

ON THE 'PERFECT TIME OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE': AGAMBEN AND FOUCAULT

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RESUMO – O artigo articula um ponto de convergência entre Foucault e Agamben, de forma a sublinhar uma confluência em seus pensamentos, a saber, a possibilidade de um pertencer não-complicado ao profano, ou ao tempo perfeito da experiência humana.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE – Agamben. Experiência humana. Filosofia política. Foucault. Modernidade.

ABSTRACT – The article articulates a point of convergence between Foucault and Agamben, with a view to reinforcing a common direction in their thought, namely, the possibility of an uncomplicated belonging to the profane, or to the perfect time of human experience.

KEY WORDS – Agamben. Foucault. Human experience. Modernity. Political philosophy.

“Against the empty, continuous, quantified, infinite time of vulgar historicism must be set the full, broken, indivisible and perfect time of concrete human experience...”

GIORGIO AGAMBEN, *Infancy and History* ¹

“Experience is just this, being born to the presence of sense, a presence itself nascent, and only nascent. Such is the destitution, such the freedom, of experience.”

NANCY, *Birth to Presence* ²

“... no matter how boring and erudite my resulting books have been, this lesson has always allowed me to conceive them as direct experiences to “tear” me from myself, to prevent me from always being the same.”

FOUCAULT, *Remarks on Marx* ³

When philosophy dreams of an experience that will tear us away from ourselves, as Foucault puts it, it is difficult to know whether this tearing away leads us back to or toward what philosophy attempts to articulate, conceptualize or preserve, or whether the tearing away is precisely *from* philosophy. “Tearing away” might be an

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¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History* (Verso, 1993), 148. Henceforth *IH*.

² Jean-Luc Nancy, *Birth to Presence* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1994), 4.

³ Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), 32

active separation from language or a kind of language (and thus a form of life) that, in its use of concepts or its fealty to representation on the one hand and transcendence on the other, is hostile to life, to immanence, to a fundamental human experience that induces philosophy – or the experience of thinking. The question concerns not just philosophy as a discipline, though philosophy as a discipline is and should be shaped by the question, as Heidegger insisted. At issue is the character of the experience that is either presupposed by philosophy or produced by it. If philosophy tears us away from a life structured by a forgetting of the image or a repression of the imagination characteristic of western thought or by an occlusion of Being in favor of beings, then what experience of language, of life, of things or of ourselves animates this tearing away? This too is an experience – of thought, of the margin of thought and what is not thought, which is not to say “the ineffable”. If that is the case and we turn to the margin to think it as such, does the movement away from oneself even then occur as the enactment of a lineage that is philosophical or a mode of life or thinking that the philosophical represses or cannot recognize? What kind of experience is this that tears one away from oneself? And who or what wants this?

These questions are inspired by, and take up, Giorgio Agamben’s remarks on Foucault and the “Politicization of Life”, in which Agamben posits a body free of sovereignty and of all forms of discipline as the frustrated goal or wish of genealogical analysis. Only by linking to threads of analysis that Foucault could not or did not link – between the “two faces of power” – can the political be brought “out of concealment” and can thought be “returned to its practical calling”⁴. This point of connection is implicit in Foucault’s work, as Agamben avers, but he argues that the two strands of Foucault’s last analyses of bio-political power and techniques of the self converge without touching. Foucault, according to Agamben, gives an incomplete picture of power in relation to bare life. The “tearing away” from ourselves that Foucault recommends is still under the faded sign of sovereign power and fails to recognize bare life. *Homo Sacer* attempts to remedy this “blind spot” in Foucault’s analysis of bio-power by restoring the significance of sovereign and legal power⁵. This ultimately defines Agamben’s “messianism,” the hope of a future free of the sovereign ban (untouched by regimes of bio-power, by disciplinary technique), a pure and profane immanence out of which language speaks only its own sufficiency in relation to broken and perfect time. We might ask whether this messianism is a hopeful gesture toward a perfect future or recognition of its potentiality, its absence and presence, its defining tie to broken and perfect time⁶. My reading of Agamben

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 4-5. Henceforth as *Homo Sacer*.

⁵ See *Homo Sacer*, 6. See also Peter Fitzpatrick’s critical review of Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, “These mad abandon’d times,” *Economy and Society* 30:2, May 2001, 259-260.

⁶ I raise a similar question in my “Law in Abandon” (*Law and Critique* 15 (Kluwer, 2004), 259-285), in which I understood Agamben to be positing body and a politics “free of every ban” and Nancy’s thinking, in his *Experience of Freedom*, to be informed by abandonment through and through without any hope of a messianic release from the ban. I am not convinced, however, that Agamben’s “broken and perfect time” does not resist this criticism. In some ways, then, this essay is a return to that question and to the reading of Agamben I proposed.

