its modifications. Agamben comes to positively recognise Plotinus' 'politicisation of life' in the *Use of Bodies*, perhaps revising his earlier assessment in *Opus Dei* where the Plotinic 'hypostasis' is read as the apparatus that performs the biopolitical capture of life (see Björk, 'Plotinus').

⁴¹ Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 265-6: 'The city is founded on the division of life into bare life and politically qualified life, the human is defined by the exclusion-inclusion of the animal, the law by the exception of anomie, governance through the exclusion of inoperativity and its capture in the form of glory.'

⁴² Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 90.

⁴³ See Agamben, *Potentialities* and *The Use of Bodies*. Eric Santner (*The Royal Remains*, 138) has named this tendency the 'pantheism debate', a recurring theme 'that seems to return at the end of each century under a different guise...between an affirmative biopolitics -what [he is] calling a *biopolitical pantheism*- on the one hand, and the *creaturely messianism* of the modern German-Jewish tradition of thought represented by figures like Franz Rosenzweig and Walter Benjamin, on the other.' For an account of the weight and pervasiveness of this theme in German intellectual debates in the 20th century, see Lazier, *God Interrupted*.

Agamben's Gnosticising Platonism and anti-Aristotelian prejudices are here exposed in full glory, so to speak. Once he has designated the immanence/transcendence divide as the product of a governance apparatus that secures human beings' enslavement to biopower, he falls back to a form of transcendence as an indescribable and indefinable existence ('the thing itself', 'pure potentiality'), a presentation that cancels all false representations. He is, of course, quick to point out that the only presentation of the 'thing itself' that we are capable of realising is only made possible through the failure of our representations.⁴⁴ But it is not possible in his terms to proclaim that the incarnate divine is the embodied failure itself as weak agency (a predicament in which eternal life is life as remainder-*λείμωνα*, rather than a life without remainder).⁴⁵ For Agamben, the path to radical profanation cannot be confused with any historical actuality; rather, in the spirit of the pure coincidence of beginning and end, it aims at the restoration of human beings' post-historical *pure potentiality*. The ultimate act of fidelity to the *logos* is the death of representational politics, the preclusion of any figuration, which is apriori equated with the names of language, the appropriations of the Voice, the negative foundation of representations that 'preceding generations called God, Being, spirit, unconscious'.⁴⁶

It may then be not entirely unfair to claim that the stumbling block⁴⁷ of Agamben's messianic phenomenology is revealed in its Platonic awkwardness *vis a vis* incarnation. Agamben may well affirm the radical difference that constitutes the spectrality of flesh, the *missing link*, for Santner,⁴⁸ or radical gap that constitutes flesh as a surplus that forever eludes one's grasp. Yet, he has no concept of a hypostatic embodiment of that remainder because he takes the latter to be the product of the negative presuppositional structure of language that he wishes to see eliminated, rather than radicalised. It is no accident that, in Agamben's imaginary, incarnation coincides with the failure of all flesh to put on the 'clothing' of grace since, for him, the truly 'glorious body' is revealed at the point of the dismantling of the nature/grace opposition that veils the originary human nudity ('naked corporeality').⁴⁹ Agamben acknowledges that this 'naked corporeality' is only negatively *posited* as lost by the act of clothing itself, i.e. by the veiling of a deprived grace. Nonetheless, he cannot envision the dissolution of the nature/grace apparatus in the suffering enfleshment of this double loss, but only in the recovery of nudity as 'pure visibility/knowability', namely as the true potential of the human body to be naked (the 'thing itself') before the insertion of the machine of 'baring' (i.e., making naked).⁵⁰ Such a denuded, post-

⁴⁴ Agamben, *The Idea of Prose*, 107. In that sense, Agamben belongs to those thinkers who according to Santner (*The Royal Remains*, 76), 'highlight the spectral dimension of the flesh correlative to a gap - missing link- that haunts any narrative of the emergence of human subjectivity'.

