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The Profanation of Revelation: On Language and Immanence in the Work of Giorgio Agamben

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Agamben

Abstract

This essay seeks to articulate the many implications which Giorgio Agamben's work holds for theology. It aims therefore to examine his (re)conceptualizations of language, in light of particular historical glosses on the 'name of God' and the nature of the 'mystical', as well as to highlight the political task of profanation, one of his most central concepts, in relation to the *logos* said to embody humanity's 'religious' quest to find its Voice. As such, we see how he challenges those standard (ontotheological) notions of transcendence which have been consistently aligned with various historical forms of sovereignty. In addition, I intend to present his redefinition of revelation as solely the unveiling of the 'name of God' as the fact of our linguistic being, a movement from the transcendent divine realm to the merely human world before us. By proceeding in this manner, this essay tries to close in on one of the largest theological implications contained within Agamben's work: the establishment of an ontology that could only be described as a form of 'absolute' immanence, an espousal of some form of pantheism (or perhaps pan*en*theism) yet to be more fully pronounced within his writings.

Key words: Giorgio Agamben, immanence, profanation, language, theology

Introduction

In the last few years, the work of Italian philosopher and cultural theorist Giorgio

Agamben has begun to arouse great interest, not only among those immersed in philosophical

and political theory, but also among those in literary circles, critical-legal studies, theology,

feminism, post-colonial thought and history.[1] Despite the critical-constructive work being done

with regard to his writings, however, it has almost escaped notice that there has been little

account given for Agamben's overtly *theological* claims by the discipline of academic theology

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[1] See the main monographs on his work to appear recently, including: Calarco and DeCaroli; Dickinson, *Agamben* Durantaye; Mills; Murray; Murray, Heron and Clemens; Norris, Wall; Watkin; and, Zartaloudis.

proper.[2] This is a lamentable fact in many respects, most notably because his rereading of the theological tradition – as well as the centrality it plays in his work – contains significant consequences for the way theology is both perceived and performed on the whole. His work in fact often focuses on redefining traditional theological terms as philosophical ones, a process which appears in many ways to threaten the integrity of theological study as it has generally (historically) been conceived. This would include the complete revision (or, better, *profanation*) of concepts such as: revelation, redemption, original sin, profanation, the messianic, sovereignty, the sacred (especially through the figure of the *homo sacer*), glory, the 'name of God' and creation, among others. Demonstrating his close proximity to theology time and again, these terms are continuously explored in his work in direct relation to the history of theology as well as theology's attempts to formulate its various doctrines and creeds yet in relation to the history of western thought. The disciplines of theology and of religious studies thus would be greatly amiss if they were to continue neglecting the radicality of his thought in producing their very self-definition.

It is with all of this in mind that I set out in this essay to articulate something of the many implications which Agamben's work holds for theological study specifically, its past, present and future. First, I intend to do so in relation to his (re)conceptualizations of language, something he formulates in light of particular historical glosses on the 'name of God', and which ultimately leads him to a re-evaluation of the nature of the 'mystical'. In this fashion, I hope to show how Agamben's critique of mysticism can open theology to a new perspective on both its nature and its essence. Second, I will turn to the way in which Agamben lays out the political task of

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[2] See the small but growing amount of writing which has attempted to deal with his more 'theological' claims, though mainly in relation to his work on Saint Paul, including: Bertozzi; Bretherton; Boer; Colilli; Dickinson, 'Canon'; Meyere; and, Presutti. Despite these minor attempts, however, there has been little reflection yet made on the implications his work holds for theological study on the whole, as I am here otherwise attempting to investigate.

profanation, one of his most central concepts, in relation to the *logos* said to embody humanity's 'religious' quest to find its Voice. By doing so, I am aiming to present Agamben's challenge to those standard (ontotheological) notions of transcendence which have been consistently aligned with various historical forms of sovereignty. And, finally, I will close with a section presenting revelation as being solely the unveiling of the 'name of God' as the fact of our linguistic being, a movement therefore from the transcendent divine realm to the merely human world before us. By proceeding in this manner, I am trying to close in on one of the largest theological implications contained within Agamben's work: the establishment of an ontology that could only be described as a form of 'absolute' immanence, an espousal of some form of pantheism (or perhaps pan*en*theism) yet to be more fully pronounced within his writings.[3]

Language beyond the 'mystical'

From the outset, Agamben's pursuit of the origins of language do not deviate too greatly from the heritage which seemingly bequeathed it to him. From more remote mystical traditions to the most 'authoritative' theologians, Agamben draws from a rich history of theology in order to move in effect to a place that seems to be entirely beyond its contours. Even when he engages with philosophy directly, and this throughout several of his works (see, e.g., his *Kingdom*; *Sacrament*; *Nudities*) it is from a quasi-theological-mystical interest that he analyzes its most fundamental propositions, thus giving rise to those comments which would see his work as being