will emphasize the latter in order to understand the hopeful gesture, such as it is, as related to Foucault's sense of his work as liberatory and transformational. Thus, if the claim is that Foucault's project is in need of completion in the name of the future and that Agamben's thinking completes that thought, we might ask about the value of "emancipation" and its connection to experience in their thinking. Foucault, of course, has been read as a pseudo-romantic, as if the "tearing away" from oneself is in the name of and performed by a true self that yearns for an unfettered exuberance, sometimes without any clothes on and in desert locales. Do Foucault's alleged romanticism and Agamben's complicated messianism constitute promises that either can or wish to keep?⁷ Of course, if they make promises, they do so in the full knowledge of what a promise entails. They do not define a future, and they do not prescribe. Each refuses to articulate norms or to depend on idealizations that risk maintaining the exclusions or destructions that each in very different ways attempts to revisit, and from which they hope to get free. But how does that contribute to the liberatory effect of Foucault's thinking, or the release from the sovereign ban? This essay will articulate a point of convergence between Foucault and Agamben, with the goal being the reinforcement of a common direction in their thought: the possibility of an uncomplicated belonging to the profane, or to the perfect time of human experience.

I. Agamben's "Perfect Time of Human Experience"

For Agamben, contemporary philosophical thought cannot bear the thought of the margin, of the limit, of the tearing of oneself from oneself, and condemns it to a "marriage with its theological master"⁸. Where Foucault is never sure he is a philosopher and is often indifferent to philosophical priorities, Agamben engages with what philosophy wants to say – and therefore what is possible for philosophy to say – recognizing all the while that what philosophy wants to say is not yet said. His essays "attest the project of a work that remains stubbornly unwritten"⁹. They have never been experienced – never read, never written, never presented at professional conferences – but everything in Agamben's *oeuvre* serves as an introduction to these un-attempted essays. The philosophical for Agamben, as for Benjamin, is transformed by the experience of its own limits and the task of coming philosophy "to redefine the entire domain of categories and modality so as to consider no longer the *presupposition* of being and potentiality, but their exposition"¹⁰. If the task is understood as a task of reintroducing a sense of history to the time of

⁷ The question of the critical potential of Foucault's work has been asked and answers attempted for some time now. See, for example, Beatrice Han's *Foucault's Critical Project* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

⁸ Giorgio Agamben, "The Idea of Language," in *Potentialities* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 45. His sympathy with Deleuze is apparent here, and much of what follows will keep that sympathy in mind.

⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *IH*, 3

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, "Philosophy and Linguistics", *Potentialities*, 76.

experience – a task or motif that runs through all of Agamben's works – then Agamben not only escapes lyricism and utopianism but hopes to initiate a radical reinvention of philosophy¹¹. The exposition of potentiality returns philosophy to its practical calling. Philosophy – or philology, linguistics – opens a space for human action, a space untouched by sovereign power and from which language and law speak only themselves without any reference to an end, where the limit between language and law, law and life, blurs into indistinction. We find ourselves engaged in a project – only ever proposed, never fully realized, and to which all of Agamben's texts are elaborate prefaces – of “reaching a principle free of every presupposition”, what Plato thought of as the *telos*¹². To think experience in this context is to begin to rethink the beginning of ethics, the possibility of community, and to inaugurate an examination of the “concrete human experience” in “perfect time.”

1. The Precondition

At the conclusion of *Infancy and History*, Agamben proposes a “Project for a Review.” The proposed review is one among many volumes (an infinite number?) of unwritten texts of which *Infancy and History* is, as Agamben writes in his 1988 preface, a prologue. The “Project for a Review” prepares for precisely that – a re-viewing of the limits, an “experience” of the margin or an experience of the interruption that is, as an experience, the site from which the project can take its beginnings.

The interruption or margin lies between “truth and the mode of transmission, between writing and authority”¹³. This margin is what is in so many ways “destroyed” by Western thought despite its obsession with the past, with the mode of transmission and what is transmitted, despite appropriation and quotation. Western thought destroys this margin through a double gesture that Derrida understands so well: the desire for undifferentiated truth is interrupted by an awareness of differences in the formation of truth, an awareness that is carried with the metaphysical assumptions that structure language, representation, and the subject. The “Project for a Review” is thus devoted to “destroying a destruction,” to abolishing the margin between the thing transmitted and the mode of transmission, which is to say, to pursuing an *experimentum linguae* – an experiment and experience in and of language – the content of which can only be understood as an

¹¹ To show how this thread stitches together Agamben's works, we would first have to work through Agamben's answer to the question “what is the meaning of “I speak”?” (*IH*, 5), a question that Agamben says is present in his written and his unwritten works. It would also be necessary, it seems to me, to study and attempt to answer the question Agamben asks of Deleuze: “... what does it mean for absolute immanence to appear as life?” (“Absolute Immanence”, in *Potentialities*, 229). I suspect that Agamben's *Profanations*, forthcoming in English at the time of this writing, will address this question.

¹² Agamben, “The Idea of Language”, *Potentialities*, 47. It is also absolute immediacy, infancy, “pure contemplation without knowledge”. Cf. “Absolute Immanence”, in *Potentialities*, 233.

¹³ Giorgio Agamben, “Project for a Review”, *IH*, 143.