⁴⁵ Agamben is ambivalent on that front as a simple comparison of his treatment of the idea of the 'remainder' in his *The Time That Remains* and *The Use of Bodies* would show. Whereas in the former the messianic remainder renders the law deactivated, in the latter, as in most of his work, the logic of the remainder takes a back seat compared to the logic of indistinction that seems to be prioritised as the *dispositif* that dissolves the Western ontotheological machine of separation and its practical-political effects.

⁴⁶ Agamben, *Potentialities*, 45-6.

⁴⁷ Literally, the 'flesh-wound' of Agamben's phenomenology, like the one described in Kafka's story 'A Country Doctor' that inaugurates a new way of becoming immanent, 'a mode of thinking "with" or "in" the flesh' (Santner, *The Royal Remains*, 82).

⁴⁸ Ibid., 71.

⁴⁹ Agamben, *Nudities*, 81.

⁵⁰ It is characteristic of Agamben's Platonic understanding of the body that in *Nudities*, 103, he describes the body that restores its inoperativity as 'the body that contemplates and exhibits its

historical existence is supposed to be the reversal of bare life's expropriation by the apparatuses of biopower. In truth, however, it makes for a purified, Gnosticising form of Platonic contemplative existence where human beings are reconnected with that within their existence that (para-)exists as an *Idea*; or, in his own words, with 'a Gnostic reading of the Platonic idea' as 'an eternal as-suchness'⁵¹ beyond the impurities of a life conscious of the 'weakness of language' [*διὰ τὸ τῶν λόγων ἀσθενές*].⁵²

Granted, Agamben's 'pure transcendence', as it were, of the 'thing itself' is not some concession to an esoteric Platonic mysticism, but just the flip side of his 'absolute immanence' that reads both 'events' as arising on the same plane of indistinguishability.⁵³ Equally, however, his 'immanent' Platonism prevents him from realising that once he posits the ontological separation between *zōe* and *bios*, he cannot imagine its overcoming as a 'healing' -that is, qualified- *zōe*⁵⁴ (creaturely life lived only as the modification of its own being), namely a hypostatic existence that may embody our reconnection with flesh as 'auto-impressionality'.⁵⁵ Instead, for Agamben, creaturely life becomes the supersession of vulnerable, suffering creatureliness in the manner of 'pure creatureliness' (again, a recovery of the 'thing itself' without remainder), reminiscent of Plato's discussion of the *autarkēs* existence as the unity/sublation of thought and praxis.⁵⁶

potentiality [and] through its gestures enters a second final nature (which is nothing other than the truth of its former nature).' It seems that reconnecting with our creatureliness does not merely involve removing the spell of operativity. It also fantasises the possibility of accessing a non-spectral body (a post-historical body without remainder which paradoxically becomes more apophatic than material) envisaged as a suspended 'between', a zone of indistinction between 'becoming-animal' and 'becoming-human' (Agamben, *The Open*).

⁵¹ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 100, citing Plato's *Seventh Letter*.

⁵² Agamben, *Potentialities*, 30.

⁵³ Ibid., 220ff.

⁵⁴ 'Healing' here of course does not refer to the restoration of a traumatic disruption in the fabric of being, but the transfiguration of the flesh's spectrality. Healing, for instance, is defined by Merleau-Ponty (*Phenomenology of Perception*) as a reopening of self to others through the body, a turning from *Thanatos* (death drive of closure) to *Eros* (life drive of communion). Life, though, cannot be lived without an (excessive) remainder because life is nothing natural that our 'becoming-animal' may restore (see also Rogozinski, *The Ego and the Flesh*). Yet, that remainder is not nudity as 'pure knowability', but creaturely life as abject excrement or, in Pauline terms, as the 'refuse of the world (*ώς περικαθάρματα τοῦ κόσμου*)', 'the offscouring of all things (*πάντων περίγυμα*)' (1 Cor. 4:13). Finally, the idea of a life (*zōe*) that can be qualified deconstructs Agamben's *zōe/bios* division. For an argument that this idea of *zōe* as qualified life already exists in Aristotle, Hellenistic Judaism (Philo) and early Christianity, see Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*; see also Ojakangas, *The Greek Origins of Biopolitics*. For such an interpretation, then, a better translation for Aristotle's *zōon politikon* would not be 'a gregarious animal' or 'a political animal' but 'a political living being' since politicality is not 'a specific difference that determines the genus *zōon*' as opposed to 'the attribute of the living creature as such' (so Agamben). Instead, 'the attribute of the bare life of the being called man is political, and that is his specific difference' (Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 330; emphasis in the original).

