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ON STIFLING A  
TRANSCENDENTAL BREATH:  
AN ITALIAN CONTRIBUTION  
TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF  
BREATHING

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Breath in Recent Times: On an Empirical Conception  
of Breath and the Soul

To what extent, if any, has the more or less newly founded respiratory philosophy conceived of breath in an empirical way? It seems to us that if *spiritus* is understood as that which binds together the ideality of the soul with the materiality of the body, then it could go either way. And yet it has mostly been taken as, for instance, Franco (“Bifo”) Berardi seems to when he speaks of the “soul” in the wake of Epicurus as “the vital breath that converts biological matter into an animated body,” which is to say that the soul – or more precisely, the spirit – is to be understood in a bodily way, as the potentiality which the body accrues, or as Spinoza had it, “[w]hat the body can do.”<sup>1</sup>

But are there no risks attached to this apparent tendency to elide any notion of breath that exceeds the empirical, the material, the bodily, the natural? The question of the empirical status of breath is indeed not merely an academic affair; it may help us to explain certain aspects of the events that have dominated the last three and a half years, since March 2020, in the form of a virus declared “pandemic,” which was

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<sup>1</sup> Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, trans. Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2009), 21.

transmitted for the most part by way of the breath. More specifically, considering such questions may help us to understand the immensely jarring contrast between the friendly valorisation of a shared con-spiration that has characterised this young philosophy up to now, and the intense, even violent, hostility to the breath of the other, which the developed world exhibited from at least 2020 to 2022, and which took the form of the enforced stifling of infants, not to speak of adults, by way of such measures as the mask. What element of our conception of breath can have allowed such a reversal of values, and therefore what needs to be altered in that conception in order that such a transvaluation is never allowed to happen again? A certain turn towards the *transcendental* form of the breath is here urged upon us.

Before passing on to the nature of this breath, let it be said that we do not intend to relegate Berardi himself to the “empiricist” side of the debate, even if we have too little space here to include a reading of Berardi’s book entitled *Breathing*,<sup>2</sup> or his more recent text, *The Third Unconscious*, which devotes itself to the development (and degeneration) of the soul in the time of the “pandemic.” The latter work, in certain of its minor strands, attempts to signal its own virtuous distance from the “anti-masker” line, despite the major thrust of the text moving in quite another direction,<sup>3</sup> and indeed Berardi’s work as a whole may help us eventually to think at least two things: how our sense of social solidarity could have become so degraded that the only way in which it could manifest itself was in a delusional “protection of others” from our living breaths (and a secret, and similarly delirious protection of ourselves from theirs). As Berardi puts it: “the exposition [*sic*] to the breath of the other can have a pathogenic effect [...], poisoning the sources of that con/spiration that makes life pleasurable.”<sup>4</sup> The second thing he allows us to think is the explosion of identity affirmation

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<sup>2</sup> Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Franco Berardi, *The Third Unconscious: The Psycho-sphere in the Viral Age* (London: Verso, 2021), 28: “I’m far from joining the right-wing negationists [*sic*; i.e. “denialists”] who want to reclaim the freedom to not wear a mask”; “My intention is not to question the sanitary policy”; cf. also 44, and yet, cf. 74ff.

<sup>4</sup> Berardi, *Third Unconscious*, 66.

that seemed to arise in tandem with this baffling tendency, and even to become intertwined with it. Some middle-class Americans seem to be stating now that they are continuing to wear “their” masks as an expression of “who they are.” Their own identity has become an altogether anonymous, faceless affirmation of pure “caring.”<sup>5</sup> In any case, Berardi helps us to raise the question of how the very fundament of human society, a *conspiratio* and a face-to-face, might have become so corrupted, and indeed inverted in such a way that the social bond was conceived, at least for a number of years, as founded precisely upon a *stifling* of breath, a concealment of the face, and a shunning of the other’s physical body.

To some extent adopting an approach that resembles Giorgio Agamben’s in his considerations of biometrical identification,<sup>6</sup> Berardi associates this transformation of identity in the name of health with a much broader digitalisation, one which, in America at least, took advantage of an earlier epidemic (AIDS) in order to promulgate itself. We can read the recent plague and its effects upon our avowed identity in a similar vein, but this time as rendering conceivable the ultimate *completion* of this digital revolution, and the replacement of what Berardi describes as an affectionate, physical “conjunction” with a distanced, digital “connection” or “connectedness,”<sup>7</sup> which wreaks havoc in what he persists in calling our “soul,” not to speak of the intercourse of our bodily life.<sup>8</sup>

To some readers, particularly the academics, no doubt the slightest criticism of the concealment of the face and the stifling of the breath will seem surprising, if not reprehensible: after all, was “masking” (note

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<sup>5</sup> The present author was recently seeking a fellow academic and found that someone working in the same department – one single figure among perhaps twenty, engaged in a single-handed re-definition of the phrase “virtue signalling” – had posted as her “profile picture” a photograph of herself with her identity entirely obscured by a mask, perhaps making the political point that this lack of individual identity *was* her new identity.

<sup>6</sup> Berardi, *Third Unconscious*, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Berardi, *Third Unconscious*, e.g., 18–19.

<sup>8</sup> That said, we should note that Berardi considers this vision of the future, which he takes to be Agambenian, to be merely “probable,” and his intention is to sketch the outline of an alternative, one in which this online “connectivity” and distantiation come to be associated in our minds precisely with “sickness,” and their opposite with health, joy, and pleasure. Cf. Berardi, *Third Unconscious*, 18–19; on Agamben, cf. 43–44.

the quasi-deliberate confusion of active and passive voices) not the least egregious and “harmful,” the least “restrictive” of all “restrictions,” those multifarious forms of separation that held us apart for so long, and often, in the end, forever, and which even went so far as to legally prohibit many from comforting their most dearly beloved in the moment of their death, their expiry – for fear of their very (last) breath?

In truth, without a proper conception of the human, which the stress that we are about to lay on a transcendental form of breath – in excess of the empirical – will in part be designed to allow us to reveal, one will seemingly remain unable to see just how deleterious to human social life it is to deprive one’s self of a face and to allow one’s self to be deprived of the slightest experience of the face of another.

