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"Bare Life" and Politics in Agamben's Reading of Aristotle

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Abstract: Giorgio Agamben's critique of Western politics in *Homo Sacer* and three related books has been highly influential in the humanities and social sciences. The critical social theory set out in these works depends essentially on his reading of Aristotle's *Politics*. His diagnosis of what ails Western politics and his suggested remedy advert to a "biopolitical paradigm," at the center of which stand a notion of "bare life" and a purported opposition between *bios* and *zoē*. Agamben claims that this distinction is found in Aristotle's text, in ancient Greek, and in a tradition of political theory and political society stemming from fourth-century Athens to the present. However, a close reading of Aristotle refutes this assertion. There is no such distinction. I show that he bases this view on claims about Aristotle by Arendt and Foucault, which are also unfounded.

> To someone saying that life is bad, Diogenes said, "not life itself, but the bad life."
>
> C'est une fois qu'on aura su ce que c'était ce régime gouvernmental appelé libéralisme qu'on pourra … saisir ce qu'est la biopolitique.

I

Since the publication of *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* and three related works, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, and *State of Exception*, the social and political ideas of the Italian literary critic and philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, have spread rapidly.[1] In the last decade or so, Agamben's intellectual stock has

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Attribution of Epigrams: Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. 2, trans. R. D. Hicks (London: Heinemann, Loeb Editions, 1970), 57. The words attributed to Diogenes of Sinope are "ou to zēn alla to kakōs zēn" and Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la Biopolitique. Cours au Collège de France. 1978–1979* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 24.

[1]Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans.

risen sharply in literary theory, comparative literature,[2] sociology,[3] international relations theory,[4] history,[5] law, and critical legal theory.[6] His work now commands attention in the highest citadels of European and North American academia.[7] Citations of Agamben abound, as do references to his concept of bare life and to two related distinctions: the distinction between bare life and political life, and the distinction between *zoē* and *bios*.[8]

No doubt, the current fascination with Agamben's work has something to do with the intoxicating nature of his conclusions. *Homo Sacer* concludes with the assertion that "[t]oday it is not the city but the camp that is the fundamental bio-political paradigm of the West."[9] Agamben's thesis is that a "biopolitical paradigm" is responsible for some of the worst atrocities of the twentieth

Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999). *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[2]The translator into English of *Homo Sacer* and two other of Agamben's volumes is Daniel Heller-Roazen, professor of comparative literature at Princeton. I offer here a few select examples of recent work on Agamben or influenced by him, work that is either written by high profile academics or that appears in significant journals or in volumes published by major presses. Some of this work is very critical. Still, I take it that the authors in question deem that Agamben's work is sufficiently influential to be a worthy target of their criticism.

[3]See for example, René ten Bos, "Giorgio Agamben and the Community without Identity," *Sociological Review* 53, no. 1 (2005): 16–29.

[4]See for example, Jan Huysmans, "The Jargon of Exception. On Schmitt, Agamben and the Absence of Political Society," *International Political Sociology* 2 (2008): 165–83.

[5]See Phillipe Mesnard, "The Political Philosophy of Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Evaluation," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 5 (Summer 2004): 139–57; and a recent article by Mark A. Mazower of Columbia University, "Foucault, Agamben: Theory and the Nazis," *Boundary* 2, no. 35 (2008): 23–34.

[6]See the recent volume *International Law and Its Others*, ed. Anne Orford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). It has 24 cited references to Agamben, some extensive, and, by way of comparison, only 2 to Rawls. See also Nasser Hussain and Melissa Placek, "Thresholds, Sovereignty and the Sacred," *Law and Society Review* 34, no. 2 (2000): 495.

[7]For example, in July 2005 a symposium took place at Yale University Law School entitled "The Political: Law, Culture, Theology." It was held under the aegis of the SIAS (Some Institutes for Advanced Studies) consortium, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, and attended by 18 of the world's brightest young European and American scholars in law and in the humanities. They came to study the work of Giorgio Agamben among other authors. http://www.law.yale.edu/news/4718.htm

[8]At last Google count, "Agamben" netted 1,200,000 hits, up from 404,000, when I first submitted this article in July 2008.

[9]Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 181/202. Henceforth second references, after the solidus, are to the Italian original: *Homo Sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita* (Torino: Giulio Enaudi, 2005).

century, including the Nazi concentration camps, and that it provides the hitherto concealed common link or "inner solidarity" between Nazism and liberalism.[10] According to Agamben, the same "paradigm" can explain or illuminate why the post–Second World War period, in spite of the dark shadow cast over it by totalitarianism, has witnessed the gradual diminishment of democratic politics and the irresistible growth of autocratic and executive governance. Agamben is wont to claim, for example, that his theory can throw light on why in the wake of the war on terror apparently liberal democratic states go in for practices such as "extraordinary rendition" and the detainment and torture of "unlawful combatants" at that other camp in Guantanamo Bay.[11] Whatever else one might think about them, these are audacious and provocative statements, which, when viewed at a low enough level of historical and empirical resolution, appear to chime with recent geopolitical developments in the aftermath of 9/11.

Contra Agamben, I think that the very idea of a single underlying paradigm of Western politics since the Greeks is ridiculous, that his diagnosis of contemporary society is wholly unpersuasive, and that his social theory has no critical purchase whatsoever on the current political state of affairs. The argument I pursue here, however, focuses mainly on the textual evidence on which Agamben bases his thesis of the destiny of Western politics, evidence which consists almost entirely of an erroneous—albeit widespread and hence not yet discredited—reading of Aristotle's *Politics*. Partly because that reading is so adhesive and influential, it is worth taking another detailed critical look at it, which I do in section III below. In sections IV and V, I attempt, to spell out the consequences for Agamben's wider social and political thought—that is, for the whole project sketched out in his *Homo Sacer* trilogy and his *State of Exception*. If I am right, the credibility of the social theory, namely the diagnosis of Western politics set out in *Homo Sacer* and elsewhere, is closely tied to, and heavily dependent on, the credibility of his reading of Aristotle and of his intellectual history.

[10]Ibid., 5/7, 10/14. "The camp—as the pure absolute and impassable bio-political space . . .—will appear as the hidden paradigm of the political sphere of modernity [come il paradigma nascosto della spazio politico della modernità] . . ." Ibid., 123/35. On the biopolitical paradigm, see also *Homo Sacer*, 3, 9, 166–81.

[11]See Agamben, *State of Exception*, 2–3. See also "Interview with Giorgio Agamben: Life, A Work of Art without an Author: The State of Exception, the Administration of Disorder and Private Life," *German Law Journal* 5, no. 5 (May 1, 2004, special edition): "It is firstly obvious that we frequently can no longer differentiate between what is private and what public, and that both sides of the classical opposition appear to be losing their reality. And the detention camp at Guantanamo is the *locus par excellence* of this impossibility" (612). See also Rens van Munster, "The War on Terrorism: When the Exception Becomes the Rule," *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*, 17, no. 2 (2004): 141–53.

II

Before turning to the disputed interpretation of Aristotle, I shall set out in detail the thesis upon which Agamben's diagnosis of the destiny of Western politics rests. It takes the form of an analysis of the paradoxical logic of political sovereignty. Agamben maintains that a single, hidden, *biopolitical* paradigm, originating in ancient Athens and running through to modern Western democracy, epochally determines and obscures the nature of politics to the present day.[12] This "hidden foundation" [*il fondamento nascosto*] or "hidden paradigm" [*il paradigma nascosto*], he claims, is characterized by a single logic, captured in the distinction between "bare life" and "politics."[13] He calls this logic "the logic of exception" by which he means that it is not only a relation of exclusion of the former ("bare life") by and from the latter ("politics"), and of mutual opposition between the two terms and their referents, but one that is simultaneously an inclusion of the former in the latter.[14]

This thesis is very abstract. What does it amount to concretely? What does it mean to claim that bare life is simultaneously included within and excluded from politics? We can make the thesis that politics excludes bare life from it, and remains opposed to it, more concrete by construing it as an historical claim about ancient political life. At one level, Agamben means that the political life of citizens in ancient Greece was conducted separately from family life, and thus separately from the women and slave economy, and the material and biological side of social reproduction. By contrast, the modern state both includes and confines these spheres (or the modern manifestations of bare life) within it: hence the thesis that in modernity bare life is both included—confined within political life—while simultaneously being excluded from and opposed to it.[15] To expand slightly, Agamben claims that in modern society political sovereignty, by dint of the institutional forms and effects of civilization, is directed against the human being's natural existence and his or her biological and animal functions. Or rather, these functions are maintained in existence, but closely controlled by the juridical, administrative, and executive power of the state. Since its origins in the ancient Greek polis, especially since the advent of modernity, politics, according to Agamben, has been marked by an intensification of the state's regulation, control, and subordination of the biological and somatic aspects of

[12]Agamben's statement that Western politics has been biopolitics "from the very beginning" is evidence that he thinks there is a single overarching paradigm.

[13]Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 9/12 and 123/31.

[14]It is important to note that what Agamben calls the logic of exception is still, at some level, a logic of mutual opposition and of exclusion, even if this exclusion is at the same time an inclusion. There is no state of exception that is not also at some level a state of opposition and exclusion.