“unpresupposable non-latency in which men have always dwelt, and in which, speaking, they move and breathe”¹⁴. In pursuit of this *experimentum linguae*, Agamben opposes criticism to ideology and the human sciences, and puts in their places an “interdisciplinary discipline” – philology. Philology, says Agamben, has always pursued this: “The abolition of the margin between the thing to be transmitted and the act of transmission... has in fact been philology’s role since the very beginning.” Animated by criticism, philology would thus be the general name for “all the critical-philological disciplines which today are designated, somewhat inappropriately, ‘human sciences’. That philology is “critical” means that this “as yet unnamed science” is “freed from subjection to the powers of Law and Destiny”¹⁵.

Through this *experimentum* (and its etymological tie to “experience” should be kept in mind) Agamben resists fundamental features of the human sciences, insofar as those sciences are dedicated to a positivistic approach to human behavior and institutional structures that are modeled on the natural sciences, or as they understand themselves to be “critical”. Despite their “critical” edge, they nevertheless repress or cover up the margin between writing and authority. They do not recognize that what is transmitted in and as culture or a lineage is distinct from the truth of what is transmitted, the irreparable divide between subject matter and truth content¹⁶. Agamben thus proposes philology as a “tool for the destruction of destruction” and the ultimate abolition of the margin between writing and authority, as philology forces us to revisit and continually review our historical experience. Quite beyond an analysis of “false consciousness,” which Agamben forcefully rejects as preserving the gap between subject matter and truth content, this “critical mythology” would draw us back to an “experience of the language of metaphysics” that has its “final, negative foundation in Voice”¹⁷.

Thus can take shape and substance the project of an ‘interdisciplinary discipline’ in which all the human sciences converge, together with poetry, and whose goal would be that ‘general science of the human’ which is severally heralded as the cultural task of the coming generation. In so far as it is possible, the review sets out to prepare the advent of this as yet unnamed science which, in its correspondence with poetry, might also be the new, critical mythology... (IH, 147).

And yet, at the climax of the process of review (or the process in which a review is proposed), when Agamben’s language turns not only messianic but revolutionary

¹⁴ IH, 9. In a sense, the “Project for a Review” and the preface to *Infancy and History* announce the same project: a return to or review of an inheritance (say, the division between language and “I speak”) from a perspective animated by the interruption of that inheritance. They announce works that have not been written – that perhaps cannot be written until the interruption is accomplished – and depend on experiences that can only follow the work. This is, as we will see, what Agamben means by “broken and perfect time”.

¹⁵ IH, 147.

¹⁶ IH, 143.

¹⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 85. This text (“The Eighth Day”) can be read productively alongside the “Project for a Review” as both texts point toward an experience of the human as both living and speaking.

and imperative in tone (“The moment has come...”, “There must be a critical demolition...”, “... must be brought to fruition...”), Agamben brings us up short:

It is a *precondition* of the review's proposed undertaking to reach a new point in the relationship between time and history – that is, first and foremost, a new and more primary experience of time and history¹⁸.

The proposed review, one that would use philology as a tool to “destroy a destruction” by not only re-inscribing the margins of western philosophy with what it had repressed (poetry and its connection to the political, voice and its connection to mortality) but by blurring the boundaries between margin and text, law and life – the possibility of accomplishing what the review proposes is conditioned by a “new and more primary experience”. This is the experience he will shortly thereafter oppose to the “empty, continuous, quantified” time of “vulgar historicism” as the “full, broken, indivisible time of concrete human experience”. What would appear to be the tool of the liberated intellect, a new way of thinking, a sensibility that is attuned to potentiality instead of transcendence, to presencing and *ereignis* rather than presence and dialectic, appears instead to require as its presupposition or precondition a “primary experience” of history that is *not yet*. How does Agamben propose to introduce us to this experience? What would such an introduction mean?

The “Project for a Review”, as I mentioned, joins the prologue in announcing a work yet-to-come. The prologue is even more explicit in this regard, as the concept of infancy is accessible to a thought that has been “purified”¹⁹, accessible to those who have reached a new point in the relationship between time and history. And yet these texts are always propaedeutic, introductory, in anticipation of the real work and of what one might come to say, both dependent on and productive of experience. However, in *Infancy and History*, Agamben opposes not just two understandings of experience, but two forms of life. Instead of proposing an alternative conception of experience, no longer adopting as the measure of its “perfection” its capacity to approximate the true or to mediate between a world of events and a knowing subject, Agamben proposes another measure for what he will call “effective experience”.

Effective experience is contrasted with “displaced experience” or “mechanized” experience; experience after the “destruction of experience”. Experience is “displaced” or “mechanized” – “expropriation” is the word Agamben will use – by modern science. More precisely, the expropriation of experience “was implicit in the founding project of modern science”²⁰ in which experience occurs primarily and in the first instance as insufficient, and then, in the next instance as “regulated and digested”, brought into alignment with axioms, with the authority of knowledge and, more importantly, with what can be known. “Modern science has its origins in an unprecedented mistrust of experience as it was traditionally understood”²¹. This

¹⁸ *IH*, 148, emphasis added.

¹⁹ *IH*, 4.