Naturally the philosophy of breath as an academic sub-discipline cannot be held responsible for international policy here – save insofar as its proponents would have been well-placed to make an intervention that does not seem to have been forthcoming – but we might understand the tendency within it which we are here analysing as a reflection of a broader conception of breath, voice, and the human, which, insofar as it characterises the pre-thematic consciousness of the general populace, might have allowed the measures at stake to have been more readily accepted than they might otherwise have been. We have dealt with this conception and the manifold affronts to the humanity of the human that it leads to in a recent book, and regret the minimal room we found it possible to devote there, largely in footnotes, to the phenomenological and political effects of the censoring of the face.<sup>9</sup> What matters is for us to attribute a real meaning and ontological consistency to the *phenomenal*, and so few in the Humanities, which devote themselves to just this layer, summoned up the courage to insist upon it.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Michael Lewis, *Philosophy, Biopolitics, and the Virus: The Elision of an Alternative* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2023), 188–189n61.

## A Neglected Path in the History of the Philosophy of Breath: Italy

Where might we find an example of a conception of breath that is transcendental? Berardi will already have given us a hint.

In a recent essay on breath in Italian philosophy of the 20th and 21st Century, Alberto Parisi contends that “the reflections on pneumatology proposed by these [Italian] philosophers [Giorgio Colli, Giorgio Agamben, Adriana Cavarero, and Emanuele Coccia] have been underestimated.”<sup>10</sup> The pioneering work carried out in respiratory philosophy in its early years has indeed for the most part dealt with other traditions, and it is with a view to supplementing the discipline as it stands, but also moving some way beyond Parisi’s own inspirational account, that we have charted our course.

One of the routes we shall take in an attempt to open up the problems we have raised is to read the work of Giorgio Agamben, and in particular his *Language and Death* from the late 1970s and early 1980s (a seminar of eight days, spoken and then written, to be published in Italian in 1982).<sup>11</sup> This work deals with the question of the difference between the animal voice and the human Voice (which Agamben capitalises to indicate an audible sameness but a graphic, literal, and indeed substantial difference – one which is brought about by the articulation of the animal voice by means of letters). If we read this text afresh with our own idiosyncratic interests in mind, it becomes clear that the breath which carries this voice may be deemed essential to the question, and that a similar distinction may be drawn there. This notion of spiration or spirit, the pneumatic, may be taken in two distinct senses – the empirical and the transcendental. The hypothesis we shall try to propose is that this distinction might help to shed some light upon the incipient discipline of respiratory studies, if only as something that might be borne in mind so as to temper certain excesses which it might

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<sup>10</sup> Alberto Parisi, “From Voice to *Pneuma* and Back: Italian Pneumatologies against Derrida’s Grammatology,” *Journal of Italian Philosophy* 5 (2022): 2.

<sup>11</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen E. Pinkus with Michael Hardt (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991; first published in 1982 by Einaudi as *Il linguaggio e la morte: Un seminario sul luogo della negatività*).

occasionally risk, and to help us to understand, and indeed to hesitate before, the turn towards a materialist – which is to say, purely empirical – conception of breath.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Among those who might be deemed founders of this field: for all its merits, the work of Havi Carel seems to us often to stray into a certain empiricism of breath, and indeed, this can be said to be the result of the original intent of her work on illness and the “life of breath” in particular, which was broadly therapeutic or practical; this is reflected in those aspects of the discipline more generally which stress its relation to yoga and meditative breathing exercises. And yet “transcendental meditation” is not so transcendental as all that, and the emphasis laid by – for instance – Carel upon the “deep culture, spiritual, and personal meaning” that attaches to the physiological process of respiration in no way extends so far as to reach the transcendental, being little more than “subjective colouring,” a superstructure or secondary stratum laid atop a natural experience, a flattening of the transcendental that is reflected in the particular (non-ontological) way in which phenomenology is for the most part conceived in her work. Cf. Havi Carel, “Invisible Suffering: The Experience of Breathlessness,” in *Atmospheres of Breathing*, eds. Lenart Škof and Petri Berndtson (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2018), 233.

But let it be said that we owe personal thanks to the author for an initiation into the philosophical question of breath since we were privileged to experience the inaugural moments in which this new terrain was first explored, in the *Life of Breath* project, as a part of which our own initial contributions were presented, at the workshop on *Phenomenology, Anxiety, and Breath*, held at the University of Bristol on Thursday 16th March 2017. They were also given in a revised form before the Philosophical Society of England, in Alnmouth, Northumberland, at a symposium entitled, *The Voice of Philosophy*, on Saturday 23rd September 2017, and published in greatly condensed form as “A Voice that is Merely Breath,” in *The Philosopher* 106, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 3–10. The present work tries not to rely on this work, but it inevitably builds on the insights gleaned throughout the whole process of its conception and is indebted to all those involved.

As for other pioneers of the field, Lenart Škof and Petri Berndtson, a more sustained engagement than we can afford here would need to take place, but the tendency seems to be in both cases to flatten the difference between the transcendental and the empirical, to deconstruct or elide it, and indeed to take breath as the warrant precisely for doing that: a gesture which we would wish to decelerate or indeed to hesitate before a little longer. Škof’s gesture might be said to be made predominantly under the influence of Luce Irigaray (cf. Lenart Škof, *Breath of Proximity: Intersubjectivity, Ethics and Peace* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015), 1, 14ff) and as he describes his own trajectory: “The line of the argument extends from the plane of a new cosmology to the plane of the [*sic*] ‘material’/bodily intersubjectivity, based on the cosmic/material *element* of air and the phenomenon/act of breathing,” and he explicitly affirms that he is speaking in the context of the “new materialism” and indeed signals his distance from Derrida by attributing to the latter’s work an “insistence that the only possible philosophy is a transcendental one.” Škof, *Breath of Proximity*, 11. Škof wonders whether Derrida can, as a result, “grant any philosophical relevance to the ‘empirical’ breath,” whilst the author avows his own pursuit of the “possibility for an ethics that reaches beyond the empirical-transcendental divide.” Škof, *Breath of Proximity*, 14.

In the case of Berndtson, to summarise things with a haste still more unjust, responsibility may devolve upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose path beyond transcendentalism and naturalism is reasonably well-known. Petri Berndtson, *Phenomenological Ontology of Breathing: The Re-*

We shall read Agamben's text with a view to determining whether the strategy of focusing our reading on the notion of breath renders his project intelligible in a new way, and whether it helps us to understand the very question of breath itself, and in particular the questions we have set ourselves to unfold.

Agamben's conception of metaphysics  
and its overcoming

Within *Language and Death*, Agamben's references to breath itself are somewhat scattered, and to a casual glance they could appear peripheral: to demonstrate that this need not be so, the reader has first to grasp the more general problematic of Agamben's text, for it is in pursuing a very particular goal that he broaches the topics which form our concern here.

