Kierkegaard and the Figure of Form-of-Life

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Abstract

Much attention has been paid to the influence that Carl Schmitt and his writings on the exception have had on the thought of Giorgio Agamben. Yet much less attention has been paid to how Søren Kierkegaard's existentialist writings can inform Agamben's philosophy, and specifically his figure of form-of-life. Agamben's work is driven by a desire to explore a politics exemplified by the figure of form-of-life. If bare life is the result of biopolitical operations of sovereign power, then form-of-life is the figure of the coming politics which seeks to deactivate those modes of power that create and sustain bare life. I argue that form-of-life needs to be read as an existentialist figure, and that Kierkegaard's own writings can shed light on this elusive concept. Form-of-life is a life lived in a non-relational ethical existence, not lived through identity politics or relationality. Rather, through 'contact' with other forms-of-life (contact refers to Agamben's own form of proposed relation with others), and in living a life of contemplative use, it deactivates the appropriative biopolitics that constantly divides and separates life. I argue that form-of-life should instead be read as a new interpretation of Kierkegaard's claim that the self results from the fact that the human being is a synthesis through which its existence is defined. In an existentialist reading of form-of-life, I illustrate how form-of-life is subject to a continual process of repetition, an existential process that is always already happening.

Introduction

This chapter offers a corrective to the relationship between Giorgio Agamben and Søren Kierkegaard. My starting point is the literature on Agamben's writings on bare life and the exception, and the thought of Carl Schmitt. After summarising the literature detailing how Schmitt's sovereignty informed Agamben's biopolitics, I consider how Schmitt and Agamben have cited Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's *Repetition* influenced Schmitt's writings on the

exception, and Schmitt read *Repetition* as a model for sovereignty. Kierkegaard's writings informed Agamben's philosophy as well. I read *Repetition* as a model for what Agamben terms 'absolute immanence', or 'form-of-life'. To support this, I explore Agamben's coming politics. This politics eschews relationality and definitions of life based on apparatuses, divisions and caesuras, which produce and sustain bare life. This politics seeks to provide the basis for the figure of form-of-life to live.

Form-of-life is a singularity, conceived of in all its difference from other singularities. It is life lived in a non-relational existence,[1] its own mode of being generated by its manner of being.[2] The ethical subject focuses on *how* it lives its life, through contact with other forms-of-life, and living a life of contemplative use.[3] Contact is separate from relation in Agamben's work. It is true that there is a lack of precision to the difference between the two terms in Agamben, leading to an ambiguity. This is illustrated by the fact that Agamben describes form-of-life as a singularity conceived in all its difference from other singularities. Yet relationality is tied to definitions which are based on difference. Contact is a way of relating to others outside of difference. Form-of-life is not differential or relational. Differential and relational should be understood in a precise way for Agamben. Form-of-life is non-relational in the sense that it is not defined or understood as being held up against other persons or beings and compared and contrasted to that other. Likewise, form-of-life is non-differential in that form-of-life does not depend upon differences between itself and others. Form-of-life is an existential figure, always in the process of repetition, understood in its performative, Kierkegaardian sense. Form-of-life is a new interpretation of Kierkegaard's self. If form-of-life is read existentially then its construction makes sense. Form-of-life is subject to a continual process of repetition, an existential process that is always-already happening.

Kierkegaard, Schmitt and Agamben

The dominant understanding of life since the eighteenth century has been biological in nature.[4] Yet as Agamben explains, the concept of 'life' never gets defined as such.[5] What this means is that:

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[1] Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 235.
[2] Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 224.
[3] Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 231.
[4] Gil Anidjar, "The Meaning of Life," *Critical Inquiry* 37, no.4 (Summer 2011): 697, 709.
[5] Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 13.

> [T]his thing that remains indeterminate gets articulated and divided time and again through a series of caesurae and oppositions that invest it with a decisive strategic function … everything happens as if … life were *what cannot be defined, yet, precisely for this reason, must be ceaselessly articulated and divided*.[6]

This ceaseless division finds its most famous enunciation in *Homo Sacer*, where Agamben claims, "the fundamental activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life as originary political element".[7] This division has been a theme in Agamben's thought. In *What Is An Apparatus?* Agamben explains:

> The event that has produced the human constitutes, for the living being, something like a division ... This division separates the living being from itself and from its immediate relationship with its environment.[8]

The division of life operates on a number of levels – vegetal and relational, organic and animal, animal and human.[9] These divisions pass as a "mobile border" within living man, and operate as an apparatus through which the decision of what is and what is not human is possible.[10] The result of this is the creation of a remainder, bare life.