[15]Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 4/7, 7/10.

human existence and its management of the economic, material, and instinctual basis of human life.

We can throw a little more light upon Agamben's argument by looking briefly at the different sources from which it is configured. Agamben's thesis is essentially an inference drawn from three different sets of claims.

Foucault's Biopolitics

Agamben presents his conception of biopolitics as correction and "completion" of Michel Foucault's concept of biopower.[16] Foucault uses the terms *biopolitics* and *biopower* to designate the process whereby, in the eighteenth century, government once based on the sovereign's power of life or death over its subjects developed *softer* (but more pervasive) technologies of power, which allowed them to extend their reach over their subjects by managing, regulating, and controlling populations. (Note that Foucault's use of the term is much more historically specific than Agamben's and much more narrowly targeted at specific areas of community life and population control such as health, sanitation, birthrate, longevity, and race.[17] Note also that there is consequently no suggestion in Foucault that biopolitics is epochal or uniform or that it structures the political as such, however that is

[16]Ibid., 4/6. Paul Patton in an informed and insightful essay argues that Foucault abandons his short-lived notion of biopower after 1976. Among other things, he belatedly recognized that state power had always intervened in the biological lives of citizens, and that in truth the real change in the nineteenth century was that advances in technology, science, and medicine allowed government interventions to be more efficient. Patton, "Agamben and Foucault on Biopolitics and Biopower," in *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, ed. Matthew Calarco and Steven De Caroli (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 203–19.

[17]Foucault in "*Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976* (New York: Picador, 2003), 239–65. In this essay, Foucault is particularly interested in the irony that it was liberalism, which he understands as a reforming "critical reflection upon governmental practice," and thus as a manifestation of social criticism, that brought about this extension in the reach of governmental control. Cf. also Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 141–42, where he describes biopolitics as "nothing less than the entry of life into history, that is, the entry of phenomena peculiar to the life of the human species into the order to knowledge and power, into the sphere of political techniques. . . . For the first time in history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence; the fact of living was no longer an inaccessible substrate that only emerged from time to time, amid the randomness of death and its fatality; part of it passed into knowledge's field of control and power's sphere of intervention. Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied and the level of life itself; it was the taking charge of life more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body."

conceived, from its origins to the present.[18] Furthermore, it is worth noting that Agamben reverses Foucault's order of explanation. For Foucault argues specifically that one has first to understand liberalism and neoliberalism and the various historical forms it takes in order to understand biopolitics, not vice versa.[19]) Nonetheless, Foucault's work provides not only the terminology, but also much of the theoretical impetus for Agamben's project.

Arendt's Thesis of the Rise of the Social

Agamben borrows his second set of ideas from Hannah Arendt. He claims that in ancient Greece "simple natural life is excluded from the *polis* in the strict sense, and remains confined—as merely reproductive life, to the ambit of the *oikos* (*Politics* 1252a26–35)."[20] The clue to the origin of these ideas comes from Agamben's mention of the reproductive life of the *oikos* and, a page later, his allusion to Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*.[21] In that brilliant but highly idiosyncratic work, Arendt, citing Aristotle, asserts that according to Greek thought, "political organization is not only different from but stands in direct opposition to that natural association whose centre is the home (*oikia*) and the family."[22] A little later she asserts that for the Greeks "everything merely necessary or useful is strictly excluded" from "the realm of human affairs," that is, from the political realm.[23] There is another passing remark in which she refers to the "specifically human life" construed as the lived and narrated time between birth and death, consisting of human words, deeds, and actions—"*bios* as distinguished from mere *zōē*."[24]

Arendt is drawing a strict contrast between political life and the natural life process, that is, life deemed *natural* in the sense that is bound to the "necessity

[18]Foucault, "*Society Must Be Defended*," 241–42. For this reason, I think that Žižek's talk of a "sense of biopolitics from Foucault to Agamben" is wholly mistaken, while Ziarek's talk of Agamben's "revision" of Foucault's concept understates the fact that Agamben takes the concept, transforms it, and adapts it for purposes for which it was not intended. Slavov Žižek, "From Politics to Biopolitics and Back," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 23 (2004): 501–21. Eva Płonowska Ziarek, "Bare Life on Strike: Notes on the Biopolitics of Race and Gender," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 107, no. 1 (2008): 89.

[19]Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la Biopolitique : Cours au Collège de France, 1978–1979* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 24.

[20]Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 2/4 (translation amended).

[21]Ibid.

[22]Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 24. 27.

[23]Ibid., 25. She makes this claim about Greek political thought, Greek political reality, and about Aristotle's conception of politics.

[24]Note how Arendt transliterates the Greek noun. See note 50 below.

of subsistence."[25] In fact, Arendt originated the thesis that the economic, biological, and instinctual bases of human association—because they are based in our physical and animal existence—are *opposed to* and *excluded from* political life, and the idea that what the Greeks called *zōē* is opposed to and excluded from *bios*. Arendt is also the person who first offers Aristotle's *Politics* as evidence for this view. Persuaded by her account of ancient politics, Agamben complains that Arendt unfortunately failed to connect it with "the penetrating analysis she had previously devoted to totalitarian power."[26] By means of his thesis on the destiny of Western politics, Agamben accordingly takes up her ideas, increases their significance, and presses them into the service of a diagnosis of totalitarian power.[27]

Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt on the State of Exception

The third and final source for Agamben's intellectual medley is his interpretation of Walther Benjamin's eighth thesis on the philosophy of history.

> The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency (*Ausnahmezustand*), and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism.[28]

Benjamin's thesis has an historical, wholly extramundane, critical dimension (contained in its first sentence) as well as a Messianic revolutionary dimension (contained in its third sentence.). The former is targeted specifically at the politics of the final years of the Weimar Republic, which took place under a state of emergency ("*Ausnahmezustand*," in German literally "state of exception") and the suspension of constitutional law. Agamben reinterprets Benjamin's thesis as a prophecy about the fate of Western politics. Auschwitz, he claims, was a state of exception par excellence. Moreover, political life in the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first is marked by an ongoing series of now declared, now disguised, states of exception.[29]

[25]Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 24.

[26]Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 2/4.

[27]Ibid. Jacques Rancière argues that in Agamben's account "radical suspension of politics in the exception of bare life is the ultimate consequence of Arendt's archpolitical position, of her attempt to preserve the political from the contamination of private, social, apolitical life." "Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?" *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2/3 (Spring/Summer 2004): 301–2.

[28]Walther Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zone (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257.

[29]Agamben, "The State of Exception as a Paradigm of Government," chap. 1 of *State of Exception*.

I shall not dwell on the influence of Benjamin–and through Benjamin, Carl Schmitt–on Agamben. Two points, however, are worth noting. The first is that in his "Critique of Violence," written under the influence of Schmitt's *Die Diktatur*, Benjamin makes a passing reference to "mere life" [*bloβes Leben*] by which he means man's mundane, natural, and physical existence.[30] The second is that Agamben takes his notion of what he calls the logic of the state of exception from Schmitt's doctrine of the sovereign, who has the power to suspend and to restore the legal order. Agamben frequently notes that "the state of exception is neither external nor internal to the juridical order."[31]

Agamben's thesis in *Homo Sacer* is a kind of intellectual club sandwich of these three sets of ideas.[32] He asserts that modern Western liberal democratic politics is constituted by a single biopolitical paradigm, which bears the structure of exception, whereby bare life is opposed to and excluded from politics but simultaneously included within it. In this space—in the state of emergency qua the space of *exception*, that is, the space where law and its protections are suspended—the eponymous subject of the book, *homo sacer*, lived his rather precarious life. *Homo sacer*, Agamben tells us, was a person designated sacred in Roman law who lacked the usual protections of the law. Due to his peculiar legal status, he could be killed, but not sacrificed. "The protagonist of this book is bare life," he writes, "the life of *homo sacer* who may be killed but not sacrificed and whose essential function in

[30]Benjamin draws a distinction between mythical law-founding and law-keeping violence and divine violence and writes the following: "For blood is the symbol of mere life. The dissolution of legal violence stems, as cannot be shown in detail here, from the guilt of more natural life, which consigns the living, innocent and unhappy, to a retribution that 'expiates' the guilt of mere life—and doubtless also purifies the guilty, not of guilt, but of law. For with mere life the rule of law over the living ceases. Mythical violence is bloody power over mere life for its own sake, divine violence pure power over all life for the sake of the living" (W. Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *One-Way Street and Other Writings* [London and New York: Verso, 1997], 151). W. Benjamin, *Zur Kritik der Gewalt und andere Aufsätze*. Mit einem Nachwort versehen von Herbert Marcuse (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1965). Thanks to Verena Erlenbusch for pointing this out to me.

[31]Agamben, *State of Exception*, 22. See also Carl Schmitt-Dorotic, *Die Diktatur: Von den Anfängen des modernen Souveränitätsgedankens bis zum proletarischen Klassenkampf* (Munich: Duncker and Humblot, 1921).