Philosophically, and perhaps in light of the contemporary predominance of a deconstructive reading of Heidegger's conception of the end of metaphysics, he finds it necessary to set himself two tasks:

1) To present a new vision of what metaphysics is.

On his account, metaphysics involves a certain very peculiar conception of *grounding*: the Western metaphysical way of thinking, speaking and acting is founded upon a conception of the act of foundation which takes this operation to involve an exclusion or exception; in the context of language, to take a privileged instance, in the transition between animal and human, what must be excluded in order for *logos* to form is the animal voice or *phōnē*. More curiously, and in a way that will take us much longer to justify, the removal of the animal voice is aligned with the impossibility for human language to refer indexically and in an immediate way to the singularity of the real thing – such a reference is

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*spiratory Primacy of Being* (London: Routledge, 2023), 3ff. Berndtson speaks of his own work as nurturing “a Merleau-Pontian-inspired phenomenological philosophy of the primacy of breathing.” Berndtson, *Phenomenological Ontology of Breathing*, 5.

In relation to the present work, I must here insert a note of thanks to the reviewers from *Poligrafi*, who spared me from much obscurity in the article in general and from a number of errors I would otherwise have made.

ruled out by language in its propositional or apophantic form,<sup>13</sup> which is specifically human and to which the animal has no access.

Agamben supports his account of metaphysics with an intriguing reading of G. W. F. Hegel and Martin Heidegger, who on most interpretations of the history of metaphysics constitute the philosophers or thinkers jointly responsible for the closure of metaphysics. This reading singles out the discreet but decisive role of *pronouns* within the text of philosophy, and in particular of the demonstrative pronouns *Diese* and *Da* which take centre stage at the very outset of the dialectic in the passages of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* devoted to “Sense Certainty,” and in Heidegger’s notion of “Da-sein,” being (the) “there” (*Da*). The way in which these pronouns function allows Agamben to demonstrate the way in which each of the two thinkers conceives the negative or “removed” foundation that is characteristic of metaphysics. For instance, Hegel demonstrates that a singular referent, intended by “natural consciousness,” cannot truly be referred to by language, save as (what turns out ultimately to be) a universality. Such is the first dialectical inversion of the *Phenomenology*: language, as Hegel puts it, speaks more truth than our intentions, for when it adverts to “this” singular entity, the word, the demonstrative pronoun, can refer, with time, space, and a shift in the “I”s who deploy it, to *any* particular thing.

2) To assess the possibilities for “overcoming” metaphysics in a new way in light of this conception. This will allow Agamben to criticise those who attempt to exceed the closure of metaphysics in Hegel and Heidegger on the basis of a mistaken, alternative conception of the same. These include Jacques Derrida and Georges Bataille at their most

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<sup>13</sup> Following the Loeb translations which in turn partake of a long interpretative tradition, we take “proposition” to be a Latinate translation of Aristotle’s “*logos apophantikos*” (cf. Aristotle, *De Interpretatione*, in *The Categories; On Interpretation; Prior Analytics*, trans. Harold P. Cooke and Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), 17a), and naturally Agamben will have in mind, *inter alia*, Heidegger’s stress on the apophantic “as,” often used to distinguish man from the animals (e.g. in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), a lecture series from 1929–30). Although let it be noted in passing that David Farrell Krell has rightly pointed out an ambiguity in that regard, since Heidegger’s early work tends to stress a *pre*-predicative form of revelation as the prerogative of the human, or *Dasein*. David Farrell Krell, *Derrida and our Animal Others: Derrida’s Final Seminar, “The Beast and the Sovereign”* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013).



non-Hegelian: given that, *ex hypothesi*, these figures misjudge the most profound character of metaphysics, their attempts to move outside of it simply reinstall them within it. As Agamben has it: “that which thought [e.g. deconstruction] attempts to categorise as the mystical [a notion that we shall soon come to elucidate], or the Groundless, or the *gramma* [the letter], is simply a repetition of the fundamental notion of onto-theology,” ontotheology being metaphysics, as the science of beings as such and as a whole, on a Heideggerian account.<sup>14</sup>

Metaphysics, like sovereign power in a state of exception (a notion to which Agamben will later devote his “Homo Sacer” series), extends its dominion even in what appears to be the “end of metaphysics”<sup>15</sup>; all previous critics of metaphysics would thus partake of metaphysics’ own “nihilism” without knowing it – a nihilism which ultimately signifies the malign outcome of metaphysics itself, and indeed its ghastly prolongation beyond its own ending.

The curious name that Agamben perhaps most frequently gives to the metaphysical theory of ground as well as to the ultimate position in which those who would attempt to escape it end up is “mysticism.” The crucial characteristic of mysticism for Agamben’s purposes is the notion that language and thought are capable of effacing themselves and so providing us with access to the “ineffable” – the singular real thing in all its truth. This would be the dream of metaphysics itself, but also that of the critics of metaphysics who have attempted to delimit metaphysics *from* such an Archimedean point. As if they were pointing out some condition of its possibility that lay outside of it, or which it was unable to express or capture.

The way in which Agamben weaves together these two possibilities is by tracking the way in which the Eleusinian mysteries are read at two different points in the career of G. W. F. Hegel. At first, in a youthful poem, Hegel proposes the mystical silence – which constitutes the apophatic manner in which language is led to its limits – as a way in which one might gain access to the singularity of things, and so escape the gen-

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<sup>14</sup> Agamben, *Language and Death*, xiii.

<sup>15</sup> Agamben, *Language and Death*, xiii.

eralities of word and concept which murder the thing.<sup>16</sup> But later on, in the “Sense-Certainty” dialectic of the *Phenomenology*, he would present a new conception of the mysteries which in fact demonstrates them to be inherently dialectical in character, as the singular referent of the indexicals – “this,” “here,” “now,” “I” – proves to be universal.<sup>17</sup> Effectively, it is this earlier of the two gestures which the post-Heideggerian critics of metaphysics attempt to repeat, following Ludwig Feuerbach in attempting to forestall the dialectical movement at the very outset<sup>18</sup> – thus replacing negation with pure affirmation – without realising that the mature Hegel, and, by extension, metaphysics itself, was already one step ahead of them.