In reading this division of life as central to Agamben's thought, we can understand Schmitt's role in Agamben's œuvre. In *Homo Sacer* Agamben sought to focus upon and modify Carl Schmitt's concept of the sovereign decision. For Schmitt, sovereignty was not identifiable through statutes, ordinances or constitutions, but rested on one concrete political fact, namely which individual or body could declare a state of exception and suspend the existing legal order. It was the decision, rather than a pre-ordained power, that decided who was sovereign and determined the law. The exception also applies to the sovereign leader of the state. For Agamben it was also the sovereign decision that determined who is or is not human, and who is bare life. As a result Schmitt occupies an important role in Agamben's work. Agamben

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[6] Agamben, *The Open*, 13.
[7] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 181.
[8] Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 16.
[9] Aristotle, "On the Soul" in *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume One*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
[10] Agamben, *The Open*, 15.

follows Schmitt in the qualities and nature of the exception, but he seeks to distance himself from Schmitt and found a politics which is not based on this sovereign exception determining who is or is not human.

Schmitt's sovereignty views legal norms as abstractions. These produce political order when they are applied or given force: "what matters for the reality of legal life is who decides".[11] The state, in an emergency or state of exception, has the power to decide that it faces an exceptional circumstance, and can suspend the constitution to allow a political struggle to occur to restore order.[12] In a state of exception legal norms are suspended, yet the exception itself remains "accessible to jurisprudence", as political decisions made by the individual(s) in authority are a part of the law. This leads to a paradox for Agamben: "the sovereign is, at the same time, inside and outside the juridical order".[13] The sovereign is outside of the law as it is defined by the suspension of the law; yet the sovereign is inside of the law as the sovereign decision is an aspect of the law. The state of exception simply reveals this "specifically juridical formal element" in "absolute purity".[14] Legal authority survives the suspension of the law. Actions taken outside of the law have a juridical character. The negation of law eventually leads to a new state and a new law – the exception becomes wholly absorbed into the power of the state. The exception undermines the law, but the law requires the exception in order to assert its primacy and to enact its legislative will.[15]

Schmitt argues that the state of extreme emergency proves that the law requires a discretionary sovereign decision that "emerges from nothingness" when "looked at normatively".[16] Schmitt wrote that "all political concepts are secularized theological notions".[17] This is why the exception is a miraculous event: "the exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology".[18] What makes legality possible is the state's objective capacity to guarantee the continued existence of the law in the face of its enemies. The sovereign exception is the moment in which state authority appears in its purity: a power to enforce the law separated from the norms of law themselves. The capacity to decide on the

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[11] Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 34.
[12] Daniel McLoughlin, "The Fiction of Sovereignty and the Real State of Exception: Giorgio Agamben's Critique of Carl Schmitt," *Law, Culture and the Humanities* 12, no.3 (2016): 509, 515-16.
[13] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 15.
[14] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 13.
[15] Rebecca Gould, "Laws, Exceptions, Norms: Kierkegaard, Schmitt, and Benjamin on the Exception," *Telos* 162 (2013): 77, 85-6.
[16] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 31-32.
[17] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 37.
[18] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36.

state of exception, which Schmitt takes to be constitutive of the normal functioning of the legal order, is the "zenith" of the sovereign's power, who acts as "God's highest representative on earth".[19]

In 1933 the Nazis indefinitely suspended the law through their 'Decree for the Protection of the State and People'. For Agamben the Nazis were able to suspend the law because there is no necessary relation between the decision on the state of exception and the fact situation that ostensibly gives rise to it.[20] The Nazi party produced a 'normal' constitutional structure characterised by the profound legal indeterminacy of the emergency situation. For Agamben (and this is part of his move away from Schmitt) that is deeply problematic for Schmitt's account of sovereignty, which depends upon a relatively clear temporal and categorical distinction between the juridical practices of the normal situation (in which the constitution applies) and the emergency situation (in which it is suspended). Once emergency and normality, exception and law, are rendered absolutely undecidable, the sovereign is "no longer capable of performing the task that *Political Theology* assigned to it":[21] that of distinguishing between exception and law on the basis of a distinction between emergency and normality.

