**THE LIMIT OF THOUGHT[[1]](#endnote-1)\***

Tom Frost

*The ways in which we do not know things are just as important (and perhaps even more important) as the ways in which we know them … It is possible, in fact, that the way in which we are able to be ignorant is precisely what defines the rank of what we are able to know and that the articulation of a zone of nonknowledge is the condition – and at the same time the touchstone – of all our knowledge.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

*- Giorgio Agamben*

Karl Marx, in the eleventh of his *Theses on Feuerbach*, declared that the philosophers had only ever interpreted the world. In doing so, they had missed the point that philosophy, as a discipline, is meant to change the world.[[3]](#endnote-3) If this is philosophy’s purpose, then the most important question to ask is how, exactly, should the world be changed?

The thought and philosophy of Giorgio Agamben is certainly world-changing, but perhaps not in the way Marx would have imagined. Indeed, it is not altogether clear to some that Agamben can be read as offering any way in which the world can be changed. Agamben has been seen as an ‘apocalyptic chronicler’,[[4]](#endnote-4) someone whose thought is utterly pessimistic and even demonstrates disdain for the world.[[5]](#endnote-5) Such a reading almost necessarily leads to a conclusion that Agamben implies that we are living in a tragic situation, one which is being affected by an irreversible historical necessity.[[6]](#endnote-6) If a reader were to digest many of the readings given to Agamben’s works, they would be forgiven for thinking that Agamben is the Angel of History, a figure that Walter Benjamin depicted thusly:

His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe that keeps piling ruin upon ruin and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Reconstructing Agamben’s thought can be difficult. This difficulty of re-telling Agamben’s work has been portrayed as a ‘reaction block’ by Alice Lagaay.[[8]](#endnote-8) Despite this reaction block, Agamben’s work has reached the forefront of academic discourse over the past decade. Much of this secondary literature has focused upon Agamben’s continuing *Homo Sacer* series of works, and in particular *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* and *State of Exception*. Like Marx’s claim that a man’s history is made under circumstances occurring in the past, so to can Agamben’s rise to prominence be traced to external events. Although *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* was published in 1998, it was the terrorist attacks of September 2001 on the United States of America, and the subsequent ‘War on Terror’, conducted by the Administrations of President Bush and President Obama, that catapulted Agamben’s work to national and international attention.

The claims that today, the camp, not the city, is the biopolitical paradigm of the West,[[9]](#endnote-9) and that the state of exception is the dominant paradigm of government,[[10]](#endnote-10) resonated most strongly in a world where the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were being waged, where the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay was making the daily news, and where emergency powers aimed at combating the threat of terrorism were being passed across scores of states worldwide. These claims also (ultimately) led Agamben to be seen as a pessimist. *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception* allowed many scholars to cast Agamben as a modern-day Cassandra, seeming to warn (unheeded?) of the tumults of the twenty-first century’s first decade.

Yet this only tells half the story. Far from being an avowed pessimist, Agamben has been clear that his work and thought is optimistic in nature, and it is precisely the hopelessness he sees in modernity that fills him with hope.[[11]](#endnote-11) In 1999, in an interview with the French journal *Vacarme*, Agamben was asked why, when he clearly identifies the adversaries we have to face today, his response is to take flight and evade, rather than to stand up and resist.[[12]](#endnote-12) His response was instructive:

I think everything depends on what one understands by flight … The notion of flight does not imply an elsewhere one might go. No, it’s a very particular flight: a flight with no elsewhere … For me, it’s a question of thinking a flight which would not imply evasion: a movement on the spot, in the situation itself.[[13]](#endnote-13)

For Agamben, the answers we seek are here, already in the world. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in Agamben’s writing on ‘potentiality’. Potentiality is a key concept for Agamben in his thought, and has been the focus of a collection of essays written by Agamben himself. Challenging how we have conceived of potential for over two millennia, Agamben sees potentiality not as something to be completed or fulfilled. Rather, potentiality can be conceived as separate from actuality, as a separate force which does not need to be actualised. This is termed impotentiality, the potentiality not to do. This passivity does not try to find a ground or a justification for actions, but points towards a life that is lived in the very experience of its ungroundedness.[[14]](#endnote-14) As Agamben has written:

Our ethical tradition has often sought to avoid the problem of potentiality by reducing it to the terms of will and necessity. Not what you *can* do, but what you *want* to do or *must* do is its dominant theme. But, potentiality is not will, and impotentiality is not necessity … To believe that will has power over potentiality, that the passage to actuality is the result of a decision that puts an end to the ambiguity of potentiality (which is always potentiality to do and not to do) — this is the perpetual illusion of morality.[[15]](#endnote-15)

This form of potential offers a ground for a new politics, a flight which has no elsewhere, a flight which eschews the notion that we need to ‘progress’ and actualise a better world. As Juliane Schiffers explains:

Man is a being who not only has the potential to realise and relate to his own being but also to realise and to relate to the contingency, inaccessibility and instability of his being.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Here we see what such (im)potential can mean. This ungrounded potential is experienced, as it is not simply a potential waiting to be actualised. Such an experience of potentiality is a ‘limit concept’. A limit concept is the limit between two concepts, and it is this limit which calls them both into question.[[17]](#endnote-17) Such limit concepts are methodological tools which Agamben uses throughout his work – the figure of *homo sacer* is one famous example.