What is crucial, for our purposes, is that Agamben stresses the fact that one of the names given by Hegel to this process of incorporation which takes place as he effectively leaves behind his youthful mysticism, the medium sufficiently plastic as to tolerate the splitting and reconciliation of opposites, singularity and genericity, the outside of language and thought and the inside, is “*Geist*,” the German translation of the Latin “*spiritus*” – “spirit” or indeed “breath”:

The originality of the Hegelian system is that, through the power of the negative [*il potere del negativo*], this unspeakable point no longer produces [...] any leap into the ineffable [as in the early Hegel’s own mysticism]. At every point the Notion is at work, at every point in speech blows the negative breath [*soffia l’alito negativo*] of *Geist*, in every word is spoken the unspeakability of *Meinung* [the singular thing that we “mean” to refer to, and that Sense Certainty takes our experience to be an experience of], manifested in its negativity [i.e. singularity can be spoken of only in its sublation as universality, unspeakability only in speech].<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Agamben, *Language and Death*, 6ff.

<sup>17</sup> Agamben, *Language and Death*, 10ff. “This self-preserving Now is, therefore, not immediate but mediated; [...] A simple thing of this kind which *is* through negation, which is neither This nor That [...] we call a *universal*.” Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977; first published in 1807), §96.

<sup>18</sup> Although having in mind more the *Science of Logic* and the putatively presuppositionless beginning of philosophy, Feuerbach asks, “is it not after all a presupposition that philosophy has to begin at all?” Ludwig Feuerbach, “Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy,” in *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings of Ludwig Feuerbach*, trans. Zavar Hanfi (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1972), 59.

<sup>19</sup> Agamben, *Language and Death*, 14; *Il linguaggio e la morte*, 22.

In Hegel's mature work, in which an oppositional understanding is taken to be a sign of immaturity, the work of the Understanding rather than that of (speculative dialectical) Reason, the notion of Spirit is employed so as to capture the way in which the unspeakable mystery, the singularity of each individual thing, is in fact not exterior to language but suffuses it in the form of a breath that silently blows always and everywhere within language itself, as something inaudible within audible speech, a stream of discreet consonants among the noisy vowels.

It is, therefore, with only a minimal distortion of the text that we may take Agamben to be speaking of the secret centrality of *breath* to the history of philosophy and to its end.

### The Memorialising and Forgetting of Singular Being

From one perspective, the issue of the Sense Certainty dialectic is that the reference to individual things must in the end subordinate them to a certain universality, but also that this reference cannot take place by means of the gestural act of mere pointing, or even by way of its linguistic analogue (the indexical or pronoun), but must rather employ a fully-formed propositional judgement (such as "Now it is night"). This will mean that the Being of the entity must, when linguistically evoked in the context of a complete sentence, be taken to be both singular and generic; and yet, prior to that linguistic moment, Sense Certainty takes the singularity of the entity *alone* to be the very Being of that entity – what that entity *is*<sup>20</sup> – as have the critics of metaphysics who refuse to allow the dialectical machine to start up. But in this context, breath may be taken to express that singular Being which propositional language always vaporises one way or another – whether dialectically, thereby memorialising it (Hegel) or in the way of concealment and therefore forgetting (Heidegger).

A scission is carried out at the very heart of being, thanks to the emergence of the propositional form of language – and therewith the

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<sup>20</sup> "[I]ts truth contains nothing but the sheer *being* of the thing." Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §91.

birth of man. Being is thus divided from the very beginning into the *prōtē ousia*, the singular “this” of mysticism (which Aristotle, in making this distinction between the singular and the generic senses of being, is said by Agamben to partake in, implying once again that mysticism, far from standing outside of metaphysics lies in fact at its very foundation), and the *deutera ousia*, the universality of the categories (or “predicates”), and ultimately the very highest genus, or even that which exceeds the logic of species and genus altogether, thus assuming the position of what the mediaevals came to call the “transcendental.”

This primordial division in the sense of being is at least in part a result of the *propositional* character of the language in which the singular entity is taken up:

The Aristotelian scission of the *ousia* [...] constitutes the original nucleus of a fracture in the plane of language between showing and saying, indicating and signification. This fracture traverses the whole history of metaphysics, and without it, the ontological problem itself cannot be formulated. Every ontology (every metaphysics [...]) presupposes the difference between indicating and signifying, and is defined, precisely, as situated at the very limit between these two acts.<sup>21</sup>

If the propositional form of language joins together a singular subject and a generic predicate which subsumes the former under certain categories, then the proposition itself may be taken to suggest the ultimate structure of metaphysical thinking which is consummated in the Hegelian sublation of the two parts of the proposition (the “infinite judgement”) and the Heideggerian conception of the forgetting of being that propositional language enacts, at least in the form of prose. The prosaic proposition, and so philosophy, can be founded only on an elision, a removal of the singularity that takes place when the singular entity is categorised – “pigeon-holed” – by the predicate. This is the basic metaphysical gesture, the sublation of mystical being (in “spirit”) or its simple “forgetting” (for Heidegger finds it necessary to shift the sense of “being” further back towards the singular thing than Hegel’s dialectic allows – as if the evaporation of being into a generic form could *not* constitute a commemoration but only a betrayal of being).

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<sup>21</sup> Agamben, *Language and Death*, 18.

Before we can get on to the question of how Agamben might propose to move beyond metaphysics so conceived, we need to explore this conception of its nature a little further, not least in order to grasp the precise place this schema reserves for the notion of the *voice*: this will prove crucial in the move beyond metaphysics, since Agamben will come to stress the fact that it is necessary to think of human beings as possessing not merely language (*logos*) but also an especial voice of their own, distinct from the animal's *phōnē*.

### The Animal Voice and the Human Voice

Voice is, therefore, in part Agamben's translation of Aristotle's *phōnē*, one which seems to be made with at least one eye on the novel understanding he is about to propose of a certain relation between the voice of man and that of the animal, and so one which will inflect the sense of the negation by which the former departs from the latter.

Towards the beginning of his *Politics*, and so at the very foundation of metaphysics itself, Aristotle distinguishes man and animal thus:

man alone of the animals possesses speech [*logon*]. The mere voice [*phōnē*], it is true, can indicate pain and pleasure, and therefore is possessed by the other animals as well [...], but speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right [*dikaion*] and the wrong [*adikon*].<sup>22</sup>

In a summary, from the eighth day of the seminar that *Language and Death* epitomises, Agamben clearly establishes a connection between his project and this passage from Aristotle's *Politics*<sup>23</sup> whilst elaborating upon the particular sense in which human beings nevertheless enjoy the use of a voice:

the Voice presupposed here is defined through a double negativity. On the one hand, it is in fact identified only as a removed voice, as a having-been of the natural *phōnē*, and this removal constitutes the originary articulation (*arthron, gramma*) in which the passage from *phōnē* to *logos* is carried out, from

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<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1944), 1253a.