Kierkegaard's *Repetition* catalysed Schmitt's revival of the exception in the early part of the twentieth century. Rebecca Gould makes the point that Schmitt's *Political Theology* is the only serious scholarly reflection on *Repetition*.[22] Nearly every element of Schmitt's deliberations on the exception originates in Kierkegaard. Jacob Taubes made clear that the "trajectory between [the] Kiergaardian exception and Schmitt's definition of sovereignty" must be acknowledged.[23] Schmitt acknowledges his debt to Kierkegaard in *Political Theology*. He references Kierkegaard once by vocation, as "a Protestant theologian who demonstrated the vital intensity possible in theological reflection".[24] He then quotes approvingly from Kierkegaard to support his focus on the importance of the exception:

> Eventually one grows weary of the incessant chatter about the universal, and the
> universal repeated to the point of the most boring insipidity. There are exceptions. If

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[19] Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes,* trans. George Schwab (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), 55.

[20] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p.170.

[21] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p.58.

[22] Gould, "Laws, Exceptions, Norms," 81.

[23] Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Aleida Assmann, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 65.

[24] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 15.

they cannot be explained, then the universal cannot be explained, either. Generally, the difficulty is not noticed because one thinks the universal not with passion but with a comfortable superficiality. The exception, however, thinks the universal with intense passion.[25]

Further to this, in a passage where he also explains how his exception differs from Kierkegaard, he argues that the exception:

[I]s more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: It confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception. In the exception, the power of real life breaks through the crust of a mechanism rendered torpid by repetition.[26]

Schmitt opposes the exception to repetition, seeing repetition as something to be overcome.[27] Schmitt emphasized the unique character of historical events, with historical singularity held up against the idea of repetition in history:

The big events are unique, irrevocable and unrepeatable. A historical truth is true only once.[28]

It is for this reason that Schmitt's exception is unrepeated and unrepeatable. The seriousness of this miraculous exception is deeper than any generalisations which can be drawn from "what ordinarily repeats itself".[29] Repetition for Schmitt is related to the norm which stultifies political life and prevents decisions from being made.[30] As a result Schmitt clearly prefers the uniqueness and unrepeatability of historical events over any kind of eternal recurrence.[31] Man has:

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[25] Søren Kierkegaard, "Repetition: A Venture in Experimenting Psychology," in *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, trans. Harold V Hong and Edna H Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 227.
[26] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, p.22.
[27] Gould, "Laws, Exceptions, Norms," 89-90.
[28] Carl Schmitt, *Gespräch über die Macht und den Zugang zum Machthaber/Gespräch über den Neuen Raum* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994), 55.
[29] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 22.
[30] Gould, "Laws, Exceptions, Norms," 90.
[31] Matthias Lievens, "Singularity and Repetition in Carl Schmitt's Vision of History," *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 5, no.1 (2011): 105, 120-21; Carl Schmitt, "Die geschichtliche Struktur des heutigen Welt-

[A]n almost irresistible need to eternalise his last great historical experience. Precisely my sense of history guards me from such repetitions. My sense of history especially maintains itself by recalling to memory the unrepeatable uniqueness of all great historical events. A historical truth is true only once. But also the historical call, the challenge which opens a new epoch, is true only once and is correct only once.[32]

It is an unrepeatable singularity which marks Schmitt's exception and his sovereign decisionism.

What then is repetition for Kierkegaard? It is true that *Repetition* is a pseudonymous text, written by a fictional narrator, which may not have reflected the views of Kierkegaard himself. My reading of the text could be framed as a reading of that fictional narrator rather than Kierkegaard. Schmitt and Agamben read this text as being of Kierkegaard's view; I follow their approach here. Repetition has an existential repeatable singularity. To Kierkegaard we owe the insightful alignment between the exceptional and the existential, and the notion of exceptionality and repetition as kindred rather than opposed.[33] In *Repetition*, Kierkegaard makes the point that repetition is not recollection.[34] Repetition is the antithesis of Platonic recollection, or *anamnesis*.[35] Recollection is the source of all knowledge, where learning is a recollection of what we once knew in a pre-existent state before our souls entered our bodies.[36] Recollection is the retrieval of an impression of a past actuality: someone who recollects is thinking about the past. Genuine repetition is recollected forwards.[37]

Kierkegaard's *Repetition* provides the tale of a narrator who moves back to Berlin to re-live the life he had there when younger. The narrator, Constantine Constantius, discovered that everything was the same on his return. However, Kierkegaard makes it clear that what Constantius experienced was not repetition but mere recollection. For Kierkegaard "the only repetition was the impossibility of a repetition".[38] Repetition is a movement of becoming, of coming into existence:

Gegensatzes von Ost und West. Bemerkungen zu Ernst Jüngers Schrift: 'Der Gordische Knoten'," in *Staat, Grossraum, Nomos. Arbeiten aus den Jahren 1916-1969* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1995), 544-45.