⁵⁵ Henry, *Incarnation*.

⁵⁶ In the Third Book of the *Republic* (387 d-e), Plato introduces the self-sufficiency the Guardians are trained to achieve with the unusual expression *αὐτὸς αὐτῷ αὐτάρκης*. This is a very peculiar syntagma that expresses Plato's desire to convey a sense of an active agent that acts upon himself (both the actor and recipient of an action) and is echoed in Agamben's search for a form of life that rests on a modal ontology of use (*chrēsthai*) where existence is an act of auto-constitution (Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*).

The irony here may be that such an inscrutable existence, far from profaning the world, reintroduces a sense of mystery-opacity surrounding creaturely life which, in addition to being rendered seductively elusive and cryptic, it is equipped with a sense of contemplative self-sufficiency that is disconnected from the human experience of loss, failure, and imperfection. To be sure, Agamben's blind spot here is not some hostility towards the body or aversion to human animality. On the contrary, his entire argument is geared towards an existence that would suspend the machine of separation between the human and the animal that defines human beings as the negation of their animality. The price, however, for the attainment of such a state of suspended indeterminacy between human and animal is the loss of the possibility of assuming an incarnate existence that embodies, not the suspension of historical existence, but its transfiguration into *an-other life* so that, to recall Marx on another occasion, true history may begin.⁵⁷

In contrast, creaturely life, for Williams' more Aristotelian/patristic orientation, is

[t]he affirmation of the transforming *coincidence* of finite and infinite in the detail of this finite life, including and especially its humiliation and powerlessness, in an 'ultimate realism' which insists that the unprotected historical fleshliness of the incarnate Word is the appropriate embodiment of the selflessness of the divine.⁵⁸

In other words, the incarnate divine (i.e., the becoming-human of the divine through the becoming-divine of the human) is a finite mode of existence that enacts infinity through its mode of relatedness with the absolute self-dispossession and self-abandonment of God's love. Infinity reveals itself in the abandoned and despised mortal, i.e. infinity is not here Agamben's pure (*im*)*potentiality* but a finite *mode of unrelated relating* (*hypostasis*),⁵⁹ as a form of 'weak' *praxis*, enacting itself ultimately in the emptying power, the dereliction, and the wordless helplessness of the Cross: 'The 'in-and-beyond' of [this] analysis already implies that what we encounter in any finite substance is a kind of *excess*, an overflow of connectedness and so of possible meaning'.⁶⁰ That possible meaning qua surplus/remainder, if it is to become divine (*theōsis* qua powerlessness) and not human (will-to-power) or animal (nullification of the will), can only be our re-connection with our creatureliness as a vulnerable,

⁵⁷ In that sense, the experience of historicity is not something that one encounters once the phantasies of actual history are overcome, but one that regulates the (dis)jointure between the somatic and the spectrality of flesh. To be creaturely, as Santner puts it in the *Weight of All Flesh*, 84, 'is to exist in forms of life that are, in turn, contingent, contested, susceptible to breakdown—in a word, historical'.

⁵⁸ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 236.