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[3] Agamben himself, of course, does not use either term to describe his writings, thus rendering any attempt to affix such a label to his work as extremely difficult. His overlap on just such a point is no doubt akin to those attempts to discern what form of divinity is at work in Spinoza's philosophy, the source from which many of Agamben's reflections flow. See Deveaux; Mason.

somewhat overtly theological (cf. the conclusions made in Durantaye and Dickinson, *Agamben*). For example, and as an introduction into these theological-philosophical juxtapositions in his writing, it is within the context of his depiction of the 'coming community', that Agamben carefully situates his discourse in-between two of the twentieth-century's greatest philosophical minds, two thinkers who arguably also happened to achieve a remarkable proximity to the mystical: Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein. If their works appear at moments to be isolating the borders of the mystical rather than give way to it (as Wittgenstein's famous comments on the 'mystical' in his *Tractatus* appear to do, the only text of his to which Agamben refers) then so much the better for Agamben, who finds an oscillation between both thinkers to be the approximate dynamic he needs to achieve a liquidation of the mystical in its near entirety (Agamben, *Coming Community*, 90-106; Wittgenstein).[4]

His immediate references are language and its relation to our being-in-the-world, that which has directly occupied thought, he tells us, since the time of Plato (Agamben, 'The Thing Itself', *Potentialities*). Situating himself within this historical trajectory, Agamben begins to formulate the precision of his thoughts on language and the mystical in relation to the singular act of naming, something which reaches its pinnacle expression in the various historical attempts on the part of theologians to formulate (or *pronounce*) the 'name of God'. For him, the act of naming, that is, our attempt to deal with our being-in-the-world as revealed in the existence of language itself, is what should be considered as the primary 'content' of religious expression. It is a fact of our (linguistic) existence that we are unable to state *as such*, and this gives rise to its 'mystical' aura, to mysticism itself in fact and to any accompanying religious impulse. This is indeed what enables him to say that

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[4] Quentin Meillassoux, however, argues that it is precisely Heidegger and Wittgenstein who have been responsible for the proliferation of 'mystical' thought in a contemporary philosophical context. See his *After Finitude*, 41-2.

> What remains without name here is the being-named, the name itself (*nomen innominabile*); only being-in-language is subtracted from the authority of language. According to a Platonic tautology, which we are still far from understanding, the idea of a thing is the thing itself; *the name, insofar as it names a thing, is nothing but the thing insofar as it is named by the name*. (Agamben, *Coming Community*, 76-7, emphasis in the original)

This name is far from being understood by us, not solely because it is an obscure (and obscuring) thought in itself, but because the relationship between them, between name and thing (as between language and being-in-the-world), constitutes the essential problematic of a determinate existence: how are we to move from one to the other? In other words, it forms the problematic contours *of transcendence itself*.

In its basic structure, this problematic nestled within the event of language itself, its 'taking-place' as it were, reveals the fundamental division that grounds much of Agamben's ontological reflections. The partition between language and our being-in-the-world is opened up for him by those philosophical figures who were fascinated by our dwelling in language, such as Aristotle, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, figures who were no less interested in 'theological' claims, even if they do not always express it directly as such. As he unfolds this event's history,

> The scission of language into two irreducible planes permeates all of Western thought, from the Aristotelian opposition between the first *ousia* and the other categories…up to the duality between *Sage* and *Sprache* in Heidegger or between *showing* and *telling* in Wittgenstein. The very structure of transcendence, which constitutes the decisive character of philosophical reflection on being, is grounded in this scission. (86)

The difficulty of conceptualizing this scission rivals only the comprehension of the difficulties embedded within the structure of transcendence itself, or that which indeed limits any understanding within the realm of ideas – or even the realm said to be inhabited by the divine (Agamben, 'What Is a Paradigm?', *Signature*). It is, however, precisely this domain of thought that Agamben, despite declaring that 'we are still far from understanding' it, hopes to explicate as something immanent to our existence, the very fact of the existence of language itself

(Agamben, 'The Idea of Language', *Potentialities*; see also his *Sacrament*). For, as he will put it

in another, earlier context, though one that nonetheless sets the course for these later

ruminations, it is 'Only because the event of language always already transcends what is said in

this event' that 'something like a transcendence in the ontological sense' can be shown to take

place (Agamben, *Language*, 86). This is a 'transcendence' that does not ultimately transcend the

world, but remains entirely immanent to its linguistic economy, not necessarily even a

transcendence-in-immanence because it in fact blurs the line between them (Agamben, *Time*,

25). Seeing reality thus would in fact seem to confirm the significance of Agamben's taking up

of Heidegger and Wittgenstein at the conclusion of his political formulations in his work *The*

Coming Community.