[32] Schmitt, *Gespräch über die Macht*, 61.

[33] Gould, "Laws, Exceptions, Norms." 93.

[34] Kierkegaard, "Repetition," 131.

[35] Kierkegaard, "Repetition," 149.

[36] Dominic Scott, "Platonic Recollection and Cambridge Platonism," *Hermathena* 149 (Winter 1990): 73, 74.

[37] Kierkegaard, "Repetition," 131.

[38] Kierkegaard, "Repetition," 170.

Repetition means that a past actuality becomes actual once again: someone who repeats is renewing actuality. Recollection and repetition deal with the past in different ways: that which is recollected is complete within itself; it is contemplated as a finished totality, apprehended as an idea. On the other hand, if something is repeated it is re-enacted, actualized; it is not merely represented as an idea but recreated as a reality.[39]

Both recollection and repetition are movements of truth: the former moves towards a past eternity, and the latter moves towards a future eternity. This illuminates Constantin's remark that 'repetition and recollection are the same movement, only in opposite directions'.[40] Repetition is life that is lived in the moment itself. For Kierkegaard, the one that lives is the one that gives himself to the repetition of life.[41] Life is a succession of repetitions, but such repetitions create something new. Such a position raises the possibility that the very act of repetition opens up to a new sphere of living, a sphere that for Kierkegaard must be embraced. The singular and the irreducible are precisely what is repeatable, which stands in contrast to the sovereign decisionism of Schmitt, which holds that the exception equals the unrepeated and unrepeatable.[42]

In the sections which follow, I wish to read Kierkegaard's 'repetition', the repeatable singularity, as a model for Agamben's 'absolute immanence'. It is true that Kierkegaard wrote that repetition is transcendence. Yet Agamben's immanent life sees Kierkegaard's repetition as a corollary and Schmitt's exception as an antithesis. Agamben's philosophy is driven by a focus upon immanence, understood as the plane of existence *as it is experienced*. This can be contrasted with transcendence as it is usually understood, which is that which goes beyond; in phenomenology the transcendent is that which transcends our own consciousness. For Agamben however, the plane of transcendence extends no further than the plane of immanence, and it is in this sense that his engagement with Kierkegaard should be situated and the repeatable singularity represents absolute immanence.[43]

The exception Agamben is interested in undermines the (Schmittian) law and sovereign decisionism, rather than founds it. This is why in *State of Exception* Agamben wrote that it is necessary to rethink the relation between life and law: "to show law in its nonrelation to life

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[39] Clare Carlisle, "Kierkegaard's Repetition: The Possibility of Motion," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 13, no.3 (2005): 521, 525.
[40] Kierkegaard, "Repetition," 131.
[41] Kierkegaard, "Repetition," 132, 133.
[42] Gould, "Laws, Exceptions, Norms," 83-84.
[43] Giorgio Agamben, "Absolute Immanence," in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 226-28.

and life in its nonrelation to law",[44] opens an immanent space for human action. This space, which Agamben calls 'politics', is made after the tie between law and life is severed. The political in Agamben is the existential in Kierkegaard:

> Politics is that which corresponds to the essential inoperability of humankind ... There is politics because human beings are *argōs* – beings that cannot be defined by any proper operation – that is, beings … that no identity or vocation can possibly exhaust.[45]

The next section explores the nature of this immanent life.