⁵⁹ Or as Nancy describes Christ's *hypostasis* in his *Inoperative Community*, 139: 'neither a fusion nor differentiation, but a single place of subsistence or presence, a place where the god appears entirely in man, and man appears entirely in god.' In a brilliant insight that captures the ambiguity of the term *stasis* (a component of the word *hypostasis*) that in Greek signifies both immobility, status quo and strife, discord, Stathis Gourgouris makes a point that is reminiscent of the Lacanian split subject, or the birth of subjectivity, not as a negative machine that subdues essence, but as the failure of self-sufficiency: 'In an admittedly free translation, we could say that substance [hypostasis] is no longer a mere manifestation of singular being (essence), but the signification of otherness-in-being, of being that exists through discord with itself (stasis).' Gourgouris, 'Political Theology as Monarchical Thought', 159, n38.

⁶⁰ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 252; see also Santner, *On Creaturely Life* and Nancy, *Adoration*

fleshly (always a spectral/hauntological, never natural, perturbation in the fabric of being) and suffering hypostasis (a becoming-divine human form of animality).⁶¹

God's radical difference from the world is not then only revealed in the world's abandonment to profanation (*first kenosis*), but that profanation itself becomes the terrain of the revelation of the divine in its powerless vulnerability, frailty, and mortality (*second kenosis*).⁶² Thus, transcendence is not enacted as the extrinsic 'interruption' or exception of the historical, the human, the profane nor can divinity be added as a predicate to the sum-total of what is a true human life (this wouldn't simply be a category mistake but also a misunderstanding of the divine gesture). In its radical separateness, the divine is revealed (or modally enacted), not merely as in proximity to human plight, but as the genuine creaturely, an incarnate suffering existence.⁶³ Such a self-emptying doubly kenotic existence signals (the body is always a sign) not only the end of all ontotheology in a move that has been described as 'transcendence transcending itself or *transdescendance*',⁶⁴ but, more importantly, the abandonment to a zero level of sacrality where the divine is the *coming to presence* of the creaturely.⁶⁵ Once the 'false sacrality' of the divine is self-exposed, the divine body reveals itself as the *placing* of creaturely life bringing the violence of the anthropological machine to a halt.

(In lieu of) Conclusion: creaturely glory

On another occasion, I have recommended the following image as an expression of the incarnate tragicomic existence of a dying God that performs a double kenosis: the death of an absolute transcendence (posited in contradistinction to immanence) and the deactivation of an imagination that equates the Word with supernatural agency or power and earthly glory:

⁶¹ Or, to use Derrida's, as ever, imaginative neologism, 'an a-human divinanimality', what is in human beings *more* and *less* than themselves (see Derrida, *The Beast and The Sovereign*, 127).

⁶² For similar perspectives on the potential of kenotic Christianity to transform contemporary philosophy, ontology, and ethics, see Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*; Kristeva, *This Incredible Need to Believe*; Vattimo, *Belief*.

⁶³ This is not a morbid pursuit of misery, torment, or martyrdom akin to the perversion of the ascetic ideal in monastic communities (see e.g., the Catholic practice of penitential self-flagellation) as a conduit connecting the self with the divine nor of thanatolagnia or self-annihilation as a model of existence. Although a preoccupation with 'suffering bodies' is significant (see Kearny and Treanor, *Carnal Hermeneutics*), the fundamental insight here is 'the logic of pathos...the *dunamis tou pathein*, which is the power to receive, the capacity for being affected' [emphasis in the original] (Nancy, 'Rethinking Corpus', 87). Agamben's (*The Use of Bodies*, 29-30, 214) work is animated by a similar search for an existence that actualises itself through 'a complex movement of auto-affection' (what he labels the 'demand' of life taken from Freud's *die Not des Lebens*), or what Michel Henry (*Incarnation*, 90) describes as the passive (*pathétique*) life, this 'original affectivity [that] is the phenomenological matter of the auto-revelation that constitutes the essence of life'. That said, Agamben (*The Use of Bodies*, 277) arguably exhibits a thanatolagnic tendency -that prefers to identify salvation, not with the transfiguration, but with the death of desire- in his equation of inoperativity with the image of a lifeless deposited God: 'Thus in the iconographic theme of deposition -for example in Titian's deposition at the Louvre- Christ had entirely deposited the glory and regality that, in some way, still belong to him on the cross, and yet precisely and solely in this way, when he is still beyond passion and action, the complete destitution of his regality inaugurates the new age of the redeemed humanity'. In this respect, Agamben's inoperativity seems to share commonalities with the thanatomania of the Provençal troubadours that Denis de Rougemont exposed in his monumental *L'Amour et l'Occident* and that Agamben himself treats with sympathy in *The Adventure*.