[32]Each of these three ingredients is, viewed from a source-critical point of view, controversial and open to objection. First, there is Agamben's anachronistic and ahistorical reworking of Foucault's notion of biopolitics mentioned above; second, his application of Arendt's reading of Aristotle and her critique of the rise of the social to the phenomenon of twentieth-century totalitarianism; and third, his use of the idea of the state of exception to explain the suspension of aspects of *international* law, as well as the recent erosion of civil and human rights by executive and autocratic governance. That said, I shall leave these lines of objection to be pursued by scholars of Foucault, Arendt, Benjamin, and Schmitt respectively.

modern politics we intend to assert."[33] Although Agamben names the book after *homo sacer* the latter figure is really just a recondite example of the more general theory that is put forward.[34] The dyad of bare life and politics—*zoē* and *bios*, as Agamben puts it—forms the central axis of that theory. By his own lights, "it is the subject of the book."[35] For this reason, I target my objections at Agamben's central claim regarding the destiny of Western politics. First, I question whether bare life and politics form a relation of mutual opposition, and of an exclusion that is simultaneously an inclusion of the former within the latter, and thus, in this technical sense, an "exception." Second, I reject the assertion that they articulate a paradigm of politics that dates back to Aristotle and ancient Greece.

III

Agamben claims that in its origins, among the Greeks, politics [*politica*] was conceived as an exercise of a power that was implacably opposed to bare life [*la nuda vita*], which he understands as a human being's physical, instinctual, biological, and material existence, and which he glosses as "the simple fact of living."[36] He maintains that the peculiar opposition between these two forces can be seen in Aristotle's use of two different Greek words for life, *zoē* (*zēn*) and *bios*, which form the terms of an *Urdistinction* that grounds the distinction between bare life and politics, and from which the social and historical struggle between bare life and political sovereignty unfolds. Agamben further claims that *actually existing politics* in the ancient world was marked by this peculiar opposition—which is the "foundation of Western democratic politics."[37] Whether Agamben's claim is that

[33]Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 8/11.

[34]He is a confusing example also, as Paul Patton points out. *Homo sacer* is supposed to be bare life and thus outside the law, yet owes his peculiar legal status wholly to Roman Law. Patton, "Agamben and Foucault on Biopolitics and Biopower," in *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, ed. Matthew Calarco and Steven De Caroli (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 211.

[35]The index and the structure of *Homo Sacer* are good evidence for this claim. Agamben's social theory and his analysis of sovereign power in particular do not depend on the example *homo sacer*—he has a whole array of other instances, including (at random): the *Versuchsperson* (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 154–60, 171–78); people in a persistent vegetative state (163–64, 181–83); the sadomasochist and "Sade's entire work (in particular … *120 Days of Sodom*)" (134–35, 148–49); not to mention "the entire population of the Third World" (180–211).

[36]Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 2/4. Agamben, *Means without End*, 3/13. Henceforth references to the original are given after the solidus: *Mezzi Senza Fine: Note sulla politica* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1996).

[37]He also calls it the "founding opposition" and the "hidden foundation" (Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 2, 4, 7, 8, 9, 11, 181–84).

Aristotle himself laid this foundation in the *Politics* or rather that Aristotle's *Politics* testified to the existence of such a foundation among the ancient Greeks is not made clear. Agamben makes now one, now the other claim, and does not adduce any further linguistic or historical evidence.

In any case, Agamben's claim of a distinction between bare life and politics, or *zoē* and *bios*, is central to both his diagnosis of what ails Western liberal democratic politics and his etiology of the atrocities of the twentieth century. Furthermore, he claims to be able to trace this distinction back to Aristotle's *Politics*, and, therefore, to the ancient Greek language and, thus, to actual ancient Greek political culture and society. He asserts that we owe our current political self-conception, and indeed our paradigm of the political, to "the Greeks."[38] Agamben bases all these claims on the slender evidence of his reading of a few passages of Aristotle's *Politics*.

In the beginning of *Homo Sacer*, Agamben discusses the following sentence from Aristotle's *Politics*, which he considers to be of crucial and fateful significance.

> When several villages are united in a single complete community large enough to be nearly or quite self-sufficing, the polis comes into existence, originating in life itself [*ginomenē men tou zēn heneken*] and existing essentially for the sake of the good life [*ousa de tou eu zēn*] .[39]

There are several points to note here. First, Agamben reads Aristotle's contrast in the passage between life (*zēn*) and the good life (*eu zēn*) as the original instance of the opposition between bare life and politics. Second, he claims that the contrast Aristotle makes is captured by the semantic distinction between two different Greek words for "life," namely, "*zōē*" and "*bios*." Third, he takes this sentence as evidence that Aristotle conceives these two distinct kinds of life—"bare life" and "political life"—to be exclusive and *mutually opposed* and, hence, to exemplify the logic of exception. Fourth, Agamben claims that the distinction between *zoē* and *bios* was pandemic in the ancient Greek language. Fifth, he claims that actual politics in the ancient world was marked by this same relation. Finally, Agamben claims both that this passage is "canonical for the political tradition of the West" and that the opposition it contains *defines* the end of the political community.[40]

[38]Ibid., 1/3.

[39]Ibid., 2/4. Aristotle *Politics* 1252b29–31. English translations from Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Jowett, ed. S. Everson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). References to the Greek from Aristotelis, *Politica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957).

[40]Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 2/4. "[W]hen Aristotle defined the end of the perfect community in a passage which was to become canonical for the political tradition of the West (1252b30) he did so precisely by opposing the simple fact of living (*to zēn*) to politically qualified life (*ginomenē men oun tou zēn eneken ousa de tou eu zēn*)." Would not one be just as entitled (if not more so) to claim that the Roman distinction between

In this one passage, Agamben claims to have unearthed the hidden biopolitical paradigm of Western politics.

> It will be necessary to reconsider the Aristotelian definition of the polis as the opposition between life (*zēn*), and good life (*eu zēn*). The opposition is in fact, at the same time an implication of the first in the second, of bare life in politically qualified life. What remains to be interrogated in the Aristotelian definition is … why Western politics first constitutes itself through an exclusion, which is simultaneously an inclusion, of bare life.[41]

I assert that every one of these claims is either straightforwardly false or at very least unwarranted and misleading. To begin, Agamben's reading focuses on what he says is Aristotle's use of two different words for life in ancient Greek, *zoē* and *bios*. Agamben maintains that in Aristotle and in ancient Greek, these words form a conceptual dyad, an *uropposition* that grounds an array of subsidiary distinctions and oppositions, such as those between bare life/politics, mere life/the good life, voice/speech, and private life/public life.[42]

This assumption clearly departs from Aristotle's usage. Take, for example, the word *bios*. Agamben notes that *bios* in Attic Greek has an ethological sense, meaning "the form or way of living proper to an individual or group."[43] He implies, though, that the term refers only to human lives.[44] Aristotle entertains two different candidates for the highest form of the good life (which, notoriously, he has some trouble reconciling): the *bios theōrētikos*, contemplative life, and the *bios praktikos*, the life of practical virtue.[45] These are, indeed, two *ways of living* the good life peculiar to humans. A good life achieves the telos of *eudaimonia* (or "happiness"), which Aristotle defines as "activity of the

res publica and *res privata* constituted the foundation of modern politics; or that Hobbesian social contract theory, which is based on the repudiation of and break with Aristotle and Aristotelianism, was paradigmatic of modern Western political theory and modern politics?

[41]Ibid., 7/10.

[42]Ibid., 4/7, 8/11. It is not clear whether he is claiming that this distinction is in Aristotle and, therefore, in Greek, which, as Laurent Dubreuil points out, would be a fatal inference, not because (as I will show) there is no such distinction in Aristotle, but because even if there were such a distinction, one cannot infer from Aristotle, let alone from one passage in the *Politics*, to the Greek corpus. Dubreuil, "Leaving Politics: Bios, Zoe, Life," *Diacritics* 36 (Summer 2006): 83–99.

[43]Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 1/3; *Means without End*, 3/13.

[44]This is reading between the lines; however, Agamben clearly implies that *zoē* and *bios* respectively correspond to voice and language, and Aristotle clearly states that whereas animals have voice, only human beings have speech. Dubreuil reads Agamben in the same way that I do. Dubreuil, "Leaving Politics."

[45]See Richard Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

soul expressing virtue."[46] Although it is true that for Aristotle only human beings (among mortals) are capable of living the life of contemplation and practical virtue, it is not the case that only human beings have "ways of life," and Aristotle does not reserve the term *bios* exclusively for humans. Throughout his biological writings (and Aristotle was as much a biologist as a philosopher), he refers to the different "ways of life" (and the different characters or dispositions) of various species of animal.[47]

The noun *zōon*, by contrast, literally means an ensouled, and in this sense *living* or *animated*, being. It is more an ontological than an ethological noun. Its primary sense in fourth-century Greek is not "animal," although many people including Heidegger have claimed that it is.[48] Agamben, to give him credit, notes that the term is applied equally to "animals, men or gods."[49] The closely cognate noun *zōē* [*ζωή*] is more abstract and means life, or living, or (just like *bios*) way of living.[50] For Aristotle, *zōē* and *zōon*

[46]Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a16–18.