Agamben's Existential Life

In 'Absolute Immanence' Agamben provided a close reading of Gilles Deleuze's essay, 'Immanence: A Life'.[46] In Deleuze's essay Agamben sees in the term 'life' a capacity to resist force and power.[47] "A life…" marks the radical impossibility of establishing divisions and separations.[48] "A life…" exists on the plane of immanence, and is immanent only to itself.[49] As Deleuze and Guattari explain, immanence must be distinguished from an immanence that is held in relation to the transcendent plane.[50] Immanence has neither a focal point nor a horizon that can orient thought. The only possible point of orientation is the 'vertigo' in which outside and inside, immanence and transcendence, are absolutely indistinguishable.[51] What does this mean for an immanent life? At the end of *What is Philosophy?* life as absolute immediacy is defined as "pure contemplation without knowledge".[52] What this means is:

> A life is everywhere, in all the moments that traverse this or that living subjects and that measure lived objects.[53]

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[44] Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) 88.
[45] Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 141.
[46] Agamben, "Absolute Immanence," 239; Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2001).
[47] Agamben, "Absolute Immanence," 220.
[48] Agamben, "Absolute Immanence," 233.
[49] Agamben, "Absolute Immanence," 227.
[50] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 45.
[51] Agamben, "Absolute Immanence," 228.
[52] Agamben, "Absolute Immanence," 233.
[53] Gilles Deleuze, "Immanence: A Life…" *Theory, Culture, Society* 14, no.2 (1997): 3, 6.

This immanent life is 'form-of-life'. Form-of-life is an existential figure, inhabiting a non-relational existence, not lived through forms of identity politics. This figure (under different names) has formed a part of Agamben's thought for many years. Written in 1990, *The Coming Community* opens with a meditation on 'whatever-Being'.[54] This *whatever* (which will be later termed form-of-life) is a *radical indifference*:

> [T]he coming politics will no longer be a struggle to conquer or to control the state on the part of either new or old social subjects, but rather a struggle between … whatever singularities and the state organisation.[55]

Kierkegaard can be read as expressing himself in line with this:

> [T]he established order will not put up with consisting of something as loose as a collection of millions of individuals … The established order wants to be a totality that recognises nothing above itself but has every individual under it and judges every individual who subordinates himself to the established order.[56]

Kierkegaard traces the individual's "collision" with "the established order", pointing out that the established order would be upset by the fact that the individual wanted to live an immanent life - "that the single individual wanted to withdraw from his relation to the established order".[57]

In a way which evokes the operation of repetition, form-of-life is generated by the very act of living.[58] It is a movement of becoming, of coming into existence. This form-of-life (like "a life") is what Agamben terms a monad, signifying itself singular nature. The relationship between monads is complex. The more form-of-life becomes monadic, the more it isolates itself from other monads. However, each monad always-already communicates with the others, by representing them in itself, "as in a living mirror".[59] In form-of-life, living and life contract

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[54] Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 1.
[55] Agamben, *Means Without End*, 88.
[56] Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, trans. Howard V Hong and Edna H Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 91.
[57] Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 93.
[58] Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 221.
[59] Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 232.

into one another,[60] in a mode of living, a "*how* I am what I am".[61] Form-of-life is the most idiosyncratic aspect of everyone—their tastes:

> If every body is affected by its form-of-life as by a clinamen or a taste, the ethical subject is that subject that constitutes-itself in relation to this clinamen, the subject who bears witness to its tastes, takes responsibility for the mode in which it is affected by its inclinations. Modal ontology, the ontology of the *how*, coincides with an ethics.[62]

This is not to take the notion of 'tastes' too literally. Tastes – "the fact [individuals] like coffee granita, the sea at summertime, this certain shape of lips, this certain smell" – are ontological in character.[63] Agamben continues:

> It is not a matter of attributes or properties of a subject who judges but of the mode in which each person, in losing himself as subject, constitutes himself as form-of-life.[64]

This ontology of the 'how' presupposes a doing, a taking responsibility, a capacity for realising this 'how'. The 'how' is repetition, a repeatable singularity which is lived in the moment itself. For Agamben this is where living and life coincide – but what are the limits of this living? To live life as a form indicates that one *must* realise and take responsibility for this condition. Form-of-life must live its own mode of being (as a monad) inseparable from its context (that is to say, a network of relations). However these relations are non-relational. Form-of-life is in *contact* with its relational context because it has rendered these relations non-relational.[65] 'Contact' means that:

> [F]orm and life … dwell in a non-relation. And it is in contact – that is, in a void of representation – and not in a relation that forms-of-life communicate. The "alone by oneself" that defines the structure of every singular form-of-life also defines its community with others. And it is this … contact that the juridical order and politics seeks by all means to capture and represent in a relation … forms-of-life are in contact,

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[60] Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 223.
[61] Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 231.
[62] Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 231.
[63] Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 231.
[64] Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 231.
[65] Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 232.

but this is unrepresentable because it consists … in the deactivation and inoperativity of every representation.[66]