²⁰ *IH*, 17

²¹ *IH*, 17

distrust provokes the displacement of experience “outside the individual” so that the certainty of an experience is in a direct correspondence with the loss of the authority of that experience (“Might I be a gourd or be made of glass?”). It is literally “expropriated” in the sense of becoming a “property” that is no longer under the control or authority of an individual, and less certain and useful to the degree that it cannot be expropriated. Which is to say that none of the events that make up daily lives – the drive to the market, playing catch on the lawn, climbing a rock unaided by ropes, making copies of this very article to discuss with a friend, waking up to the tolling of bells, a balloon ride – “will have become experience”. Agamben's claim here is hardly dismissive of balloon rides and games of catch. It is a claim about the temporality of experience, of what “will have become”. It is about the “translatibility” of experience and not about the quality (poor or rich, base or exalted) of the experiences themselves. What “becomes experience” in the modern era is sense data that is translated, interpreted, interrogated with respect to its meaning and sensibility. Impressions are taken up not as experience but as evidence and thus a means by which something is transmitted (and thus separated from what is transmitted in experience). It is mechanized.

Agamben's response to this expropriation of experience is not a retranslation of experience along the lines of a philosophy of life or a call to a reconstruction of experience. In his remarks on Heidegger's *Ereignis*, Agamben points to this very expropriation as that which must itself be appropriated, a gesture in which the “dialectic of the proper and the improper thus reaches an end”²². The task of appropriation does not grasp what is expropriated, it does not banish the ban or, in Deleuzian terms, it does not give way to transcendence so that what is expropriated is once again brought back into a fold of meaning, brought out of exile and into full citizenship. We are left instead with an experience without consciousness: “... the transcendental is resolutely separated from every idea of consciousness, appearing as an experience without either consciousness or subject, a transcendental empiricism, in Deleuze's truly paradoxical formulation”²³. This amounts to a “restoration of mobility” to a life of immanence, a form of “beatitude” in that human happiness and freedom are no longer played out against the backdrop of subjection to power, but instead are played out in a “semantic constellation” appropriate to immanent causality, a vocabulary attuned to “desire's variable field of immanence”²⁴.

The philologist's attention to this semantic constellation determines “the matrix of desubjectification itself in every principle that allows for the attribution of subjectivity” and produces for philosophy a new form of contemplation, that is, a “dislocation” of the contemplative life onto a new plane of immanence²⁵. And this is precisely what Agamben is recommending to those of us interested in the possibility

²² Giorgio Agamben, “The Passion of Facticity”, in *Potentialities*, 203

²³ Giorgio Agamben, “Absolute Immanence”, in *Potentialities*, 225

²⁴ Giorgio Agamben, “Absolute Immanence”, in *Potentialities*, 235

²⁵ Giorgio Agamben, “Absolute Immanence”, in *Potentialities*, 239

of liberation and in finding that possibility – that potential – at the heart of ethics and of political life. It is a possibility that relates to infancy, the site of the difference between the human and the linguistic, and that occurs to Agamben in the form of a question that Foucault will also ask: “What is the meaning of ‘I speak’?” Thus, without recommending a return to fantasized infancy or an experience that would return us to a more pure relationship with language, to the point of connection between desire and the word (all of which are far too fancy, thoughtful, and ultimately too difficult to really play proxy for the very experience for which they serve as alternatives), Agamben draws us to an experience of the dislocation in the question “What is the meaning of ‘I speak’?” and in the turn to philology and etymology as the privileged context for possible answers. But this experience of the dislocation – this “broken and perfect time” – is not an *avant garde* resistance to systems of meaning or metaphysics, a rage against closure that prefers the open to the healed wound as a perpetual reminder of the failures of language or the dangers of mechanization or technology. It is experience as such. That is to say, it is the experience of the dislocation, where the genitive ‘of’ is subjective and objective, an experience that is best said in a semantic constellation in which the coordinate points are provided not by consciousness or by tortuous translations from one thing to another (the truth and the mode of transmission), but by the emergence here and there of a way of being that speaks for itself:

... from the point where there is experience, where there is infancy, whose expropriation is the subject of language, then language appears as the place where experience must become truth. In other words infancy as Ur-limit in language emerges through constituting it as the site of truth²⁶.

2. Experience

So at the end of these reflections on experience, Agamben is left with the hope of a return, of a “philosophy to come” that might return us not to infancy but to “transcendental experience”. Where Kant rules out “transcendental experience”, though, Agamben (with Benjamin) pursues it through the *experimentum linguae*, an experience of language itself “in which the limits of language are to be found not outside of language, in the direction of its referent, but in an experience of language as such, in its pure reference”. It is this question – or the possibility of pursuing this kind of experience – that defines all of Agamben’s work, as he says, “both written and unwritten”²⁷. Far from an experience of the “ineffable”, this experience “of language itself” is already bound up with language. Where Dilthey and Bergson attempted to return to “lived experience” after Kant by positing “the non-substantial and purely qualitative character of consciousness as revealed in immediate experience”²⁸, neither can escape the gravity of the idea that this “ineffable”

²⁶ *IH*, 51.

²⁷ *IH*, 5.

²⁸ *IH*, 35.

immediate experience is the province of poetry or mysticism²⁹. From that perspective, the “current of consciousness” fades into imperceptibility when we turn to grasp it, if only because we are so thoroughly of it, and so it can only be gestured at or evoked.