It is this focus upon potentiality which explains why Agamben’s thought has such appeal across a multitude of disciplines and subject areas. Agamben’s thought contests the search for foundational grounds of political existence. As such, Agamben works against the notions of unity, the People and the nation which are so central to the (French) republican tradition. In contrast to this revolutionary republican tradition, Agamben eschews the idea of the totality of the event, the notion that there can be such a thing as a ‘solution’. Potentiality is not waiting for a revolutionary event in order to become ‘totalised’, and give meaning to its existence. In questioning the necessity of long-standing ideas of sovereignty, the State, and the People, Agamben’s thought is provocative and enigmatic, and his work covers such a breadth of topics that scholars from across a multitude of disciplines cannot ignore the implications of his thought.

Even though their essays cover diverse areas, and they are drawn from diverse disciplines, the contributors to this collection all share a belief that Agamben’s work and thought also act as such a limit concept – it is for this reason that this essay’s title speaks of the limit of thought. Agamben himself has written that ‘the art of living is … the capacity to keep ourselves in harmonious relationship with that which escapes us’.[[18]](#endnote-18) In writing on Agamben, the contributors to this volume consider the limits of their thought; Agamben’s work brings into focus, and necessitates a questioning of, the very foundations and boundaries that are so often presupposed, and taken for granted, in much of what we call ‘political thought’ today.

The present collection seeks to explore the limits of Agamben’s thought, and also the limits of thought throughout the humanities and social sciences. Drawing together an international group of scholars from across the social sciences and humanities, including scholars who have worked closely with Agamben in translating his works, this collection seeks to question how Agamben’s work provides the potential for questioning boundaries, and opening new avenues and future directions of thought and scholarship.[[19]](#endnote-19)

This collection has been divided into three parts. This is not to provide an overarching programatisation of Agamben’s thought. Far from it. Rather, this triumvirate – law, politics, and philosophy – represents key, interrelated, interdependent issues with which, for Agamben, we need to grapple, and considers the limits of each, aiming to free each unto a new use.

The first section of the volume is entitled *Before the Law*. The first two chapters focus upon one of the biggest influences on Agamben’s writings on law – St. Paul. The first chapter, ‘The Curse of the Law and the Coming Politics: On Agamben, Paul, and the Jewish Alternative’, by Adam Kotsko, introduces Agamben’s critical project by focusing upon a short discussion of Paul in Agamben’s *Sacrament of Language*. In this discussion, Agamben claims that the notion of ‘the curse of the law’ is crucial for understanding Paul’s notion of redemption. Kotsko maintains that this passage is crucial in understanding Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* project as a whole, as well as shedding new light on the question of Paul’s view of the law. Agamben speaks of making the law into an object of ‘study or play’ as a way of deactivating the law’s curse. Kotsko contends that rabbinic Judaism can stand as an example of what it means to suspend the force of law and make the law into such an object.

**Alysia Garrison**

Following on from this, in ‘A Particular Fetishism: Love, Law and the Image in Agamben’, Connal Parsley considers Agamben’s coming politics, noting that the explication of the critical figure of ‘whatever being’ in *The Coming Community* is accompanied by a reference to the ‘gaze of love’. This gaze of love is a resource for Agamben’s coming politics, yet one which Agamben places in opposition to Pauline notions of Christian love and which marks a decisive departure from Christian ideas of love and politics. Parsley places Agamben’s remarks on love as a ‘particular fetishism’ in relation to his approach to representation generally. This has the effect of reframing love’s gaze as a ‘free use of the proper’—thus offering clearer if still highly determined grounds for a contestation of law’s propertizing technology.

Providing a point of closure for the preceding discussions of the influence of religion on Agamben’s notion of the law, Tom Frost, in ‘Agamben and the Possibilities of Tradition’, argues that a messianic law necessitates a dramatic reversal of how we think about potentiality. Frost contends that the messianic ‘small shift’ Agamben argues is necessary means that tradition plays a key part in the messianic world-to-come. Agamben’s messianic figure of whatever-being is constructed, in part, due to this tradition, which forms a Heideggerian ‘background’ to the coming community. Drawing upon the English common law’s construction of precedent, Frost maintains that the messianic ‘deactivation’ of the law may not be as radical a revolution as may be assumed on first reading.