Contact occurs when two entities are separated only by their void of representation. 'Representative' politics seeks to capture and represent this void in the form of a relation that will always-already have a negative ground – this capturing will take place through the Schmittian decision.[67] Contrastingly, form-of-life is situated beyond every possible recognition, and beyond the Schmittian exception and decision.[68] In a sense, Agamben is arguing that existence precedes essence:

> Only if I am … delivered to a possibility and a power, only if living and intending and apprehending themselves are at stake each time in what I live and intend and apprehend … only then can a form of life become, in its own factness and thingness, *form-of-life*, in which it is never possible to isolate something like naked life.[69]

There is a corollary between Agamben's "living [which] is at stake each time in what I live and intend" and the view from *Repetition* that life is a series of repetitions, and such repetitions create something new. Such a form-of-life cannot be based upon the mutual sharing of properties or the politics of social movements.[70] A community of forms-of-life is not structured by an *absence* of shared properties as a "negative community".[71] Forms-of-life are in contact but this consists in the inoperativity of every representation – a non-representable politics.[72]

To summarise – Agamben describes form-of-life as a monad that dwells in non-relational contact with other monads. Therefore, forms-of-life are not in relation, but are in contact. For Agamben, all identities are relational in the sense that every identity is a differential construct. Some people regard these differences as essential (for example, male and female, black and white, Jew and Gentile), while others regard them as arbitrary constructs. The person who regards them as arbitrary constructs lives in "contact" with others, and focuses on how its lives its life,[73] which involves ways of envisaging an immanent life on the threshold

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[66] Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 237.
[67] Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 237.
[68] Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 248.
[69] Agamben, *Means Without End*, 9. The isolation referred to is Schmitt's decision.
[70] Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 86.
[71] Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 86.
[72] Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 237.
[73] Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 231.

of its political and ethical intensification. [74] The person who regards these differences as ontic realities lives in relation with others, upholding these representational constructs as juridical.

Form-of-life, Repetition, Synthesis, Self

Building upon the previous section, I now wish to extend the connections I am making between Agamben and Kierkegaard. Agamben's claim that the 'subject' is the result of the living being passing through divisions and caesuras (which operates as an apparatus through which the decision of what is and what is not human is possible) is in my argument a new interpretation and concretisation of Kierkegaard's claim that the human being is a synthesis with the possibility of becoming a self. This forms the basis of an existential reading of form-of-life which is subject to a continual process of repetition.

For both Agamben and Kierkegaard, anthropogenesis never stops happening, and first philosophy is the memory and repetition of this event. [75] It is the task of the human being to bring the parts together in their existence, and the human being only manages to be a singular being (form-of-life for Agamben, the self for Kierkegaard) when this happens.

Agamben opens up a new reading of Kierkegaard in a political context. The political is never an end in itself and can never be one except at the cost of the individual. This is shown through Agamben's writings on potentiality (which connect to form-of-life) and Kierkegaard's writings on the self. Agamben argues that if something has the potential-to-be, it must also have the potential-not-to-be. Daniel Heller-Roazen explains:

> The potential not to be (or do) … is not effaced in the passage into actuality, on the contrary, actuality is itself nothing other than the full realisation of the potential not to be (or do), the point at which, as Aristotle writes, "there will be nothing impotential" … Aristotle's definition of potentiality therefore concerns the precise condition in which potentiality realises itself. [76]

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[74] Erik Bordeleau, "Initiating Life: Agamben and the Political Use of Intimacy," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 31, no.3 (2017): 481, 482.

[75] Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 111.

[76] Daniel Heller-Roazen, "Editor's Introduction: "To Read What Was Never Written"" in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 17.

Potentiality is more than just unactualised actuality. It is the potential to not-do, the potential not to pass into actuality.[77] The existence of potentiality is the presence of an absence, what Agamben terms a 'faculty'.[78] To be potential is to be capable of im-potentiality.[79] Therefore a thing (for example, a life) is potential when, at its realisation, there is nothing left that is im-potential, nothing able not-to-be.[80] Potentiality thus fulfils itself by letting itself be – by taking away its own potentiality not-to-be.[81]

Every human power is im-potentiality and every human potentiality is always-already held in relation to its own privation.[82] This is both the origin of human power, good and bad, and the root of human freedom.[83] Agamben sees human freedom neither as the power to do an act, nor the power to refuse to do an act - to be free is to be capable of one's own im-potentiality, to be free for both good and evil.[84] Agamben goes on to say in relation to potentiality:

> [T]here is in effect something that humans *are and have to be*, but this something is not an essence or properly a thing: it is the simple fact of one's own existence as possibility or potentiality.[85]

Potentiality is connected to the figure of form-of-life. 'Letting itself be' – this is a description of how a monad generates its form through its act of living. In other words, a form-of-life is capable of im-potentiality. In turn, im-potential forms-of-life dwell in contact with each other – that is to say, in non-relation with one another. Form-of-life is a philosophical outlook. It is to say that one's identity is a constructed performance. This means that form-of-life is an embodied existential figure, subject to a continual process of repetition, a process that is always-already happening. In a similar vein to Kierkegaard (and explicitly referencing him), Agamben also sees repetition as bringing change:

> What is repetition? There are four great thinkers of repetition in modernity: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gilles Deleuze. All four have shown that

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[77] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1046a, 30-35, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume Two*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Giorgio Agamben, "On Potentiality", in *Potentialities*, 180.
[78] Agamben, "On Potentiality," 179.
[79] Agamben, "On Potentiality," 182.
[80] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 45.
[81] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 45-46.
[82] Agamben, "On Potentiality," 182.
[83] Agamben, "On Potentiality," 182.
[84] Agamben, "On Potentiality," 182-183.
[85] Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 43.

repetition is not the return of the identical; it is not the same as such that returns. The force and the grace of repetition, the novelty it brings us, is the return as the possibility of what was, render it possible anew; it's almost a paradox. To repeat something is to make it possible anew.[86]

For Agamben, repetition restores possibility,[87] which is coterminous to potentiality.[88] Therefore we can say that in living our lives as inseparable from its form, a life which lets itself be, we do so through a series of repeatable singularities which allow us to be capable of im-potentiality.

In a similar fashion to the potential which lets itself be, Kierkegaard begins *The Sickness unto Death* by describing the idea that the human being is a self or has the possibility of becoming one:

> A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two. Considered in this way, a human being is still not a self. In the relation between two, the relation is the third as a negative unity.[89]

The human being can be a self when the synthesis, the relation itself, relates itself to itself, or lets itself be. This can be connected to Agamben's potentiality – at a thing's realisation, there is nothing left that is able not-to-be. In both cases, the self is defined without being divided and separated through a decision. Kierkegaard's self (importantly not the human being) does not involve its being held in relation to anything other than itself. It is its own relation to itself. Kierkegaard's description of the self can therefore be favourably compared to Agamben's ontology of potentiality and form-of-life.

Agamben warns against representative politics as a way in which life can continue to be articulated and divided through the repeatable sovereign decision, creating bare life as a

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[86] Giorgio Agamben, "Difference and repetition: on Guy Debord's film," in *Guy Debord and the situationist international: texts and documents*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 313, 315-16.
[87] Agamben, "Difference and repetition," 316.
[88] Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 43.
[89] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Harold V Hong and Edna H Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 15.

remainder. In a similar (although by no means identical) manner, Kierkegaard sees danger in reducing the single human being to a citizen in the state. The individual needs to be kept separate from the masses of society, and not subsumed into the latter. Kierkegaard sees in the state's ethics a modern version of ancient Greece's conception of the relation between the individual and the *polis*, where the task of the individual was to enter into and fulfil their life in the *polis*. Kierkegaard points out this danger in *The Sickness unto Death*:

> If order is to be maintained in existence … then the first thing to keep in mind is that every human being is an individual human being and is to become conscious of being an individual human being. If men are first permitted to run together in what Aristotle calls the animal category – the crowd – then this abstraction, instead of being less than nothing, even less than the most insignificant individual human being, comes to be regarded as something – then it does not take long before this abstraction becomes God.[90]

This means that the single individual (as a potentiality) could be subsumed by a collective identity (which represents actuality). A collective identity reduces the human being to the "animal category", with "the predominance of the generation over the individual".[91] In this situation, the individual is deprived of their own significance and becomes "less than nothing, even less than the most insignificant individual human being".[92]

Finally, I explore how the self in Kierkegaard is a life that is lived in the moment itself (which is the structure of repetition), and how this repetition models a version of "contact" between non-relational monads in Kierkegaard. My starting point is Kierkegaard's proposal to 'level' all existence so that the human being becomes the self before God, without appealing to the support of any further authority,[93] removing any transcendent referent for the self to define themselves in relation to. Becoming a self requires that an individual distance themselves from the world of others in the sense of defining themselves through a relation to another. Instead, a self is a non-relational monad, which is held in relation to itself, who is nevertheless in contact with other monads. Here I am arguing that Kierkegaard can be read as

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[90] Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 117-18; cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, Book II, 11, 1281a40-43.
[91] Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 118.
[92] Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 118.
[93] Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V Hong and Edna H Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 272.

opposing the sovereign division of life into citizen and bare life, which involves the production of individual subjects through the actualisation of their potentiality.