<sup>23</sup> Which Agamben invokes explicitly at *Language and Death*, 87.

the living being to language. On the other hand, this Voice cannot be *spoken* by the discourse of which it *shows* the originary taking place. The fact that the originary articulation of language can take place only in a double negativity signifies that language is and is not the voice of man. If language were immediately the voice of man, as braying is the voice of the ass and chirping the voice of the cicada, man could not be-the-*there* or take-the-*this*; that is, he could never experience the taking place of language or the disclosure of being. But if, on the other hand [...] man radically possessed no voice (not even a negative Voice), every shifter and every possibility of indicating the event of language would disappear equally.<sup>24</sup>

To make sense of this passage, it will help us to think of the animal voice as if it involved an immediate reference to the real thing, a notion which we are only now coming to be in a position to explain. We can differentiate between animal and human language by describing the latter as propositional and therefore as capable of *apophansis*, revelation or manifestation. Animal sounds can only indicate the mere existence of a real entity stimulating the animal so as to cause pleasure or pain, whereas the propositional structure of *human* language allows us to reveal something of the general essence of the existing thing: phenomenalisation, the event of manifestation, is thereby the exclusive province of man and takes place by means of the formation within language of propositions.

These propositions would constitute the *logos* that is the exclusive province of the human; Agamben deploys the notion of voice to describe the very *enunciation* of these propositions, which he will eventually come to understand as the very event of manifestation itself, and so a – perhaps – *non*-metaphysical notion of Being. But we remain as yet in the context of metaphysics, albeit a metaphysics that is being read with Agamben's ultimate intent of exceeding it already in mind. In this context, Agamben describes the precise process by which Aristotle may be taken to understand the transition from animal to man in the context of language. The pure and unlettered animal sounds are articulated in human speech by means of the letter, the element (*stoikheion*) of speech.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Agamben, *Language and Death*, 84–85.

<sup>25</sup> See for example Agamben, *Language and Death*, 38–39; cf. also Aristotle, *De Interpretatione*, 16a.

The sounding human voice is not the same as the animal voice (*phōnē*); rather, it is a voice that is articulated by the letter, and it is in fact this gesture of literal articulation which constitutes the properly *human* Voice, and so the properly human breath, which remains *distinct* from the animal – and we can perhaps specify this by speaking here of consonants and vowels.<sup>26</sup>

The invocation of the letter in Aristotle also demonstrates his particular brand of metaphysical mysticism: Agamben speaks of the mysticism of the kind that one finds in the Jewish inscription of the name of God in the form of consonants alone, which are in themselves unpronounceable: IHVH.<sup>27</sup> Letters are exclusively *written* forms of language and thus amount to a silent recollection of the sonorous animal voice, a direct reference to the real which is silenced but manifests itself as silence *within* that Voice. Indeed, the fact that the *gramma* plays this role may explain why Agamben chooses to distinguish the human Voice (*Voce*) by means of a silent change in the initial *letter*.

But how does this help us to justify the alignment of the animal voice with an immediate reference to the singular thing on the part of indexicals in human language, that Agamben's argument, as we have reconstructed it, seems to assume? Perhaps retrospectively: the memory

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<sup>26</sup> Here for want of time we must elide an exposition of the most ambiguous of these fascinating consonants, the letter 'H', the aspirant, so often left unvoiced in Romance languages. Ivan Illich, a great inspiration for Agamben, at least in his later years, has shed some light on this moment of articulation by investigating the early moments of phonetic writing and the later introduction of letters for vowels, whilst rendering explicit the effects of the letter upon the (otherwise animal) breath: "The freely voiced qualities of breathing are not indicated, only the consonants, the harsh or soft obstacles the breath encounters." Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders, *ABC: The Alphabetisation of the Popular Mind* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1988), 11.

<sup>27</sup> "That which is construed as the supreme mystical experience of being and as the perfect name of God [...] is the experience of the meaning of the *gramma* itself, of the letter as the negation [*negazione*] and exclusion [*esclusione*] of voice." Agamben, *Language and Death*, 30; *Il linguaggio e la morte*, 41. Agamben then moves very quickly to what becomes the main substance of his argument in relation to the voice, a summary of what is to come: "As [or 'Like', *come*] the unnameable name of God, the *gramma* is the final and negative dimension of meaning, no longer an experience of language but language itself, that is, its taking place in the removal of the voice. There is, thus, even a 'grammar' of the ineffable; or rather, the ineffable is simply the dimension of meaning of the *gramma*, of the letter as the ultimate negative foundation [*fondamento negativo*] of human discourse." Agamben, *Language and Death*, 30; *Il linguaggio e la morte*, 42.

retained of the singular reference to the real, the way in which language has long been taken to refer to that which stands beyond language, is by means of the indexical. This ability to indicate may then be taken to constitute a distant memory of the animal and its voice within human language, the faint recollection of that which is without language and so (putatively) in immediate relation with the real: the indexical is the fragment that language retains of its ultimately shattered dream of a relation to the non-linguistic real.

But the ultimate connection of animal voice and the real will prove to be more retrospective still: the voice is not connected with the indexical altogether explicitly by the tradition, but this is what Agamben himself adds even to the linguists who speak of these indexicals as “shifTERS.” The linguists, Emile Benveniste and Roman Jakobson, add to the philosophical account of the indexical the idea that it refers first of all *not* to the entity it intends but to the very act of language (or indeed, and more precisely, *speech, vocalised language*) in which it occurs: “Pronouns and other indicators of the utterance, before they designate real objects, indicate precisely *that language takes place*. In this way, still prior to the world of meanings, they permit the reference to the very *event of language*.”<sup>28</sup>

What goes undeveloped in the linguistic insight is precisely the transcendental question of how it is *possible* for language to indicate its own pure taking place – and since the Voice that announces this advent is aligned with being, as event, this amounts to the question: how in the end is philosophy as ontology possible? “*The utterance and the instance of discourse are only identifiable as such through the voice that speaks them, and only by attributing a voice to them can something like a taking place of discourse be demonstrated.*”<sup>29</sup> In other words, the reference to

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<sup>28</sup> Agamben, *Language and Death*, 25.