In response to the scientific expropriation of experience and the suggestion (in Husserl, Dilthey, and Bergson) that mute experience is brought to language and “voiced” (whether as an expression or approximation of what cannot be adequately grasped or as an inexpressible gap that is brought to language), Agamben proposes an “experience of language itself” and a discovery or tracing by philology – that is, through etymology – of an experience that belongs to immanence. This would be an experience of potentiality, of the presence of an absence and the “existence of non-being”:

For everyone a moment comes in which she or he must utter this “I can”, which does not refer to any certainty or specific capacity but is, nevertheless, absolutely demanding. Beyond all faculties, this “I can” does not mean anything – yet it marks what is, for each of us, perhaps the hardest and bitterest experience possible: the experience of potentiality³⁰.

The bitterness of this experience lies in the gulf between the absolute demand and the absolute privation, the recognition that having a faculty means having a privation. The “perfect time of human experience” thus refers not to an experience one has, but to something one undergoes, though not as “one” who undergoes “something”. That is, experience is not only thought non-subjectively (so that there is no “one” undergoing), but as structured by privation, absence, and potentiality. With the appropriate emphasis on the *time* of experience, we might instead say that the unexperienced, unsayable in experience is precisely the “tearing away” that experience constitutes. There is no experience other than the experience of becoming other to oneself. This is the most difficult, “hardest and bitterest” precondition, as Agamben says, of what experience becomes in philosophy: a natural pedagogy, a transmission of intelligence, ideas, and concepts from mind to mind. “A theory of experience”, he says of experience that is of (proper to, honest with respect to the coincidence of truth and transmission) experience, of the “brokenness” and “perfection” of the time of that experience, “would have to ask: does a mute experience exist, does an infancy of experience exist? And, if it does, what is its relationship to language?”³¹ Agamben finds this question leading not to a site of abandonment (which is always excluded in the sovereign ban and thus bound up with that exclusion, with law, the political, and power), but to poetry, to an aesthetics utterly devoid of reference to subjectivity, and thus a passage “from the first to the third person” as the key to understanding experience. “Lived experience” is neither

²⁹ A longer discussion would be required here in order to do justice to Dilthey, who is a looming presence throughout *Infancy and History*. For Dilthey, as Agamben says, life is “at the same time intelligible and inscrutable. It is unfathomable, yet accessible to the poet, the prophet, the religious person...” But he also adds: “...the historian.” Wilhelm Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences: Selected Works, Volume I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 489.

³⁰ Giorgio Agamben, “On Potentiality,” in *Potentiality*, 178

³¹ *IH*, 37.

lived nor experienced, but is the “simple difference between the human and the linguistic”. “The individual as not already speaking, as having been and still being an infant – this is experience”.

II. Experience and/as Philosophy in Foucault

In this passage from the first to the third person, Agamben articulates and intensifies a sense of experience as experience that “tears me from myself”³². Agamben's thinking draws us toward “contemplation without knowledge”, a way of thinking that requires “dislocation” and perhaps a new “physiognomy” for political philosophy and epistemology³³. It is this aspect of Agamben's work – an aspect that is bound up with the question “how should I live?” and that points to a transformed conception of the world and a body that is in question – that connects his thinking to Foucault's³⁴. It places Agamben with Foucault outside of the alternative between messianism and pessimism. Beyond this tension in his work, and perhaps through it – in his “perfect messianism” – Agamben finds in the language of potentiality, possibility, and absolute immanence, not a way of saying something or the expression of a hope so much as a way of experiencing, a path along which philosophy has always wanted to step (there are footprints in Aristotle, the Stoics, Spinoza) and that is thought again (or anew) in Heidegger's “Ereignis” and in Foucault's late work on biopolitics. To understand the political “out of concealment” – that is, to live in it, or as it, if what that entails is a transformative or liberatory experience – one has to return to the question of experience as such, to the “perfect time of human experience”. Agamben puts this in various ways, but in each

³² As David Stern argues in his “The Messiah's Task: Agamben on the State of Exception and ‘Perfect Messianism’”: “Agamben notes two forms of messianism, one he associates with Scholem and Derrida, and the other he associates with Benjamin and makes his own. The first form, which he calls imperfect, ‘nullifies the law but maintains the Nothing in a perpetual and infinitely deferred state of validity’. The second, perfect form of nihilism doesn't even let validity survive, but succeeds, as Benjamin put in his letter to Scholem, in ‘overturning the Nothing’ (*Messiah and Sovereign*, 171)”. Stern concludes: “For Agamben, the messianic task is “to create a space that escape[s] the grasp of power and its law” by rendering them inoperative (*The Time That Remains*, 27).” (David Stern, “The Messiah's Task: Agamben on the State of Exception and ‘Perfect Messianism’”, unpublished MS, 2006). The sense of “perfection” in this “perfect messianism” is also the sense of “perfection” in the title of this paper. The difficult task involves seeing this space as a potential space. It is not “to come,” at least not only “to come” or “perpetually deferred”, but rather it is the space of appropriation, the “clearing”, as it were. For an excellent treatment of the way in which Benjamin's conception of the messianic plays a role in Agamben's thinking, see Catherine Mills, “Agamben's Messianic Politics: Biopolitics, Abandonment and Happy Life”, *Contretemps: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 5: 2004; 42-62. <http://www.usyd.edu.au/contretemps/contretemps5.html>. Retrieved on August 18, 2006.