[47]If Aristotle did reserve the term *bios* for humans, presumably he would not use the word *bios* in the famous passages of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1095b19) where he characterizes the life of gratification and pleasure as "slavish" and "a life for grazing animals" [*boskēmatōn bion*]. *Bios* is in this respect more like *ethos*—another term Aristotle does not reserve exclusively for humans. For example, "Further differences exhibited by animals [*tōn zōōn*] are those which relate to their ways of life, their actions and their dispositions [*kata tous bious kai tas praxeis kai ta ēthē*] (*History of Animals*, 487a11). This is typical of his usage, as we see from, e.g., *History of Animals*, 487a14, 487b34, 488b37; and *Generation of Animals*, 750a6. See H. Bonitz, *Index Aristotelicus* (Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1955), 137.

[48]Martin Heidegger, "Letter On Humanism" [1949], in *Basic Writings*, ed. D. F. Krell (London: Routledge, 1994), 227: "[W]ith the animal *zōon*, an interpretation of 'life' is already posited that necessarily lies in an interpretation of beings as *zōē* and *physis* within what is living appears.... It finally remains to ask whether the essence of man primordially and most decisively lies in the dimension of *animalitas* at all. Are we really on the right track toward the essence of man as long as we set him off as one living creature among others, in contrast to plants, beasts, and God?" See also Arendt who claims that Plato and Aristotle did not count the need-based sociality of humankind among the specifically human characteristics; it was something human life had in common with animal life and for this reason could not be fundamentally human. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 24.

[49]Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 1/3.

[50]Note the spelling, with omega, not omicron. This is normally transliterated in Latin script thus: *zōē*. Curiously, Agamben writes it "*zoē*" throughout *Homo Sacer* and *Means without End* in both English and Italian. This spelling seems to have caught on. See *Politics, Metaphysics and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben's "Homo Sacer,"* ed. Andrew Norris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); and *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*. Note that the accents often go missing in html text, and in texts printed from articles on the web in html. In texts originally printed on paper, however, there is no reason not to write *zōē* rather than *zoē*. From now on, I shall appropriate Agamben's peculiar spelling for my own purposes: I will use "*zoē*"

do not carry the pejorative connotation they came to have when, much later, they came to denote the life of beings with a value below that of humans, that is, beings that lacked a Christian soul or human dignity, "animals."[51] As Hans Jonas puts it, *zōa* are ensouled beings in a wide and nonpejorative sense, which excludes plants, but includes animals and gods: the word "does not mean animal (= *bestia*), but every ensouled (= living) being, excluding plants but including demons, Gods, ensouled stars, indeed the ensouled universe as the greatest and most perfect living being itself."[52] The human realm, the realm that according to Aristotle constitutes the domain of ethical and political inquiry, is more narrowly restricted than the realm of *zōōn*, for the human realm is suspended between the beasts below and the gods above. Human beings are distinct from beasts and gods, but at their worst and at their best they have something in common with both.[53]

Agamben maintains that *zoē* and *bios* form a dyad in Aristotle's political theory, that they are mutually opposed, and that the latter excludes the former, just like their equivalents: mere life/good life, bare life/political way of life.[54] Considered as a claim about Aristotle's use of language, this is simply untrue. For Aristotle, *zōē* and *bios* are not a conceptual pair like *dynamis* and *energeia*, nor are they systematically linked in Greek philosophy and political culture, as, for example, *physis* and *nomos*. They are just two ordinary polysemous Greek nouns with a slightly different, partially overlapping range of meanings.[55] Certainly, there is no opposition or mutual exclusion between the terms or their referents. The human being, whom Aristotle famously characterizes as a *zōon politikon*, can lead a practical or a

when citing Agamben and to designate the notion he takes to be equivalent with "bare life," and I shall use "*zōē*" only when referring to Aristotle's concept and the actual Greek word.

[51]Dubreuil, "Leaving Politics," also notes this point.

[52]Hans Jonas, "Zwischen Nichts und Ewigkeit. Zur Lehre vom Menschen," cited in Günther Bien, *Die Grundlegung der Politischen Philosophie bei Aristoteles* (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 1973), 123. While this may be generally true, as Jonas and Bien claim, Aristotle does sometimes use the term to mean animal in the pejorative sense of beast or brute. See for example *Politics* 1280a30, where Aristotle contrasts political life with a life of indolence and pleasure fit only for animals and slaves and *Politics*, 1251a16–19 where he claims that only man—in contrast with the other animals—has a sense of justice. In these passages, Aristotle must be using the word in the narrow and pejorative sense, otherwise the comparison fails.

[53]Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1181b15.

[54]Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 2/4, 7/10. Agamben, *Means without End*, 3/13.

[55]Dubreuil claims that in Aristotle *zōē* tends to denote life in general, and *bios* particular life. Laurent Dubreuil, "Leaving Politics," 84. The view that there is a sharp distinction between something called '*zoē*' and *bios* in Aristotle is now firmly entrenched in the secondary literature. See *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, and *Politics, Metaphysics and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben's "Homo Sacer"*.

contemplative life (*bios*), and each animal species has its own distinctive character and way of life.[56] Besides, no responsible analysis of the meaning of these words in Aristotle warrants inferences about the ancient Greek language in general: as Dubreuil points out, Aristotle's *Politics* is not the entire Greek corpus.[57] Even less can it warrant historical and sociological claims about a relation of opposition and mutual exclusion at the heart of actual Greek political society and culture.

Not only, then, do the words *zōē* and *bios* not capture the distinction that Agamben claims exists between bare life and politics, but also it cannot be the case that mere life and the good life in Aristotle are related by mutual opposition, that the latter excludes the former, and that they thus constitute what Agamben calls an exception. To see why none of this can be true, we need to look at the immediate context of passage (i), *Politics* I, 1 1252b29–31. Book one comprises a narrative account of the development of the polis from its origins in the household and the village, and an account of its elements. It provides an argument for two related theses: that the polis exists by nature *tōn phusei hē polis esti* and that man is by nature a political animal (*hō anthrōpos phusei politikon zōon*).[58] Aristotle's argument is that, if all the constituent parts of a whole exist by nature, then *a fortiori* the whole exists by nature; that the polis (the whole) comprises the household and the village (its parts), and that, therefore, the household and the village exist by nature. This is clear enough from the sentence directly following the one on which Agamben bases his interpretation.

> And therefore if the earlier forms of association are natural so is the polis, for it is the end of them, and the nature of a thing is its end.[59]

The context alone signals that Aristotle does not and cannot claim that the material and biological origins and constituents of human association (i.e., what Agamben terms "bare life" or "*zoē*") are opposed and excluded by its

[56]See H. Bonitz, *Index Aristotelicus*, 137. Laclau perceptively notes that by Agamben's own lights "living beings are not distributed between the two categories—those who have exclusively bios and those who have exclusively zoē—for those who have bios obviously have zoē as well" (Ernesto Laclau, "Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy," *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, 17). The converse is also true, of course: it would make no sense for Aristotle to attribute physical life to a being and not a way of living, and his usage is indicative of this. Perhaps Laclau thinks that "*bios*" is a distinctively human way of life, which is what Agamben also thinks.

[57]Dubreuil, "Leaving Politics," 85.

[58]Aristotle, *Politics*, 12531–2.

[59]Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a1–3. Newman puts the argument nicely: "The household cannot be natural and the State other than natural: what holds of the former must hold of the latter: if the household is natural, *a fortiori* the State is so, for it is the completion of the household." W. L. Newman, *The Politics of Aristotle*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1887–1902), 29–30.

end—what it is by nature and in essence—namely, a polis or political community. Aristotle's narrative of origins of the polis in namely the family, the household, and village supports his argument, not by revealing the essence of the polis—according to Aristotle the essence of a thing lies in its final end not in its beginnings—but by analyzing the underlying natural bases of human association. These are:

(i) the natural (unchosen) desire of man and woman to couple;[60]
(ii) the natural hierarchies of master-slave and man-woman, and their mutual interest of self-preservation;[61]
(iii) the social instinct of naturally gregarious human beings to live in groups among their own kind;[62] and
(iv) the economic and material interdependence of beings that are by nature needy, unlike gods and some beasts that are self-sufficing.[63]

Together these make up what Aristotle calls variously—but always in contrast to the good life—"life," "mere life," or "life itself." He does not deny that these are also natural and normal bases of association in the polis, and as such *necessary conditions* of political life. Indeed, in a passage Agamben himself cites but fails to take into account, Aristotle claims that "human beings congregate together and maintain the political community also for the sake of mere life." Aristotle only denies that these biological, instinctual, and material bases of association are *sufficient conditions* of political life.[64] A properly political order has to have, in addition to this material, economic, and instinctual basis, a deeper (and more worthy) basis in citizenship, civic friendship, and justice. The political order proper is something that is inscribed in the constitution, laws, practices, institutions, and the collective life of the polis and instilled in the ethos or character of its individual citizens through education and upbringing.