<sup>29</sup> Agamben, *Language and Death*, 32. One is tempted to argue that our overriding concern in the present work, the distinction between the transcendental and the empirical, is marked in the relation that Agamben’s book bears to another great text of Italian philosophy, devoted to the voice: Adriana Cavarero’s *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2005; first published in 2003 by Feltrinelli as *A più voci: Filosofia dell’espressione vocale*). Agamben speaks of the place where Benveniste draws closest to the problematic of the voice, and it involves a consideration of the voice in terms of “the individual particularities of spoken sounds,” alongside the rhetoric of Quintilian



an act of speech can occur only if that linguistic act is borne by a real human voice. And this voice will carry an echo of the animal *phōnē*. The animal voice “is indeed presupposed by the shifters, but as that which must necessarily be removed in order for meaningful discourse to take place”<sup>30</sup>: in other words, *signifying* discourse, propositional manifestation. The Voice that bears language is itself “being” in this new non-metaphysical sense.

### Voice, Self-Reference, Breath, and Being

Even if Agamben is attempting to develop a potential within metaphysics that extends beyond the forms which it was actually able to unfold, he is reluctant to jettison the language of being and the transcendental. We would thus be witnessing in Agamben a transcendental voice, but one which is altering the sense of the transcendental, and so transforming the sense of being.

Thus, we are already beginning to glimpse the idea that the way in which Agamben will breach the closure of metaphysics is by reinventing at least two notions that appear within it in another form: voice and being. And it is in the deployment of the voice in this particular conjunction that we witness breath emerging once again within Agamben’s discourse.

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and the “*cantus obscurior*” of Cicero (Agamben, *Language and Death*, 32); it is here that we can clarify the immense divergence of interests which separates Agamben’s book on the voice from Cavarero’s. Though a lapse in taste, perhaps, it is clear why Agamben’s book goes unmentioned by Cavarero. Agamben cares nothing for the singularity of the voice in all its empirical diversity, focussing as he does on the voice insofar as it allows indication – and in general, the point is to situate the voice (or rather, the Voice) between *mere* sound, “the animal voice” (Agamben, *Language and Death*, 35), which, it seems, would be Cavarero’s concern, and determinate signification, in the place of an unactualised potential or intention to signify. If one bases one’s politics on that transition, on the moment at which each singular entity enters humanity, this politics will turn out differently than it would were one to base it upon the later state of an already singularised voice, or rather of a voice that remains singularised *despite* entering a generic linguistic code.

<sup>30</sup> Agamben, *Language and Death*, 35.

We have too little room to address here this rich subject matter to the extent it deserves,<sup>31</sup> but we can say that the conception of being that Agamben proposes is neither pre-linguistic nor simply coextensive with propositional language and capable of being captured in such propositions; rather, it is the very event of language, the taking place of language, its reflexivity. Being, on Agamben's understanding, would be neither singular being sublated and so remembered in generality, nor a singularity that is forgotten precisely thereby, but rather that which makes the proposition *possible*, that event in which the jointure is first being constructed in (grammatical) copulation or (logical) synthesis. This is the gesture of synthesis that is carried out precisely in the human *Voice*, and that means at the moment at which, at least on the metaphysical account, the animal voice is articulated by *letters*, thereby becoming human.<sup>32</sup>

To imagine that one can refer to the ineffable real is to remain within the mystical structure of metaphysical foundation; the only unspeakable thing to which language might refer which will avoid a metaphysical snare is a reference to the very event of its own occurrence, and this event is not spoken *of* but merely *breathed* in the very articulation of a proposition of human language which is given voice to.

The breath that carries the voice is the non-signifying potential to signify that prior to referring to any actual thing enunciates the fact that speaking is taking place, that language is starting to happen (that the metaphysical machine of the proposition is just getting warmed up). It

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<sup>31</sup> For the interested reader, we do so in a forthcoming volume on Agamben's philosophy more generally, provisionally entitled, *Agamben's Theory of Grounding*.

<sup>32</sup> Agamben indeed at the very least hints that, with this articulation, we are at a sub-metaphysical level: he tells us that the elements which carry out the articulating, the *arthron*, *gramma*, and the other *meros tou logou*, are "not properly either logical or grammatical, but they make possible every grammar and every logic, and, perhaps, every *epistēmē* in general." Agamben, *Language and Death*, 20. We cannot do justice to the point here, but perhaps it would be more accurate of us to say that Agamben locates "being" *here* rather than in the copula that synthesises subject and predicate, along with all of the historical avatars of that process of synthesis, including most centrally the Kantian imagination and its schematism, and it is perhaps somewhere close to this point that one of the great differences that separate Agamben from Heidegger might be opened up.

is the moment of “infancy,”<sup>33</sup> between the mere voice of the animal that will never utter propositions, but only – so the mystics tell us – indicate an altogether real pain and pleasure, and the signifying propositions, the adult human language from which that animal *phōnē* will have been altogether removed, along with the experience of being it encapsulated.

When language draws attention to the very fact of its own incipient propositional articulation, its own ability to manifest things, it vocalises being itself, and indeed this very inflection of the Voice *is* being in the sense of the event of manifestation or phenomenalisation.

It now remains for us to justify the assertion we hazarded in passing, that this ontological aspect of the Voice may be said to be its very breath.

### A Voice of Mere Breath: Nominalism

Such a conjunction (of being or the transcendental with the voice) is not absent from the philosophical tradition: already in Priscian, a grammarian of the 5th or 6th Century, a connection of voice and being had been drawn, but of voice in a very particular sense, that is somewhat akin to a voice that is mere hot air, wind, or breath:

Every one of the *legomena* [in the sense of the Aristotelian categories, the transcendentals], each of the possibilities for speaking listed by Aristotle, could in fact be considered in itself as pure voice; not simply, however, as a mere sound (*vox inarticulata*) or within a determined field of meaning (*vox* as signifying term), but as the bearer of some unknown meaning. The voice, taken in this way, will then show itself as a pure intention to signify, as pure

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<sup>33</sup> “If this Voice is the mystical foundation for our entire culture (its logic as well as its ethics, its theology as well as its politics, its wisdom as well as its madness) then the mystical is not something that can provide the foundation for another thought – attempting to think beyond the horizon of metaphysics, at the extreme confines of which, at the point of nihilism, we are still moving. The mystical is nothing but the unspeakable foundation; that is, the negative foundation of onto-theology. Only a liquidation of the mystical can open up the field to a thought (or language) that thinks (speaks) beyond the Voice and its *sigetics*; that dwells, that is, not on an unspeakable foundation, but in the infancy (*in-fari* [this is a tacit, unmarked expansion of the Italian, which gives no Latin, but simply hyphenates ‘*in-fanzia*’]) of man.” Agamben, *Language and Death*, 91; *Il linguaggio e la morte*, 114–115. Agamben will develop this apparently marginal notion substantially, in the earlier but near contemporary *Infancy and History* and elsewhere. See Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, translated by Liz Heron (London: Verso, 2007; first published in 1978).