³³ Giorgio Agamben, “Absolute Immanence”, in *Potentialities*, 239.

³⁴ I am borrowing this sentiment, if not this language, from Todd May's treatment of Deleuze in his *Deleuze: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). He reads Deleuze as an important philosopher not on account of the conceptual innovations he introduces, but on account of the perspective that their introduction creates, a perspective oriented by the Socratic emphasis on living well. Agamben not only can be read this way, but many of his texts explicitly demand it. I am thinking of the introduction to *Infancy and History* as well as of moments in his *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), in which it is clear that his concern is with “the happy life”. See, for example, *Means Without End*, 114-115.

case it is the experience of being “between” – between the past and the future, between modernity and the Greeks, between sovereign power and bare life, or always on the margins. Thinking “in a new way about life” as Agamben has it, we will find that Foucault’s thought occurs to us in a different way or we see it from a different perspective (perhaps not anticipated by Agamben), not as a two-pronged analysis of techniques and powers or an analysis of institutions and the measures they impose on subjects of power, but as experience. This experience is produced by and in lineages of forms of control, techniques of power, and biopolitics, to be sure, and this is how Foucault is typically read and understood with respect to this question. This is a way of saying that we are “constructed”. And yet this experience – in its belonging to that lineage – is also the experience of letting go of lineal belonging in the experience of exclusion and self-exclusion from that lineage. This occurs in a lineage of individual stylization in which such stylization is experienced as an interruption of normalcy – as broken time? – without a gesture of transcendence that would urge us to look beyond the breakage to something else, something whole, or some small thing (this desire, that persona, free from this obligation, more resolute in that one) to which we might be happier belonging³⁵. This not only distances Foucault from pedestrian claims about “social constructionism”, it puts him into communication with a central philosophical problematic. Agamben and Foucault both think experience in terms of potentiality, self-enactment, and belonging to non-belonging. The perfect time of human experience is in every sense “the between” of self-enactment and non-belonging, the place between – and therefore of – lack and abandonment on the one hand and utter sufficiency on the other. This ultimately allows us to see Agamben’s project as ethical, bearing in mind Agamben’s etymology of “ethical” in his essay on Heidegger’s *Ereignis* as what is proper to the self as dwelling, place, or habit.

As I indicated above, part of Agamben’s project involves a “completion” or “correction” of Foucault, particularly in *Homo Sacer*. And yet this completion gains its urgency precisely because of or on behalf of experience:

If anything characterizes modern democracy as opposed to classical democracy, then, it is that modern democracy presents itself from the beginning as a vindication and liberation of *zoé*, and that it is constantly trying to transform its own bare life into a way of life and to find, so to speak, the *bíos* of *zoé*. Hence, too, modern democracy’s specific *aporia*: it wants to put freedom and happiness of men into play in the very place – “bare life” – that marked their subjection³⁶.

Modern democracy is both the subjection of man and the dispersion of sovereignty into regimes, techniques, and powers of which Foucault gives an

³⁵ Charles E. Scott and Ladelle MacWhorter are both sensitive to this aspect of Foucault’s work, to the exception to normalcy that individual stylization constitutes in our tradition, the exclusion and inclusion that such stylization constructs. The final section of this paper will draw on Scott’s paper “Normalcy and Exclusion,” delivered at Cal State Stanislaus in October of 2005. I quote from that paper with his permission (unpublished MS, 2006). See also Ladelle MacWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

³⁶ *Homo Sacer*, 9-10.

adequate if incomplete account. But Foucault does not think “bare life” as such or the absolute space of exception. Foucault’s subjection is to disciplinary spaces and practices that touch the bodies of the confined, surveilled, and cared-for, but these are not absolute spaces of exception, sites of abandonment. Agamben clearly is sympathetic in the main to Foucault’s analysis and my intent here is not to criticize Agamben’s extension of Foucauldian bio-power. My concern is only with the “practical calling” of critique, and my sense that Agamben and Foucault experience that calling in the question “What is the meaning of ‘I speak’?”

With this in mind, I will turn to Foucault and to philosophy as a form of experience that “tears me from myself”. The violence of this formulation is conspicuous, and yet it is also – famously – a cause of joy in Foucault’s work, much as it is in Nietzsche. Violence, as Nancy has it, ignores the system, the world, the configuration that it assaults (a person or group, the body or language). “It does not wish itself to be compossible, but rather to be impossible, intolerable in the space of compossibles that it rips apart and destroys”. This violence is instrumental in Agamben’s texts insofar as the interruption implied by the difference between the human and the linguistic, the “having been” and “always coming to be” challenges, nullifies and overturns the reach of sovereign power, which is to say, nothing. In Foucault’s genealogical texts, the violence is not only instrumental but bound up with the movement of the text itself.