For Agamben and Kierkegaard a striving *to other* oneself or others makes no sense. Everybody should take care of themselves in order to become a true self that deserves the name. To secure one's true self no reference to others is necessary. The experience of *being othered* implies for Kierkegaard a dangerous distraction from the true relation of the self to itself – a corollary to Agamben's immanent form-of-life.

For Kierkegaard to be *othered* or to experiencing *othering* means to be threatened by an alteration that seems to make *something* or *someone* out of us. *Othering* produces an *othered self*, imagined as becoming someone or something other *which it is not* and *which it can never become* – a transcendent referent which the self is constantly defined in relation to. For Kierkegaard, if we have undergone an othering we should do our best to undo it and ultimately to rid ourselves of an otherness that threatens us with estrangement from our self.

The Sickness unto Death contends that once a self is formed, it does *not* stand 'outside' the world, but is immersed in it, as an existential figure. The self gives itself to itself. This mean that within the world the self defines its existence not through being defined through its relation to others. True selfhood and true freedom must be an orientation toward oneself as a single individual.[94] Every self must turn toward itself and establish itself before reaching out to others. Giving itself to itself models the structure of repetition which involves living a life in the moment itself. Existentially, there is no possibility of delegating the task of living one's own life. Therefore the figure of the self lives through giving itself to the repetition of life. This opens up a new sphere of living in a movement of becoming. Each moment of becoming is a repetition, a repeatable singularity through which the self lives constantly anew, existing in its own history and own world it shares with others.

The self also relates to others in a non-relational way. Living through repetition the self remains in contact with other selves – living as a non-relational monad avoids the problem of othering. In *Works of Love* Kierkegaard argued that the quality of the human condition is shown through the fact that we all die. This shows that everyone's end is the same and the differences we have in life and mere passing attributes.[95] Death founds an understanding that we are beings for whom living in a world with others matters, and others count in the sphere of our shared existence.[96] However, they count as monadic others who form part of the world in which we

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[94] Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses*, 236.
[95] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 345.
[96] Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 353.

live, continuously in contact with them. They are therefore part of the immersed world in which the self lives through a movement of becoming.

This existential approach is evocative of Agamben's form-of-life living its life as a 'how', or a mode of living. Kierkegaard and Agamben focus on a form of life that is brought about by the form itself, as a way of living. Both Agamben and Kierkegaard place the onus on the singular being to live through repeatable singularities. Kierkegaard makes clear: "The greatness is not to be this or that but to be oneself".[97] For both philosophers, the space of living is an act of radical self-determination in a world with others.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to interrogate the relationship of Kierkegaard and Agamben through Kierkegaard's 'repetition' and Agamben's 'form-of-life'. First, I considered how Schmitt and Agamben have cited Kierkegaard, arguing that Kierkegaard's *Repetition* is a model for Agamben's form-of-life. Schmitt's exception is an unrepeatable singularity which founds his sovereign decisionism. In contrast, form-of-life provides the basis of a way of living for forms of life which are able to live their lives as a 'how'. This how is always in the process of repetition in the Kierkegaardian sense. In contrast to Schmitt's unrepeatable singularity of the exception, representative of sovereign decisionism and the division of life, Kierkegaard's self and Agamben's form-of-life posit repeatable singularities which exist as non-relational monads. They do not exist in relation to others but rather in contact with them. Contact is a way of relating to others outside of difference. Form-of-life and the self are non-relational in the sense that it is not defined or understood as being held up against other persons or beings and compared and contrasted to that other. Likewise, they are non-differential in that form-of-life does not depend upon differences between itself and others. This chapter concludes with the argument that form-of-life is an existential figure, always in the process of repetition, understood in its performative, Kierkegaardian sense. If form-of-life is read existentially then its construction makes sense. Form-of-life is subject to a continual process of repetition, an existential process that is always-already happening.

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[97] Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Part II*, trans. Howard V Hong and Edna H Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 177.

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