Aristotle's distinction between mere life and the good life is, then, not captured by the semantic differences between the words *zōē* and *bios*. Recall that *zōē* applies also to the gods, who do not have needs and are not compelled to associate for economic reasons, while *bios* is applied not just to humans, but

[60]Aristotle, *Politics* 1252a30.
[61]Aristotle, *Politics* 1252a31–5.
[62]Ibid.
[63]Aristotle, *Politics* 1252a14.
[64]Aristotle, *Politics* 1278b25. See also *Politics* 1280b30–40: "A polis exists for the sake of a good life, and not for the sake of mere living. . . . It is clear then that a polis is not a mere community, having a common place, established for the prevention of mutual crime and for the sake of exchange. These are conditions without which a state cannot exist; but all of them together do not constitute a state, which is a community of families . . . in well-being for the sake of a perfect and self-sufficing life. . . . The end of the state is the good life, and these are the means towards it."

also to animals. Furthermore, far from conceiving the relation between mere life and the good life to be one of exclusion or opposition, Aristotle thinks of them as two internally related and continuous, albeit qualitatively distinct, layers of life.[65] Revealingly, he does not even use the term *bios* in the passage Agamben cites ([i] above) but uses the same word [*zēn*] in both cases.[66] The relation between the mere life of family and village and the good life of the polis that Aristotle envisages is nicely articulated by A. C. Bradley: each lower level of human social existence is "preparation and material for the higher."[67] Again, as W. L. Newman puts it, necessity is "the friend, if often the inconsistent friend, of the Good." The necessary conditions of the polis may "be positive contributors to the End, almost rising to the level of its efficient cause."[68] That said, necessity does not always conduce to the good and the best. For example, the territory may be unfavorable to the well-being of the polis; and although citizens must have a supply of material goods, the pursuit of these may entice them away from the pursuit of higher goods.[69] Still this relation is anything but one of discontinuity, opposition, and exclusion.

Mere life and the good life, in fact, relate to one another in much the same way that material, moving, formal, and final causes relate to one another in Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*: they cooperate in directing a being toward its essence and inner perfection.[70] Broadly, Aristotle views i–iv above—"life," "mere life," or "life itself"—as the efficient cause of the polis; its citizens, territory, walls, and so forth as its material cause; the constitution, laws, and so on as its formal cause; and *eudaimonia* or the happiness of its citizens and the polis as a whole as its final cause. When all goes according to nature, all four causes push (or pull) in the same direction. Between the necessary and the good is a harmony, and a being traces its natural path

[65]The distinction is roughly between the economic and instinctual basis of human association and, as it were, the moral basis.

[66]Andrew Norris notices this, but fails to see (i) as counterevidence to Agamben's central thesis. Norris, "Giorgio Agamben and the Politics of the Living Dead," in *Diacritics* 30, no. 4 (2000): 45 n. 17. He also notices various confusions in Agamben's discussion of *zoē* and bare life, but notes apologetically that "many of the confusions that seem to plague Agamben's use of the term 'bare life' are superficial." On the contrary, I think they are deep.

[67]A. C. Bradley, "Aristotle's Conception of the State," in *A Companion to Aristotle's Politics*, ed. D. Keyt and F. D. Miller (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 27. This continuity is nicely captured by Jowett's translation of *ginomenē* as "comes into existence" and *ousa* as "continuing in existence" (Aristotle, *The Politics*, ed. Jowett [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 3).

[68]Newman, *The Politics of Aristotle*, 1: 17ff.

[69]Ibid., 18.

[70]Aristotle, "Physics," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press), 2:3, 1:332–34; and "Metaphysics," 6.2, 2:1620–22.

from one to the other.[71] Thus, the polis naturally becomes both all that it can be and all that it truly is. To quote Newman again: "[M]an is started by nature on an inclined plane which carries him in the direction of the Best."[72] Thus, the assertion that Aristotle claims that mere life is opposed to and excluded from "the good life'" (even where there is simultaneously an inclusion of the one within the other) does not accommodate the argument of the *Politics*. It finds support neither in the very sentence Agamben adduces as evidence for it nor in the immediate context of that sentence. Moreover, it flatly contradicts Aristotle's views as set out in the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics*.

Agamben also claims that Aristotle "defines man as a *politikon zōon*."[73] He is in good company in assuming that for Aristotle "political" is a "specific difference that determines the genus *zōon*," for this is a longstanding and widely held view.[74] Foucault, on whose authority in this matter Agamben rather unwisely relies, holds it: "For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence."[75]

Pace Foucault, however, this is not and cannot be one of Aristotle's various definitions of man.[76] The property of being *politikon* cannot be the specific difference that determines the genus *zōon*, for the simple reason that the attribute *political*, as Aristotle understands it, is not specific to human beings. In his biological writings, Aristotle maintains that there are several different kinds of "political animal." For example in the *History of Animals*, he distinguishes between gregarious animals and solitary animals. Some gregarious animals, he notes (not those that merely herd or flock together or swim together in shoals), are political animals.

[71]Aristotle *Physics*, 2.1:193b13–14 and 2.2:194a31–34, in Barnes, *Complete Works of Aristotle*, 1:330, 332.

[72]Newman, *The Politics of Aristotle*, 1:30.

[73]Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 7/10, 2/4.

[74]Ibid., 2/4.

[75]Foucault, *La Volonté de Savoir*, 188, cited in Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 3. Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 143. Incidentally, the same idea is found in Arendt's *The Human Condition*, though she notes that Aristotle has more than one definition of man. "Aristotle's famous definition of man as *zōon politikon* was not only unrelated and even opposed to the natural association experienced in household life; it can be fully understood only if one adds his second famous definition of man as a *zōon logon ekhon* ('a living being capable of speech')" (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 27).

[76]Günther Bien, *Die Grundlegung der politischen Philosophie bei Aristoteles*, 70–72. Wolfgang Kullmann, "Man as a Political Animal in Aristotle," in *A Companion to Aristotle's Politics*, 94–117. John Cooper, "Political Animals and Civic Friendship," *Aristoteles' "Politik": Akten des XI Symposium Aristotelicum, Friedrichshafen/Bodensee*, 25.8–3.9.1987, ed. Günther Patzig (Göttingen: VandenHoeck u. Ruprecht, 1990), 221–48.

> Animals that live politically are those that have any kind of activity in common, which is not true of all gregarious animals. Of this sort are: man, bee, wasp and crane.[77]

So *political* is in the first instance a biological property of a subclass of gregarious animals. Man is a political animal, but he shares this "way of life" with all animals whose living together is characterized by a common activity. This thought is evidenced by the reference to bees and other gregarious animals in Aristotle's alleged "definition":

> It is clear that man is a political animal *more than any bee or any gregarious animal*.[78]

The specific difference that determines the genus of political animals is that human beings have *logos*, for Aristotle claims that "man is the only animal who has speech/reason" [*logon de monon anthrōpos echei tōn zōōn*] (1253a9).[79] "Logos" here means speech or reason, and Aristotle appears to have both in mind for he says that speech goes beyond mere voice, which other animals have, for indicating pleasure and pain. Furthermore, the purpose of speech is "to make clear what is beneficial and what is harmful, and so also what is just and unjust."[80] The shared collective endeavor that marks human beings as political animals is organized on the basis of practical reason, which is peculiar to humans and makes them the *most political* among animals.[81] Thus, man's political nature has a biological, instinctual, and material basis, but also a deeper and more specifically human essence. If there is a definition here, it is that man is an animal with speech and reason, a capacity for ordering his political existence on the rational basis of mutual advantage and justice.[82]

[77]Aristotle, *History of Animals* 1.1.488a8–10 in Barnes, *Compete Works of Aristotle* 1:776–77.

[78]Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a7 (my emphasis).

[79]See also Aristotle, *Politics* 1332b5: "Man and man alone has reason [*logon*]" and 1334b15 where Aristotle claims that "both reason [*logos*] and intellection [*nous*] are the end toward which nature strives, so that birth and education in customs should be ordered with a view to them."

[80]Aristotle, *Politics* 1251a16–19: "For by contrast with the other animals [*ta alla zōa*] he alone can perceive what is good and bad, and just and unjust."

[81]For, as Aristotle argues a few lines later, "the virtue of justice [*dikaiosunē*] is what is political, and justice [*dikē*] is the basis on which the political association is ordered, and the virtue of justice is a judgement about what is just" (Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a33–35).

[82]Aristotle offers several other definitions of man, all of which satisfy the criterion for definition, namely that they pick out a specific difference of the defined term. For example, man is the only animal who can speak, the only animal that can deliberate and decide, the only animal who can act, the only animal who can count, the only animal who can remember, and the only animal that can do science. On this see Günther Bien, *Die Grundlegung der politischen Philosophie bei Aristoteles*, 120–24.

In fine, then, we have shown contra Agamben that

(i) the terms "*zoē*" and "*bios*" do not mean what Agamben says they mean, for there is no general Greek distinction between them of the kind he asserts;
(ii) Aristotle's contrast between what he calls variously "life" (*zēn*)—"life itself" or "mere life"—and "the good life" (*eu zēn*) in the *Politics* is not equivalent to Agamben's distinction between "bare life" and "politics," and cannot be adequately captured by the difference in meaning between the Greek nouns "*zōē*" and "*bios*";
(iii) Aristotle does not define man as a political animal, and does not cleanly separate man's animality from his sociality or his political way of living;
(iv) Ancient Greek political life was, in all probability, not marked by an all encompassing opposition and exclusion between bare life and politics of the kind Agamben postulates. Aristotle's *Politics* certainly gives no evidence that it was.