Foucault’s *Omnis et Singulatim* concerns what he calls the banal fact that philosophy after the enlightenment is bound up with two essential problems: the prevention of reason from going beyond the limits of what is given in experience and the excessive powers of rationality. Foucault’s primary interest in thinking through these problems, through the connection between rationality and power, is that the connection is forged in and through experiences (of madness, death, crime, sexuality, etc.). These are not experiences of groups or populations, or experiences of the ‘excluded other’, but experiences of speaking beings who from time to time – and because of a tradition or heritage in which self-inspection and self-surveillance are definitive expectations of responsible subjects – become caught in the experience of a difference between singular desires, words, and self-understandings and the problematizations in which they are taken up as objects of knowledge and concern. These experiences can give us the feeling that we are going astray, that there is a path on which we ought to be walking, that the measure is being taken somewhere – anywhere – and that refinement in our behavior, our language, our self-discipline will put us back into the fold. The form of power that is concerned with these experiences is what Foucault calls in this essay and throughout his later lecture courses “pastoral power”.

Pastoral power gathers a variety of techniques for the management of human beings and is tied to the formation of multiple modes of knowledge – the constitution of medical knowledge and perception, its ties to juridical knowledges and practices, the location of the processes that produce these complexes of knowledge in the asylum, hospital, and courtroom. There is a difference between this analysis of pastoral power and other forms of analysis in Foucault’s work, however. Where

Histoire de la Folie is concerned with the *image* of madness as it gathers experiences together and organizes perceptions of madness, and where later lectures, notably the 73-74 lecture *Psychiatric Power*, begin not with the image of madness but with the complex apparatuses of power that form discursive practices³⁷, *Omnes et Singulatim* and related lectures concern the relation between pastoral power and “live individuals”³⁸. He says:

Our civilization has developed the most complex system of knowledge, the most sophisticated structures of power. What has this kind of knowledge, this type of power made of us? In what way are those fundamental experiences of madness, suffering, death, crime, desire, individuality connected – even if we are not aware of it – with knowledge and power? I am sure I'll never get the answer, but that does not mean that we don't have to ask the question³⁹.

This is not an assertion about “social construction”. The phrase “what has this type of power made of us” is not a claim about a golem-like creation of the experiencing subject out of the mud of culture but is better understood along the lines of the familiar, colloquial question: “what do you make of that?” And it is important in the context of Agamben's unwritten oeuvre that Foucault is certain that he will never get the answer to this question. The way it is posed and the concern for the “fundamental experiences” as *experiences* in relation to knowledge and power constitutes a shift or at least an important gesture in Foucault's thinking. It is where Foucault locates the point of connection between the two lines of analysis that Agamben seems to think Foucault kept distinct and where the critical “effectiveness” of genealogical thought can be seen, as “effective history” or as a small interruption in the operation of power, even if the power is that of observation and concern. Foucault notes an affinity *avant la lettre* (so to speak) with Agamben's “broken and perfect time” when, at the conclusion of *Omnes et Singulatim*, Foucault alludes to Hermann Hesse's claim that only constant reference to history is fecund: “Experience has taught me that the history of various forms of rationality is sometimes more effective in unsettling our certitudes and dogmatism than is abstract criticism.” This history is committed to the dissipation of identity and the transformation of the will to knowledge so that it turns against itself, “loses all sense of limitations and all claim to truth in its unavoidable sacrifice of the subject of knowledge”⁴⁰.

I wish to note two things about this claim in relation to Agamben's thought of experience. First, Foucault, like Agamben, identifies “experience” as a precondition. Though he is famously reluctant to use the word “fundamental” in relation to

³⁷ Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1973-1974* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 13.

³⁸ Michel Foucault, “‘*Omnes et Singulatim*’: Toward a Critique of Political Reason” in James Faubion, ed. *Power: The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, Volume Three (New York: The New Press, 2000), 307. Henceforth as *Power*.

³⁹ “*Omnes et Singulatim*”, in *Power*, 311.

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology. Essential Writings, Volume II* (New York: The New Press, 1998), 388.