⁶⁴ Dickinson, *Theology and Contemporary Continental Philosophy*, 110.

⁶⁵ Nancy, *Corpus*, 63-65.

In Greek-Orthodox temples -in a beautiful short-circuit of the events of crucifixion and resurrection- the icon of the crucified Jesus is accompanied by a crowning inscription that implies the only existence, as Paul would say, messianic subjects can be boastful of. Above the hanging, mutilated, humiliated and wretched body of a condemned Christ -an outlaw for the Roman state, a scandal for his own community and a fool for Greek philosophers- the sign paradoxically declares: *'Ο Βασιλεὺς τῆς Δόξης* ('The King of Glory').⁶⁶

Such a paradigm challenges Agamben's designation of the empty throne as the *par excellence* figure of glory. For Agamben, glory provides the occasion for inoperativity itself to become ostensive, but it is immediately captured, confined, sacralised by the theopolitical signature of sovereign biopower.⁶⁷ Indeed, for Agamben, glory ends up veiling the hollowness at the core of the Godhead instead of being recognised for what it is, not the empty cipher of 'necessary' grace or economic Providence, but the actualisation of the division of the division between law and grace, flesh and spirit. In the paradigm of the Crucified Christ as 'King of Glory', glory is revealed not as the sacralised visibility of an invisible void,⁶⁸ but as the hypostatic *presentation* of creaturely life.⁶⁹ Glory is the tragicomic abject body of a dying God that appears foreign to what most would imagine sacral regality to be. The latter is rather revealed as the glory of the creaturely, kenotic incarnate existence at once serving as a living indictment of the world's injustices and pointing to another life. The profanation of the sacred, the ultimate demystification of sacrality (or, dare say, the immanentisation of the eschaton) that Agamben is looking for is already there, hidden in plain sight.

Ultimately, as my critique of Agambenian thanatolagnic inoperativity has hopefully shown, such profanation cannot be achieved through the nullification of desire (a political theology of the Sabbath or of the deposed God) but through its transfiguration (a political theology of the short-circuit between Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday). Creaturely life is indeed the deactivation of the logic of (self)mastery and (self)sufficiency. Yet not through the death of desire (that would only tighten the grip death has on us and eventually operate as the negative mirror image of the self-sufficient desire for immortality, thus ironically reproducing the very logic of the negative presupposition -that Agamben's entire *oeuvre* seeks to transcend-, this time by positing death as the negative foundation of life). But through desire giving itself over to another life that is contingent, susceptible to failure and

⁶⁶ Paipais, *Political Ontology and International Political Thought*, 228.

⁶⁷ Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 245.

⁶⁹ For a de-Christianised world or audience, this image may seem like a piece of, what Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* would call, 'natural history', a hieroglyph or cipher of a past life to which full access is no longer possible. However, exactly as such it can indeed be *hypercathected*, invested with an excess of signification (thus, become a *Pathosformel*, as conceived by Aby Warburg) that escapes an easy capture by an interpretation that reads in it the seductive conversion of utter loss into absolute gain, an image that 'does not faithfully rest in the contemplation of bones, but faithlessly leaps forward to the idea of resurrection' (ibid., 232-3). On the contrary, the abridged non-coincidental interdependence between the two events of the crucifixion and the resurrection that the image evokes becomes the 'slight adjustment' with which Benjamin had associated the messianic, or even Santner's (*Creaturely Life*, 129) 'deanimation of the undeadness' that creaturely life is burdened with, again signifying not the death of desire but its transfiguration as the missing link between disenchantment and (re)enchantment.

breakdown, surrendered to doubt and lostness, but never without hope and love -in sum, truly creaturely because truly historical.

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