The second section is titled *Politics: Or On The Vocation Of Man*, and turns to the role politics plays in Agamben’s thought in providing directions to emancipate mankind from the biopolitical bind they find themselves in today. The first two chapters in this section provide a key insight into the connections in Agamben’s thought between ‘violence’ and ‘emancipation’.

Frank Ruda and Jan Voelker, in their essay ‘The Necessary Critique of Divine Violence: Notes on Agamben, Benjamin and Sorel’, show how for Agamben violence is intimately connected to the question of emancipation, and trace a genealogy, showing how Agamben’s writing was heavily influenced by Walter Benjamin, who was in turn affected by the work of Georges Sorel. In tracing this genealogy, Ruda and Voelker illustrate how violence and emancipation exist in a constantly deferred relation which can only be grasped through its various articulations.

Almost in response, David Seymour, in his chapter ‘The Ontological Surplus of Sovereign Violence: Political Emancipation and the Emancipation of the Political’, locates Agamben’s thought on sovereignty within the Counter-Revolutionary tradition of Joseph de Maistre, most notably, the critique of the humanism. He argues that underpinning both de Maistre’s and Agamben’s work is the accusation of hubris; the accusation that Man has usurped the destructive and creative powers once attributed to God. It is these powers that informs Agamben’s concept of the threshold of sovereignty. In the post-Revolutionary era it is this ‘ontological surplus of sovereign violence’ that emancipates itself from the emergence of political emancipation. Freed now to re-create Man in its own image, the product of this sovereign hubris is the *Muselmann*. Seymour questions the extent to which Agamben’s identification of the *Muselmann* as a site of redemption re-installs rather than transcends the ontological surplus of sovereign violence that is held responsible for originally bringing this figure into existence.

Anthony Downey turns his attention from the paradigmatic inhabitant of the camp, the *Muselmann*, to the camp itself. In ‘Exemplary Subjects? Camps and the Politics of Representation’, Downey examines the emergence of the ‘camp’ as an emblematic feature of our present-day global order. If the abrogation of legal and political representation is a distinct feature of the camp, Downey enquires into what happens when visual representation is inserted into an already compromised regime of (in)visibility? Through the lens of art, and artistic representation of camps in modernity, Downey asks whether representation merely assuages and thereafter conciliates the legal and political non-representation that exists in the camp. If this is the case, Downey considers what representational tactics can be utilized to draw attention to this double-bind in the visual ecology of representing camps.

The final two chapters build upon Agamben’s diagnoses of domination in modernity and turn their view squarely to emancipation. In ‘‘The King reigns but he doesn’t govern’: Sovereignty and Government in Agamben, Foucault and Rousseau’, Jessica Whyte considers Agamben’s account of economic theology in respect of the current austerity measures sweeping Europe. Whyte argues that Agamben’s work allows us to sharpen our understanding of the contemporary relationship between sovereign power and economic government. By understanding the relation between the exclusionary politics of sovereignty and the technocratic *oikonomia* that is subjecting populations to a new form of poverty, Whyte contends that we may be able to begin to challenge both simultaneously, and undercut the nostalgia for sovereignty that characterizes much opposition to trans-national forms of economic government.

Finally, David Kishik, in ‘Paragraphs on Modern Cities’, turns his attention to Agamben’s claim that today, it is the camp, rather than the city, that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West.[[20]](#endnote-20) Challenging the gesture that erases the significance of city life by conflating it with the death camp, Kishik draws upon Walter Benjamin’s assertion that Paris is ‘a landscape built of sheer life’.[[21]](#endnote-21) Making a distinction between ‘bare life’, the most minimal and meaningless human existence possible, and ‘sheer life’, the highest, most significant and intricate human existence imaginable, Kishik challenges us to allow the city, and the implosion of power relations it contains, to form the basis of the coming politics.

The third section is titled *Philosophy: Or On The World To Come*. Here, the coming community – Agamben’s immanent philosophy – is situated within Agamben’s wider works, and the potential connections to other philosophers and strands of thought considered.

Kevin Attell, in ‘Agamben’s Artaud’, examines Agamben’s early writings on Antonin Artaud, some of the least known in his *oeuvre*. Dating from the mid-1960s, these texts pointedly anticipate a number of signature themes that will animate Agamben’s work in the following decades and indeed up to the present. While Agamben’s debt to such modern thinkers as Heidegger and Benjamin is well known and well documented, this chapter reviews Agamben’s untranslated and uncollected texts on Artaud in order to demonstrate the significant and lasting influence his early Artaudian period has had on his later thought.