Consequently, there is no evidence in Aristotle's *Politics* to support any of the central claims Agamben makes in support of his thesis; rather there is evidence against them. Moreover, that counterevidence also weighs against both the assertion that there is a single biopolitical paradigm of Western politics (in Agamben's sense of biopolitics) dating back to the Greeks and against the Heideggerian-sounding claim that the entire Western tradition of politics—and with it our modern political self-conception—rests on a definition in Aristotle. The conception of politics that stems from Aristotle, insofar as there is one, is quite different. Aristotle's *Politics* shows rather that human beings are by nature cooperative animals that live together most successfully when they are part of a stable political order that works for the common interest. In addition, the physical, biological, and material necessities that drive the productive and cooperative life of the *polis* conduce, when all goes well (which is not always), to a just political order and to the good life. Contra Agamben, so far as Aristotle is concerned, human nature—even in the physical and biological sense of the term—and the forms of life it brings forth are in no way inimical to political association and its institutional, juridical, and

A reviewer for this journal countered that since Aristotle links man's being political with man's capacity for speech/reason, the latter *is* his specific difference, regardless of what he says in the *History of Animals*. I take Aristotle at *Politics* 1253a7–10 to be saying that man's faculty of speech and reason and sense of justice articulate *the specifically human way of being political*, and thus that he qualitatively distinguishes human sociality and cooperativeness, as rational, from the instinctive sociality of nonhuman animals. This supports my contention (and Kullmann and Bien's) that Aristotle does not actually *define* man as a political animal.

administrative forms. Hence, it makes no sense to read Aristotle *Politics* as the canonical text of a paradigm of Western politics understood as a perpetual biopolitical struggle of the state and the political order to exclude, confine, and oppose bare life.

IV

Agamben's reading of Aristotle is so unreliable because it is stained by a pre-existing agenda, which is not so much inferred from the textual evidence as projected onto it. It is not unheard of for glaring misinterpretations to become powerful and influential. Take the example of the eighteenth-century German classicist Johannes Joachim Winckelmann, who in his essay "Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works" famously attributes to Greek sculpture the ideal of "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur" and, furthermore, takes this ideal to hold not just for the plastic arts, and art in general, but for literature and philosophy too. Winckelmann claims to discover this ideal embodied in the Laocoön Group, a sculpture that depicts a man and his two sons vainly struggling to escape the clutches of two monstrous sea snakes.[83] Winckelmann and his followers were determined to find the ideal of simplicity and serenity embodied in the Laocoön, whatever the evidence of their senses, just as Agamben, spurred on by Arendt and Foucault, is predisposed to discover his biopolitical paradigm in Aristotle's *Politics*, whatever it says. The truth is that Agamben does not *discover* a concealed biopolitical paradigm stretching back to fourth-century Athens; rather he *invents* one.[84] Nor does he *discover* the hidden foundation of Western politics and its origin in the relation between *bios* and *zōē*. Claims to such discoveries recall Nietzsche's waspish remark about Kant: "When someone hides a thing

[83]Johann Joachim Winckelmann "Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst" (1755–56), cited in *Nietzsche on Tragedy*, ed. M. S. Silk and J. P. Stern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5. Note that, unlike Plato, Winckelmann says nothing about brightly painted statues, and one assumes that he believed their weathered whiteness to be part of their noble simplicity. After all, the fact that he could read his idea of serenity and simplicity into Laocoön, a statue representing a man and his sons trying to escape the clutches of two huge sea snakes, is an indication that Winckelmann, like many others of his era, was determined to find his preferred ideals in Greek art whatever the evidence.

[84]A reviewer of *Homo Sacer* notes that "in investigating the current relation between human life and state power … Agamben finds answers in remotest antiquity, in Aristotle's political writings." I would add that these are not *answers* and are not *found* in any usual sense of the word, and that the inferences Agamben draws for the present situation rest on a series of free associations which do not stand up to scrutiny. Kalliopi Nikolopoulou, "Review of *Homo Sacer*," *Substance* 93 (vol 29, no. 2) (2000): 124.

behind a bush, and then seeks and also finds it just there, there is not a lot to boast about in this seeking and finding."[85]

At this point, supporters of Agamben might claim in his defense that it does not matter whether Agamben gets Aristotle wrong. I dispute this contention. It really does matter that Agamben's reading of Aristotle's *Politics* makes no sense of the text, no sense of the immediate context of the passages he himself quotes, and makes Aristotle's *Politics* contradict doctrines laid out in the *Metaphysics* and the *Physics*.[86] It matters, in itself, and it matters because, as Dubreuil notes, Agamben's theory, though based on highly specialist material, is not addressed to scholars and specialists of Greek philosophy, and thus not aimed at, and not usually read by, readers who are in a position to verify his claims.[87] Many of his readers will simply take his statements at face value. In the relevant discussions on the web, as Dubreuil has recently noted, and in the growing Agamben literature, the spurious *zoē*/*bios* distinction has developed a life of its own. Furthermore, it has solidified into a generally accepted fact about ancient Greek language and culture, independent of any reference even to Agamben's thought let alone Aristotle's.[88]

This situation is exacerbated by Agamben's reputation as a classical scholar. The back cover of the English edition of *Homo Sacer* claims that it is "based on an uncommon erudition in classical traditions of philosophy and rhetoric, the grammarians of late antiquity, Christian theology, and modern philosophy."[89] Even Agamben's harshest critics are wont to praise his "dazzling classical erudition."[90] Whether or not Agamben is a great classical scholar, I leave to others to decide. My objection is that he offers no argument and no textual evidence for most of his interpretative claims. For the most part, he contents himself with *ex cathedra* assertions that brook no further discussion. Take the following sentence of *Homo Sacer*: "In the classical world . . . simple natural life is excluded from the polis in the strict sense, and remains confined—as merely reproductive life—to the sphere of the *oikos*, 'home' (*Politics* 1252a,

[85]Nietzsche "Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne" in *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienasgabein 15 Bänden*, ed. G. Colli und M. Montinari (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1980), 1:883. I have taken this remark out of context, which is the outright debunking of the idea of truth.

[86]*Pace* Dubreuil: "We don't have to confine ourselves to a counter-criticism that itself eschews interpretative warrant, and truth, and confines itself to the task of divesting the crow of its peacock feathers" (Dubreuil, "Leaving Politics," 88).

[87]"Agamben's philology suggests disciplinary procedures, but is foremost intended for the readers who do not possess the means of verification—even more so since the cited texts are commented upon rather evasively" (Dubreil, "Leaving Politics," 88).

[88]Dubreuil "Leaving Politics," 84.

[89]Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, back cover.

[90]See also Ernesto Laclau, "Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy," in *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, 11.

26–35)."[91] Such a sentence does not offer itself as a provocation, exaggeration, hypothesis, or a playful or creative reading. It announces itself as a statement of fact, bolstered by the reputation—and implicit claim to authority—of the classical scholar. Yet the passage cited does not begin to support the claim made on its behalf. Agamben's interpretation of Aristotle's *Politics* is further marred by the fact that he does not cite, and appears not to have consulted, any of the relevant voluminous literature on Aristotle. Rather he rests his interpretation on a passing remark by Foucault and some tendentious observations by Arendt, which have subsequently been exposed and refuted by Aristotle scholars.[92]

This brings us to a second reason why Agamben's misreading matters. Misreadings are the more adhesive for being propounded and repeated by influential figures, which makes it even more important to confront them with the textual evidence. Agamben's misreading is borrowed from Arendt who exerts a powerful influence on much current political philosophy. Yet this was surely one of her worst ideas. Arendt's claim that the biological and animal basis of human association is opposed to and excluded from the realm of politics—as *zōē* is opposed to and excluded from *bios*, a claim for which she offers the evidence of the *Politics*—is entirely colored by her own agenda, and unsupported by the textual evidence. For one thing, Aristotle maintains just the opposite, namely, that the material, biological, and economic bases of human association are continuous with political association and that *oikonomia*, or household management, is in fact part of political science.[93] For another, it is dangerous to draw inferences about the political reality of Athenian society (or, as Agamben does, about "the classical world") on the basis of Aristotle's *Politics*, which is richly evaluative and in many respects highly critical of Athenian society.[94] Finally, it is, to say the least, bizarre to claim, as Arendt does, that for the Greeks and for Aristotle "everything merely necessary or useful is strictly excluded" from the political

[91]Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 1/3.

[92]Stephen G. Salkever, *Finding the Mean: Theory and Practice in Aristotelian Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Judith Swanson, *The Public and the Private in Aristotle's Political Philosophy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992); Bernard Yack, *The Problems of a Political Animal: Community, Justice, and Conflict in Aristotelian Political Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[93]For example, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b2 and *Politics* 1253b1–3.

[94]It is dangerous, for example, to take Aristotle's critique of democracy as a description of actually existing political reality. See Josiah Ober, "How to Criticize Democracy in Late Fifth and Fourth Century Athens," in *The Athenian Revolution: Essays on Ancient Greek Democracy and Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 144–45. See also Bernard Yack, "Community and Conflict in Aristotle's Political Philosophy," *Review of Politics* 47 (January 1985): 92–112; and the appendix in Judith A. Swanson's *The Public and the Private in Aristotle's Political Philosophy*, 213–26.

realm.[95] Whatever is necessary to political life cannot be excluded from it, and whatever is useful probably won't be.