meaning, in which something is given to be understood before a determinate event of meaning is produced.<sup>34</sup>

This would be a potential to signify, or “*the pure intention to signify*,” that does not yet do so.<sup>35</sup>

Roscelin and other (so-called “nominalist”) thinkers of the 11th Century affirmed that universal essences were only *flatus vocis* – spoken of with a voice that is merely hot air. Being becomes a mere vapour, emanating from the physical human body, as Nietzsche would eventually have it, somehow consummating this empiricistic and deflationary tradition.<sup>36</sup> “*Flatus vocis* is not meant, here, as mere sound, but in the sense of the voice as an intention to signify and as a pure indication that language is taking place.”<sup>37</sup>

Citing John of Salisbury and Anselm, whilst relating their insights back to Hegel, Agamben tells us that “[t]he ‘thought of the voice alone,’ the notion of the ‘breath of the voice’ [*flatum vocis* – ML] (in which, perhaps, we ought to note the first appearance of Hegelian *Geist*), is a thinking of what is most universal: *being*. Being is in the voice (*esse in voce*) as an unveiling and demonstration of the taking place of language, as *Spirit*.”<sup>38</sup>

Agamben summarises the connection between Voice and ontology by affirming: “The Voice, as the supreme shifter that allows us to grasp the taking place of language, appears thus as the negative ground on which all ontology rests, the originary negativity sustaining every negation.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Agamben, *Language and Death*, 33.

<sup>35</sup> Agamben, *Language and Death*, 33.

<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche exclaims: “The concept of being! As though it did not show its low empirical origin in its very etymology! For *esse* basically means ‘to breathe.’” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. Marianne Cowan (Washington, DC: Regnery, 1962), 84. Cf. Derrida’s “Violence and Metaphysics” for some remarkable passages that expand upon this idea, both conceptually and within the texts of the history of philosophy (Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001; the essay first published in 1964), 173–174); and for certain critical questions regarding Derrida’s reading, cf. Škof, *Breath of Proximity*, 2015, 127ff. We address this whole matter in Lewis, “A Voice that is Merely Breath.”

<sup>37</sup> Agamben, *Language and Death*, 34.

<sup>38</sup> Agamben, *Language and Death*, 35.

<sup>39</sup> Agamben, *Language and Death*, 36.

## Breath: Transcendental and Empirical

Let us hasten towards our conclusion by seizing upon this relation of the apparently windy voice of being to breath and spirit.

If the voice cannot speak without breath, we may say that breath in this particular (transcendental) sense allows language to refer to its own event and that this sense *must* be distinguished from the purely empirical sense of breath in which we share it with the animals since this capacity for self-reference does not exist in animal *phōnē* as the latter remains unlettered and non-propositional. That said, the human Voice does indeed depend upon the animal's *phōnē* and is grounded upon the loss of the possibility of our enjoying either an immediate relation to the real or an infinite proximity with our own voice, as the animal is said to. This voice must be "removed" in order for human language to be founded.

Transcendentally, breath is to be conceived as that part of human language which recalls this negative ground, the stifled voice of the non-human animal, and the singularity that it is taken to have encountered. And yet, man himself also has a voice, and it is on the basis of this Voice that man will be capable of using language in a self-referential way, and this means that he will be able to speak, at least indirectly, of the very incipient taking place of propositional language itself. This event is the new, non-metaphysical sense which Agamben imparts to Being, which is no longer to be subjected to the scission wrought by the proposition, the division of being into the singularity of the thing and its generic sublation. We move beyond both Hegelian memory and Heideggerian forgetfulness, although Agamben's sense of being might be said to remain closer to that of his teacher, and that is to say to singularity, but in the novel sense of the uniqueness of that linguistic act at that particular time, the uniqueness not of a substance but of an event: this would be enunciated and indeed it would take place in the very first breath of spirit as it attempts to conjoin a subject with a predicate, or even earlier, when it breaks speech up into its articulated literal parts. In terms that combine Agamben's vocabulary with our own topic, the voice of Being would then amount to the infancy of spirit.

When it comes to that topic, perhaps the crucial point for our purposes is that there are *two* senses of breath, and they are prone to confusion: the first is the empirical sense of animal respiration that in a certain sense we are often said to share with all living, respiring things: this sense seems to have preoccupied the attention of the emerging discipline of (critical) respiratory studies up until now;<sup>40</sup> and yet, this ecologically-minded approach risks eliding the fact that the animal voice

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<sup>40</sup> On the relation between this putatively empirical breath of man and the panting, purring, and growling of the animal, see the contributions of Tomaž Grušovnik and Sara Štuva to *Breathing with Luce Irigaray*. The former does indeed want to stress a certain difference between the human being and nature, a gesture which he shows Irigaray's work to bolster; and yet, nevertheless, a certain sameness comes to prevail precisely at the level of *breath*: to avoid either a sceptical Cartesian alienation from nature ("mechanicism paired with exploitation"; Tomaž Grušovnik, "Breathing with the Natural World," in *Breathing with Luce Irigaray*, eds. Lenart Škof and Emily A. Holmes (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 120) or an animistic appropriation such as Deep Ecology is said to indulge in, one must insist upon a "separate and dependent existence," such as a child bears to its mother. Breath is taken as the figure of this relation. And yet it seems to be taken in an all too empirical manner: "Being a natural gesture of every living being, connected with air, the cosmic wind, and atmosphere, breathing is – because of its natural proneness to exchange – undoubtedly more suited as a platform on which to build an ethical relationship," not least in the sense that appropriation is ruled out (just as much as indifference) in the case of "the air that we do not appropriate but only exchange." Grušovnik, "Breathing with the Natural World," 119, 123, 127.

One here risks treating humans as if they could be reduced, even temporarily, to the level of the animal (and vegetal) breath; and animals can – we tell ourselves – be muzzled. It is just such a reduction to the level of the merely living that Agamben has problematised throughout his biopolitical work, but also in the chapter of his thought that we are dealing with here. Perhaps indeed, if we were to develop this critical connection, we might also come to understand why environmental concerns trouble his thought so little.