experiences of suffering, crime, sexuality, and madness, these experiences are nevertheless “preconditions” in the sense that they are singular, taken up by knowledges, practices – by sovereign power – and not essential laws or types that are actualized or realized. That is, both Foucault and Agamben rule out *a priori* responses to the question of experience and of sovereignty. There is no “place” or “time” in which potential experiences are actualized or happen. There is nothing lying in wait. There are instead discursive functions, technologies, practices and the dreams that orient them – all of which are describable, traceable, and opposed in every way to experience whether experience is understood as the difference between the human and the linguistic (Agamben) or as transgression that “opens onto a scintillating and constantly affirmed world”⁴¹. Experience, even in its “transgressive” sense, is understood not as an actualization of a potential but as that which is in a traceable, articulable relation to the historical forms and structures of rationality that care about them. Here we can oppose the “concrete time of human experience” in Agamben and the “time of human beings” in Foucault to the subject of the sovereign ban in Agamben (“bare life”) and the object of police power in Foucault (“life”), for in each case what is at stake is not a secret trove of possibilities, potentialities, or ways of living more appropriate to beings who suffer, desire, and so on. What is at stake is a relation. In *Fearless Speech*, for example, Foucault shows that the problem of truth telling undergoes a transformation from a problem of telling the truth to other people to a problem of telling the truth about oneself. There are thus a number of relations that constitute the activity of truth-telling: the relation of the powerful to the not-so-powerful, the relation one has to oneself, the relation one has to the language with which one must express who or what one is, and so forth. What Foucault and Agamben both emphasize, however, is that the relation one has to the language with which one must express oneself is not one of “means” to “end”, a relation in which one is in command of a tool (language) that one might use to chisel out something communicable from a silent and hidden realm. This is the mystical option, and it is destructive from both Agamben’s and Foucault’s perspective. Instead, Agamben and Foucault “destroy” this “destruction.” The genealogist does not disclose the “truth” about himself in genealogy, but traces the problematizations and practices that in their difference from experience serve to normalize, hypostatize, criminalize, or pathologize it. In an experience of ourselves as desiring, disabled, or otherwise abnormal, there are our possibilities. But the experience does not underlie these possibilities as their hidden fund or as some inchoate “thing” waiting for a voice or for language. On Foucault’s terms this would utterly preclude the possibility of ever “tearing myself away” from myself. Experience is transgressive of the limit that defines the hidden and the expressed, *phône* and *lógos*, inside and outside. That is, it exhibits a “reflexive patience” or a reticence in response to the idea that there is something on the interior of speech that must be

⁴¹ Michel Foucault, “A preface to transgression”, in *Aesthetics, method, and epistemology: Essential Writings*, Volume II (New York: The New Press, 1998), 75.

explicated. “From the moment discourse ceases to follow the slope of self-interiorizing thought... it becomes a meticulous narration of experiences, encounters, and improbable signs”⁴². The point of both Foucault’s and Agamben’s critical interventions is, however, to do precisely that: to create a new condition, to free ourselves for nothing in particular, or at least nothing more than the continuous reversibility and substitutability of things, vigilance and attunement to the transitional and mutational aspects of orders of knowledge and practice⁴³.

Foucault and Agamben are thus oriented in similar ways to the question of speaking – “what is the meaning of ‘I speak’?” – and to the critical consequences of asking the question from a perspective oriented by infancy on the one hand, and by genealogy on the other. Differences in approach, however, are not hard to discern. Foucault’s approach is in many respects incompatible with Agamben’s, an incompatibility I have overlooked in the interest of addressing a point of mutual concern. Briefly, though, we might recall the conclusion to *State of Exception* and Agamben’s insistence that “to live in a state of exception means to experience both of these possibilities [the maximum tension and indiscernibility of the opposing forces of law and life, anomie and *nómos*] and yet, by always separating the two forces, ceaselessly to try to interrupt the working of the machine that is leading the West toward global civil war”⁴⁴. Again, the hope is that the interruption is productive of a new thinking, that by destroying a destruction, we can occupy a place free of any presupposition, the Platonic *telos*. But Agamben will always write a preface to the work, the book, the essay that would not so much record the “results” of this interruption but that would be written in a language that would be illuminated by it, by the experience of these possibilities.

In his discussion of Voice in *Language and Death*, for example, Agamben says: “... inasmuch as this Voice (which we now capitalize to distinguish it from the voice as mere sound) enjoys the status of a no-longer (voice) and of a not-yet (meaning), it necessarily constitutes a negative dimension. It is *ground*, but in the sense that it goes to *the ground* and disappears in order for being and language to take place”⁴⁵. His written work is an introduction to what will always remain unwritten, and experience – in its perfect time – will be out ahead, in between. Agamben’s “time of human experience” *can be* perfect, will be perfect, insofar as it is oriented toward a “coming community” that, though it has never yet been (and thus is not a “nostalgic re-invocation of a *Gemeinschaft*”), is nevertheless what “underpins Agamben’s conceptions of life, politics and historical transformation”⁴⁶. Foucault’s time of experience, his “human time”, is never perfect, or, better yet, Foucault’s genealogical

⁴² Michel Foucault, “The Thought of the Outside”, in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*. Essential Writings, Volume II (New York: The New Press, 1998), 154.

⁴³ See Charles E. Scott, *The Question of Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 86-93, *passim*.

⁴⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 87.

⁴⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity* (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 35.

⁴⁶ See Catherine Mills, “Agamben’s messianic politics: Biopolitics, abandonment, and happy life”, *Contretemps: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 5: 2004; 52.

thought is indifferent to any attractive force that perfection – even if it is not yet, never – might have. Both Agamben and Foucault point a way toward an experiencing that is attuned to potentiality and “*Ereignis*” rather than to its connection to knowledge (“...classical thought takes no cognizance of the question of experience as such”) ⁴⁷, and thus they give philosophy a language that it lacks, a critical language that endeavors to surpass “criticism.” This is a language appropriate to “concrete experience” in and of freedom, to the task of occupying the place at which the division between philosophy and poetry, for example, can be traced and pursued. In short, it is a language appropriate to the experience of thinking, where thinking is “the search for the voice in language” where voice is routinely suspended, and where ethics is the resolution of the suspension of the voice in language.

⁴⁷ IH, 19.