One might be tempted to defend Arendt's reading of Aristotle not as an historical and interpretative claim, but as a speculation that is motivated by her attempt to construct a radically anti-instrumental ideal-type of political action, purified of everything social and economic.[96] Such a defense would find support in the observation that Arendt's animus against "the necessary or useful" contains an implicit claim that practical reason in the modern era, after Hobbes, Bentham, and Weber, has atrophied to a merely instrumental rationality, namely, a calculus of the best or most efficient means to given ends. The trouble is, of course, that to enlist Aristotle and the Greeks in the project of separating politics out from merely instrumental calculation is implicitly to saddle them with a modern notion of practical reason that is foreign to their way of thinking. David Wiggins has aptly described this modern conception of practical reason as a "pseudo-rationalistic irrationalism, insidiously propagated . . . by technocratic persons, which holds that reason has nothing to do with the ends of human life, its only sphere being the efficient realization of specific goals in whose determination or modification argument plays no substantive part."[97] Seeing that Aristotle had no such narrowly instrumental notion of deliberation and practical reason, he also had no reason to exclude it from the political realm. Thus, this proposed strategy would not exonerate Arendt's readings of Aristotle, indeed, it would impugn them, but it would also relegate their importance below that of the main target of her criticism in *The Human Condition*: a conception of political action based on a modern technocratic, pseudo-rationalistic, narrowly instrumental notion of praxis.

A defence of Agamben along similar lines would suggest that what is important about *Homo Sacer* is the analysis and diagnosis of the pathologies of

[95]See section II, note 23 above.

[96]*The Human Condition*, a critique of productivism and instrumentalism, and of the unlimited expansion of social and economic forms of association in McCarthyite America during the Cold War and the postwar boom, tells more about the intellectual context of Arendt's than about Aristotle's philosophy. Her diagnosis is as follows. "The modern age has carried with it a theoretical glorification of labor and has resulted in a factual transformation of the whole of society into a laboring society. . . . It is a society of laborers which is about to be liberated from the fetters of labor, and this society does no longer know of those other higher and more meaningful activities for the sake of which this freedom would deserve to be won. Within this society . . . there is no class left, no aristocracy of either a political or spiritual nature from which a restoration of the other capacities of man could start anew" (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 4–5). (Notice the suggestion that a spiritual or political aristocracy would be the remedy to our current situation.)

[97]David Wiggins, "Deliberation and Practical Reason," *Needs, Value, Truth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 223–24.

modern politics, not what it says about Aristotle and ancient Greece, which is incidental to, and separable from, that analysis. If it could be shown that Agamben brings to light something important about our current political situation that does not rely on the credential of his reading of Aristotle or the spurious *bios*/*zoē* distinction, the damage to his social and political thought would be mitigated.

The trouble facing this line of defense is that the *bios*/*zoē* distinction plays too pervasive a role in Agamben's social and political theory to be easily separable from it. One can see this if one compiles a list of the various phenomena that Agamben cites as instances of bare life:

(a) *Homo sacer*;[98]
(b) the inhabitants of the concentration camps;[99]
(c) those on whom medical experiments were conducted in the camps (*Versuchspersonen)*;[100]
(d) people who are declared "brain dead";[101]
(e) the sadomasochist and "Sade's entire work (in particular. . .*120 Days of Sodom*)";[102]
(f) refugees;[103] and
(g) the global poor including "the entire population of the Third World."[104]

This jumble of different phenomena makes up most of the content of *Homo Sacer*. It is all brought together under the rubric of "bare life" and subjected to the same basic analysis, an analysis that utilizes the distinction between bare life and politics that supposedly rests on and stems from the *bios*/*zoē* distinction.

The obvious objection here is that it is unlikely that these different phenomena are all instances of the same thing – "bare life" – and thus analyzable in terms of the same biopolitical paradigm. One has to take great care even when comparing historical phenomena that are superficially alike, as Agamben does when he compares the inhabitants of the concentration camps with the detainees in Guantanamo Bay. The flouting or circumventing of the Geneva Convention and the usual protections it affords prisoners of war is relevantly different from the suspension of constitutional law within a state, and the protection it affords its citizens that is brought about by the declaration of a state of emergency. By designating both of these "states of exception" in the same sense and treating them as instances of the same

[98]Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 81–86/90–97.
[99]Ibid., 167–80/185–202.
[100]Ibid., 154–60/171–78.
[101]Ibid., 163–64/181–83.
[102]Ibid., 134–35/148–49.
[103]Ibid., 131/145.
[104]Ibid., 180/201.

biopolitical paradigm, Agamben eliminates the crucial differences between international law and constitutional law.[105] His conclusions, that "the camp is the new biopolitical nomos of the planet" and that "[t]oday it is not the city but the camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West," striking as they are, owe most of their plausibility to the leveling of these differences and the low level of historical, empirical, and analytic resolution at which his analysis operates.[106]

Another difficulty facing this proposed line of defense is that Agamben's diagnosis of the modern politics is almost entirely contrastive: it depends on the contrast between ancient and modern politics. Take for example the following passage.

> *If anything* characterizes modern democracy as opposed to classical democracy, then, it is that modern democracy presents itself as a vindication and liberation of *zoē*, and that it is constantly trying to transform its own bare life into a way of life and to find, so to speak, the *bios* of *zoē*.[107]

It is hard to tell exactly what Agamben means here. Given his contention that a single biopolitical paradigm straddles two-and-a-half millennia of Western politics, it is natural to read the "if anything" as implying that the *only* significant difference between ancient and modern democracy is the latter's attempt to make *zoē* into *bios*.[108] Historically, there is little to commend this view of the difference between ancient and modern democracy.[109] The point to grasp,

[105]See for example "Interview with Giorgio Agamben: Life, A Work of Art without an Author": "It is firstly obvious that we frequently can no longer differentiate between what is private and what public, and that both sides of the classical opposition appear to be losing their reality. And the detention camp at Guantanamo is the *locus par excellence* of this impossibility."

[106]Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 181/202.

[107]Ibid., 9/13 (my emphasis).

[108]It is true that a central task of modern liberal democratic governments is to regulate and control the biological lives of citizens, and moreover, that social life is increasingly shaped by a global capitalist economy driven by production and consumption, leading to huge surpluses of wealth and goods for some and misery and poverty for others. Agamben might have this (among other things) in mind. But, first, this general diagnosis is not original, and second, the distinction between *zoē* and *bios* does not shed any new light on it.

[109]Agamben implies that none of the other well-attested differences between ancient and modern democracy make any difference: for example, the vast differences of scale, the numerous differences between direct and representative government, the fact that modern democracies have a separation of powers and ancient democracies tended not to, the fact that ancient democracies (unlike modern ones) relied heavily on practices such as selection by lot, the fact that in the ancient world society and politics were chiefly concerned with the prosecution of war rather than commerce, whereas in the modern world the reverse is the case, etc. See, for example, Benjamin Constant, "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns," in *Constant:*

though, is that his analysis of both ancient and modern democracy, and of the difference between them, is couched in terms of the spurious *bios*/*zoē* distinction.

A second focus of Agamben's theory of modern politics is the relation of private and public life. Once again, he contrasts the relation between public and private in modern political society with that in ancient political communities.[110]

> Every attempt to rethink the political space of the West must begin with the clear awareness that we no longer know anything of the classical distinction between *zoē* and *bios*, between private life and political existence, between man as a simple living being at home in the house and man's political existence in the city.[111]

Here again Agamben follows Arendt's view of the Greek household as a private realm of human labor and reproduction, which is opposed to and excluded from the public realm of speech and action, the *bios politikos*.[112] However, Agamben's analysis is vitiated by the insistence that the public/private distinction sits flush with, and indeed stems from, the alleged *bios*/*zoē* distinction.

Agamben's tendency to think about public and private spheres through the optic of the alleged *bios*/*zoē* distinction gives rise to a number of further difficulties. For example, he succumbs to and propagates the myth that there is a single fixed category: "the private" and its counterpart "the public." The truth is that the meaning of the adjective "private" depends largely on the noun it qualifies. Private parts are not private in the same way that private secretaries or private gardens are private. Consequently, as Raymond Geuss has argued, there is not just one private/public distinction, but rather a whole family of related conceptual distinctions.[113] In ancient Greece, notions of privacy were very different from our own. For example, ancient Greek city-states, in contrast to modern states, were marked by pervasive legal regulation and the complete absence of moral and religious freedom. For another, the polis was, though perhaps not a face-to-face society, nonetheless an open

Political Writings, ed. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); M. I. Finley, *Politics in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). On assigning office by lot under a democratic constitution, see Plato *Republic* 557a.

[110]Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 2, 4, 183, 187.

[111]Ibid., 187/210.

[112]"The rise of the Greek city-state meant that man received 'besides his private life, a sort of second life, his *bios politikos*"'(Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 24). Arendt herself quotes Werner Jaeger's *Paideia*.