Štuva, in "Breathing with Animals: Irigaray's Contribution to Animal Ethics," (in *Breathing with Luce Irigaray*, eds. Lenart Škof and Emily A. Holmes, 130–146; London: Bloomsbury, 2013) makes it clear that according to certain proponents of the philosophy of breath, Irigaray's moments of apparent humanism – which are from our own point of view promising – go too far: "All living creates on this earth live under the same sky and breathe the same air, share the same intercorporeal space and bodily vulnerability. Breathing is thus the first and last physical act that enables us to live, while at the same time making us corporeal, mortal and vulnerable." Štuva finds it "disturbing" that Irigaray "combines non-human animals into a homogeneous whole or at least into something completely separate from the human," although she concedes that this means "different [from the human], but not lesser," a gesture towards the inappropriability of the non-human animal by the human; but she still deems this "not enough" and suggests a move beyond Irigaray to a position in which animals of different kinds are "positioned on a horizontal existential level with humans." And indeed, Irigaray posits such a continuity on the level of a sexual difference which on her account pervades living nature. Štuva, "Breathing with Animals," 131, 136, 136, 137, 138.

must be altogether *removed* in order for the human Voice (and *its* own peculiar form of breathing) to take its place, and thus for the *Voice* as breath to come to be in its transcendental or quasi-transcendental guise – a breath of which – with the best will in the world – the animal can be said to know nothing.<sup>41</sup>

This distinction of the empirical and transcendental senses of breath, at least under the guise of the apparently troubling opposition that separates animal from man in terms of their respective voices, is something that a certain strand of respiratory philosophy seems inclined to efface, but it should encourage us to hesitate before we simply accept the reduction of man to a quasi-animalistic material body, and thus to something that might be subject, without recourse, to the kinds of gagging restrictions that have been imposed upon it over the last three and a half years. This strikes us as one of the propensities of the discipline that Agamben's account will allow us to warn against, without going so far as to urge that it ought to be erased altogether.

If the study of empirical breath has allowed the discipline to stress the fashionable notion of an equality between man and animal, it has also risked being complicit in a certain “animalisation of man” that can render the breath of the latter more vulnerable to stifling, when this breath comes to be considered too rotten (*l'aito* shares an etymology with “h-alitosis”). This is more likely to occur when State power assumes a predominantly biopolitical form, as it has for at the very least

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The philosophy of breath has at times evinced a tendency towards promiscuity which may only be admirable up to a point, at least if it brings in its train a fog which obscures distinctions that remain essential.

<sup>41</sup> If Luce Irigaray's *later* work has understandably proved to be more directly inspirational for the philosophy of breath (cf. for example Lenart Škof and Emily A. Holmes, eds., *Breathing with Luce Irigaray* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013)), more light might be shed on the distinction between the transcendental and empirical by returning to her early and foundational deconstruction of the division between the metaphysical and the physical. Her series on the four elements might constitute the most precious resource in this regard: “Metaphysics always supposed, in some manner, a solid crust from which to raise a construction. Thus, a physics [...]. Would the end of the metaphysical be required by their [sc. the elements'] reintervention in the physics of today?” Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, trans. Mary-Beth Mader (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1999; first published in 1983 by Éditions de Minuit as *L'oubli de l'air chez Martin Heidegger*), 2–3. Air, whilst in some sense “material,” indeed, would be “[t]he *a priori* condition of all of his [the philosopher's] *a prioris*.” Irigaray, *Forgetting*, 12.

the last century, and the transcendental approach offered by Agamben allows us to specify with more precision and complexity the relation between animal and man at the level of their respective voices and breaths. His work has also allowed us to demonstrate more fully the significance of breath in the history of philosophy.

### Conclusion

We wondered at the beginning whether our reading of Agamben's *Language and Death* might shed light on his project as a whole. In response to this we might say that although it offers a solution that we have not had time to address (in poetry and the poetising of philosophy that mitigates certain effects of the prosaic propositional form, but also in the conceptions of the Absolute and the Event that Hegel and Heidegger themselves propose) and which is either not advocated later on in his oeuvre or falls into place as one among a number of solutions to the problem of metaphysics, in terms of the overall trajectory of Agamben's work, *Language and Death* may be said to open onto the problematic of the late 1970s and early 1980s which centres around the notion of infancy, before coming to settle, in the later 1980s and early 1990s, on the notion of self-reference and meta-language; this leads immediately on to the notion of potentiality, the potential to signify or communicate, and this in turn to the power that is the topic of *Homo Sacer*. As a consequence of this connection, the precise relation between political power and life, still quite poorly understood by commentators, may be sharply illuminated by this earlier attempt to think the logic of ground in the relation between *logos* and *phōnē*. This earlier work may indeed be understood as foundational for the later, but in the precise sense of foundation that we have been elucidating, as if the work excluded from the *Homo Sacer* series should itself be understood as a "negative ground" for the latter, which had to exist but also to be "removed" in order for that series to get off the ground.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> And as if to testify that breath itself remains at the heart of Agamben's concerns even today, and as if to reassure us that we have not committed too great an act of hermeneutic violence, we might read these extremely recent words of Agamben: "Let us, therefore, continue



This in turn leads us to a position from which we might be able better to understand the other questions and hypotheses that we proposed at the outset: the discourse on voice and its breath should lead us not simply to an affirmation of the post-human communality of empirical respiration and a general reduction of the human to the level of the animal (which in turn lays our very biological life open to all sorts of incursions and impositions stemming from sovereign instances of power); what we are led to is rather a humanistic affirmation of the very different voice (or Voice) and (transcendental) breath of which human beings alone are capable. For in the human, language is capable of referring to its own incipient or infantile state, in which it has left the animal realm behind, but has neither forgotten its animal origins nor yet fully assumed its humanity by composing a determinately signifying linguistic statement. This is the transcendental moment of language, the moment at which it is no longer animal but not yet human – at least, not fully or actually so, but rather human in potential. Perhaps this is not the infant who literally empirically breathes the moment the umbilical cord conjoining him with his mother is severed, but the infant at the moment in which this breath is about to be articulated into vowels and consonants, those silent letters which describe the form that breath assumes when it first becomes spiritual, and the animal voice is beginning to be torn from our throats. This constitutes the transcendental moment of breath as the event of being, to which we alone may be said to be privy.

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to attend to the commas even if the house burns down, let us speak to each other carefully without any rhetoric, listening not only to what we say but also to what the language tells us, to that little breath that used to be called inspiration [*quel piccolo soffio che si chiamava un tempo ispirazione*] and that remains the most precious gift that, at times, language – whether literary canon or dialect – can give us.” Agamben, “Virgole e fiamme” [“Commas and Flames,”], 19th June 2023, <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-virgole-e-fiamme>. Let us also note that his very most recent text, at the time of writing, returns to the question of the human voice, demonstrating its enduring importance: *La voce umana* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2023).

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