Such an influence can be seen in Colby Dickinson’s essay, ‘The Many Tasks Still to Come: Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben on the Future of Philosophy and Theology’. Dickinson focuses upon Benjamin’s projection of the ‘coming philosophy’, and argues that this projection redefined the relationship of knowledge and experience through its re-envisioning of the role of religious teachings within the realm of the philosophical – an immanent experience of reality without transcendence. For Dickinson, this insight is built upon by Agamben in order to demonstrate that we might experience the world and ourselves anew: a progression beyond representation (or *law*) and into the presentation (in religious terms, ‘grace’) of the ‘thing itself’. Dickinson demonstrates that in this vision, there lingers an imperative to form a ‘coming community’ based upon the singular encounter with the face of the other—a quasi-transcendental, almost mystical experience.

The implications of this singular, immanent existence are developed in ‘Blessed life ...’ byPaolo Palladino, who focuses upon Agamben’s essay ‘Absolute Immanence’. Palladino draws out Agamben’s assumptions about the material determinations of human, embodied existence and, in so doing, he elucidates how Agamben’s arguments oscillate between two very different perspectives, one of which Agamben would seem to inherit from Michel Foucault and the other from Gilles Deleuze.

Law, politics, philosophy. Each poses their own challenges which this collection aims to respond to. Today, Agamben has diagnosed the law as being caught within a wider apparatus of the state of exception, an apparatus which leads to the production of human waste, bare life. Likewise, politics is the vocation of man, yet today we are faced with a society where the spectacle, and spectacularisation of society, has become the norm. Political identities and political subjects are mere representations which economic government and sovereign power can fill and empty of content at will. Finally, Agamben’s own relationship to philosophy is complex. Agamben has written that ‘philosophy is always already constitutively related to the law, and every philosophical work is always, quite literally, a decision on this relationship’.[[22]](#endnote-22) In turn, he has noted that philosophy has:

[N]o specificity, no proper territory, it is within literature, within art or science or theology or whatever, it is this element which contains a capability to be developed. In a sense philosophy is scattered in every territory. It is always a diaspora, and must recollected and gathered up.[[23]](#endnote-23)

This collection has gathered together the thoughts and ideas of Agamben which were scattered across territories such as poetry, aesthetics, theology, biology, law, politics, linguistics and history. What follows is the development of the capability of such a gathering.

This collection responds to Agamben as an important and thoroughly original figure who has contemplated a version of politics and a community that is worth recognising as an influential contribution to modern philosophical and political thinking. It is hoped that the essays contained within are a fitting response to the challenges posed by one of the most important thinkers alive today.

1. \* I would like to express my gratitude to Colin Murray and Oren Ben-Dor for their comments and advice relating to this introduction. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p.113. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Karl Marx, ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.173. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Marius Babias, ‘Agamben and the Apocalypse’ (2004) 5 *Metropolis M* 24-31, 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Daniel Binswanger, ‘Preacher of the Profane’ *Die Weltwoche* (13 October 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Babias, ‘Agamben and the Apocalypse’, 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1968), p.249.

   See also David Kishik, ‘You are our Letter’ (20 March 2008). Available HTTP: <http://notesforthecomingcommunity.blogspot.co.uk/2008/03/you-are-our-letter.html>. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Alice Lagaay and Juliane Schiffers, ‘Passivity at Work. A Conversation on an Element in the Philosophy of Giorgio Agamben’ (2009) 20 *Law and Critique* 325-37, 325. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p.181. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Vacarme, ‘“I am sure that you are more pessimistic than I am…”: An Interview with Giorgio Agamben’ (2004) 16(2) *Rethinking Marxism* 115-24. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Vacarme, ‘“I am sure that you are more pessimistic than I am…”, 120. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Vacarme, ‘“I am sure that you are more pessimistic than I am…”, 121. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Lagaay and Schiffers, ‘Passivity at Work’, 334. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Giorgio Agamben, ‘Bartleby, Or On Contingency’ in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). p.254. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Lagaay and Schiffers, ‘Passivity at Work’, 329. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p.13. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Agamben, *Nudities*, p.114. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. The majority of the essays in this volume were presented at the symposium *Agamben and the Futures of Law, Politics and Philosophy*, held at Newcastle Law School, Newcastle upon Tyne, on 9 March 2011. The Symposium brought together scholars from Europe, North America and Australasia to focus upon Agamben’s *oeuvre* and to think of the implications of Agamben’s thought for future directions of research across the humanities. The participants in the conference belonged to academic disciplines such as Art, Biology, English Literature, History, Law, Philosophy, and Theology. The Symposium was organised by the Newcastle Forum for Human Rights and Social Justice (see <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/nuls/research/groups/humanrightsgrp.htm>). The symposium received generous support from Newcastle Law School. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p.181. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p.417. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Giorgio Agamben, ‘The Messiah and the Sovereign’ in *Potentialities*, p.161. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Giorgio Agamben (2002) ‘What is a Paradigm?’ Online. Available HTTP:

    <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/agamben/agamben-what-is-a-paradigm-2002.html> (accessed 13 May 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)