[113]Raymond Geuss, *Public Goods, Private Goods* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

air, Mediterranean society. Almost every aspect of life was open to public scrutiny and government regulation.[114] Finally, as Judith Swanson has shown, Aristotle certainly did not identify the private with the household, and the household with necessity, as Arendt and Agamben maintain. He neither exalted the public realm over the household as a realm of freedom over necessity, nor did he "conceive the household to be radically separate and opposed to the good life offered by the city."[115]

Furthermore, there are good reasons to assume that such public/private distinctions as existed were not opposed and mutually exclusive, and hence not binary. The classical concept of truth and falsity is binary. So are zero and one in computer code. The relation between the household and the various public spheres of ancient Greek society—the council, the assembly, the citizen jury, and the marketplace—is not binary. Neither is the relation of *bios* and *zōē*, nor that between what Aristotle calls "mere life" and "the good life." There are, then, good reasons to reject the idea that Greek thought and Greek political culture were marked by the logic of exception, or that since the Greeks something called the private realm, which Agamben assumes to be equivalent with bare life, has been excluded from and opposed to politics and the public sphere.[116] This, in turn, throws into question a diagnosis of ancient and modern politics that makes use of a single invariant opposition between private and public.

It turns out, then, that Agamben's diagnosis of modern Western democratic politics in *Homo Sacer* cannot be salvaged by cutting it free from his reading of Aristotle and his account of ancient politics, because it is not incidental to and separable from that account. The very term "bare life" is, by Agamben's own

[114]Finley, *Politics in the Ancient World*, 82. See also Constant, "The Liberty of the Ancients," 311: "All private actions were submitted to a severe surveillance. No importance was given to individual independence neither in relation to opinions, nor to labor, nor, above all to religion.... Among the Spartans, Therpandrus could not string his lyre without causing offence to the ephors. In the most domestic of relations the public authority again intervened. The young Lacedaimonian could hardly visit his new bride freely.... The laws regulated customs, and as customs touch on everything, there was hardly anything that the laws did not regulate."

[115]Swanson, *The Public and the Private in Aristotle's Political Philosophy*, 11.

[116]Note that I am not denying that there were any operative notions of public and private in ancient Greece. I am claiming that there are many historically various private/public distinctions, and that it is a mistake to construe the operative notions of public and private as a single binary opposition. Connolly calls the liberal and Arendtian assumption that there was a time when politics was restricted to public life and biocultural life was kept in the private realm "a joke." William E. Connolly, "The Complexities of Sovereignty," in Calarco and De Caroli, *Giorgio Agamben: Sovereignty and Life*, 29. Though I am inclined to agree, I would add that with certain jokes it is important to understand why people are telling them. I am claiming that it is a mistake to construe the operative notions of the public and the private as a single opposition.

admission, "the subject" of the book. The spurious distinction between *bios* and *zoē* plays too pervasive a role in his social theory for there to be anything of substance left over once it has been set aside.

V

I have argued that Agamben's egregious misreading of Aristotle matters in itself, and, what is more important, that the social and political theory laid out in *Homo Sacer* and related works is vitiated by this reading. His diagnosis of what is wrong with modern Western politics is closely tied to and heavily dependent upon the alleged *bios*/*zoē* distinction. However, another defense of Agamben is possible. One might claim that Agamben's *Homo Sacer* should be regarded as a literary text, the value of which is largely immune to the fact that its claims are untrue or unwarranted. From this view, the value and significance of Agamben's social and political thought lies not in its explanatory and diagnostic power, but in its practical political upshot. *Homo Sacer* does have an explicitly political and practical intent. Throughout the work, Agamben holds out the prospect of a "new politics," and indeed "a completely new politics" that will see the emergence of the political from its concealment and thereby "return thought to its practical calling."[117] Insofar as he takes on the task of bringing about wholesale political and social change, Agamben situates his work squarely in the tradition of Marxian social theory and early critical theory. The practical aims of Agamben's critical theory are not just refreshingly radical, but self-consciously eschatological.[118]

Unfortunately, Agamben's suggested remedy for the various pathologies of modern politics that he diagnoses fares no better than his diagnosis. Agamben's proposed remedy is a politics that would "take the fundamental bio-political fracture into account" and thus overcome the logic of sovereignty that continues to this day to captivate people and render them "imprisoned and immobile" and bereft of political understanding and agency.[119] Presumably, he is not claiming that *Homo Sacer* is such a politics, but rather that a politics informed by the diagnosis laid out in *Homo Sacer* would have beneficial practical effects. Even so, it is a risky claim. Certainly, if the *bios*/*zoē* distinction and the biopolitical paradigm were, as he said, somehow

[117]Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 11/15: "[S]olo una riflessione che ... interroghi tematicamente il rapporto fra nuda vita e politica che governa nascostamente le ideologie della modernità apparentemente piú lontana tra loro, potrà far uscire il politico dal suo occultamento e, insieme, restituire il pensiero alla sua vocazione practica." See also *Homo Sacer*, 5/7.

[118]"Only a politics that will have learned to take the fundamental biopolitical fracture into account will be able to stop this oscillation and to put an end to the civil war that divides the peoples and cities of the earth" (ibid., 180/201).

[119]Ibid., 180/201, 4/ 5, 11/15.

responsible for blinding political agents down through the centuries to the causes of the many calamities, catastrophes, and iniquities that have blighted modern politics, he would then have disclosed something of real social and political importance. However, if the *bios*/*zoē* distinction and the biopolitical paradigm do not vouchsafe the deep hidden structure or essence of historical and political actuality and are, as I claim, inventions of the theorist, then overcoming them will make no practical or theoretical difference, because there is nothing to overcome.

Of course, no one would disagree with the laudable practical aims of combating totalitarianism and ending concentration camps, eugenics, world poverty, and even, allowing for poetic license, "the civil war that divides people and cities of the earth."[120] However, no one needs to read *Homo Sacer* to know this, and doing so will provide no further insight into how it is to be done, or why. That said, it is a real question whether such eschatological aims are appropriate ones for social theory, or for that matter, academic works of literary criticism. For such aims are the very ones from which postmodernism, in its hostility to teleological grand narratives, turned away, and which, before that, pragmatism jettisoned as illusory metaphysical remnants. Even the critical theorists were forced to give them up. They reluctantly reached the conclusion that the diagnosis of what is wrong with society comprised the lion's share of their work, which is not to level the familiar but glib objection of *resignation* or quietism. A theory that provides compelling reasons why something is bad and ought to be changed is critical enough.

Although one might regard that retreat from praxis as cause for regret, there were good reasons for it. First, critical social theorists and social philosophers became more respectful of the limitations proper to theory: theorists are rarely in a position to bring about "a completely new politics," even if they are able to say what the new politics would be. The mature Heidegger, chastened perhaps by his brief and calamitous political engagement of the 1930s, did not thereafter succumb to any such delusion about the power of his own theory, or, if he did, he kept silent about it. Although for different reasons, Adorno and the later Frankfurt School critical theorists did not harbor any illusions that critical theory would deliver social transformation.[121] Of

[120]Ibid., 181/201.

[121]Heidegger, in an interview with the Spiegel in 1966, reflecting on his involvement with the Nazis, claimed that "only a God can save us," implying that this task was not for a politician, not for a philosopher, and, if we humans are Godforsaken, altogether impossible. Martin Heidegger, "Nur ein Gott kann uns retten," *Der Spiegel*, May 31, 1976. The apparent similarity between Adorno's and Habermas's views on this point, namely, that the philosopher and critical theorist are not the appropriate agents to bring about a transformed political praxis, conceals deeper underlying differences. On this see, James Gordon Finlayson, "Political, Moral and Critical Theory: On the Practical Philosophy of the Frankfurt School," *The Oxford Handbook of Continental Philosophy*, ed. B. Leiter and M. Rosen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 626–71.

course, by criticizing, critics cannot help but to suggest and imply ways in which the object of criticism—society or certain institutional arrangements within it—could escape the criticism. They may even be able to make concrete suggestions as to how, starting from here and now, society can be improved or transformed for the better. However, any implied remedy will have at best the status of advice, which can be taken up and acted upon by the members of the criticized society. Whether it is actually taken up, or whether it falls on deaf ears, or whether it is taken up but fails to be realized successfully for some other reason, none of this is up to the critical theorist.[122]

Moreover, irrespective of the question of the power and capability of theory and theorists to bring about change, there is the question about whether theorists are suitable agents of political change. Habermas, for example, maintains that critical theorists as experts, and usually also academics, should not arrogate to themselves the role of social engineer or agent of political emancipation.[123] Philosophers can, of course, lobby for practical change like anyone else, but they do so not as experts; they do so as individual citizens. To fail to see this is to mistake the locus of political agency in Western democratic politics, and to revert to a paternalism and epistocracy that is fundamentally antidemocratic. Ironically, no one put this point more tellingly than Hannah Arendt, who explicitly denied that her book, *The Human Condition*, could offer an answer—by which I take her to mean a practical solution rather than a response—to the problems of modern society it diagnosed. Such answers, she observed, "are given every day, and they are matters of practical politics, subject to the agreement of many: they can never lie in theoretical considerations or in the opinion of one person, as though we dealt here with problems for which only one solution is possible"[124]

[122]This is true of what Raymond Geuss calls "conceptual innovation," which, he argues, is an important and legitimate task for political theory. He cites an example of Tony Blair's "the Third Way" as an example of a conceptual innovation that failed to take root, because it was entirely empty. Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 47.

[123]*Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas*, ed. Peter Dews (London: Verso, 1992), 202, 168.

[124]Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 5.