The oscillation between these two contemporary thinkers with an almost mystical

trajectory is subsequently consulted in relation to medieval theologians for whom the problem of

a transcendence-in-language appears to be *the* fundamental philosophical problem, according to

Agamben's reading. It is a short step from here to inspecting this 'event of language' as the

fundamental structure of our 'being-in-the-world', one conceived in relation to the grounds and

origins of what constitutes the theological in the first place. In an earlier work, *Language and*

Death, Agamben renders it as such[5]:

> The transcendence of being and of the world—which medieval logic grasped under the
> rubric of the *transcendentia* and which Heidegger identifies as the fundamental structure
> of being-in-the-world—is the transcendence of the event of language with respect to that
> which, in this event, is said and signified; and the shifters, which indicate the pure
> *instance* of discourse, constitute…the originary linguistic structure of transcendence.
> (26)

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[5] Durantaye's choice to exclude *Language and Death* from his otherwise near comprehensive survey of Agamben's
work means that he misses an opportunity to explain how this work in particular frames so much of Agamben's
subsequent research trajectory. See Durantaye, *Agamben*.

As the ontological difference that Heidegger had always claimed constituted the 'always forgotten ground of metaphysics', this transcendent structure of our linguistic being is what captured the medieval mindset as being constituted solely under the auspices of the divine. It was the difference which, likewise, gave rise to the originary line of signification drawn between human beings and God, or between human and animals, as also perhaps between such divisions as gender and race (Agamben, *The Open*; cf. Calarco). And it is *this* difference which continues to haunt western thought (and theology) unto this day.

As Agamben frames the issue, while simultaneously expanding upon it:

The opening of the *ontological* dimension (being, the world) corresponds to the pure taking place of language as an originary event, while the *ontic* dimension (entities, things) corresponds to that which, in this opening, is said and signified. The transcendence of being with respect to the entity, of the world with respect to the thing, is above all, a transcendence of the event of *langue* [language] with respect to *parole* [speech]. (26)

These reflections on the event of language lead Agamben back to the medieval theological tradition which perhaps best exemplified this step beyond the mystical and towards the root of language itself, a state *beyond* all grammars. In *Language and Death*, for example, he notes how in the work of the medieval logician Albert Magnus, faith is defined as 'a particular dimension of meaning, a particular "grammar" of the demonstrative pronoun, whose ostensive realization no longer refers to the senses or the intellect, but to an experience that takes place solely in the instance of discourse as such (*fides ex auditu*)' (28). Something thus occurs in the *parole* (speech) concerning the nature of *langue* (language) itself and is therefore central to comprehending the grounds of faith, something which Agamben passionately seeks further to discern.

The division between being-in-the-world and language is thereby asserted once more as the fundamental scission within western thought (Agamben, *Infancy*, 11ff). This takes Agamben

inevitably, and as one might nearly guess, from the reception of Magnus' work to the thought of his most-prized student, Thomas Aquinas. For Aquinas, similarly, the name of God can only be illuminated as 'that in which no determinate being is named', the beyond of language that is not however to be confused with the realm of the mystical—but rather, seen as the origin of language itself, located in a realm beyond utterance. There is therefore an opening made to 'the infinite and indeterminate sea of substance', which, according to Aquinas, is said to be 'a certain shadowy realm said to be inhabited by God' (29). In this fashion, and now by Agamben's reckoning, the 'dimension of meaning at stake here goes beyond the vagueness normally attributed to mystical theology (which is on the contrary, a particular but perfectly coherent grammar)' (29-30). Consequently, and with no resources to describe this state inherent within the theological tradition, as Agamben relates, Christian ontological musings turn to Hebrew conceptions of the *nomen tetragrammaton*, 'the secret and unpronounceable name of God', as the source of linguistic signification, hence as the source of language itself.

Theology has dealt often with the erasure of the verb 'to be', the verb of existence stated in relation to God (cf. Marion). It is this very tenuous relationship which is subsequently mirrored in the various historical acts of trying to define the difficult relationship between mystical experience and language (*apophatics*). Agamben is no stranger to this theological tradition, as we have seen. Indeed, he is quick to extend this discourse even further in order to encompass the entire realm of human existence and thereby to demonstrate what a true nature beyond even the mystical might be, a proposition which in itself may actually approach an apophatic thinking itself *beyond* apophatics. For example, in another context, Agamben has recourse to describe the effect of the revealing of the origins of language upon the (western, philosophical) subject as such:

> We see that the *cogito*, like mystical synderesis [the capacity to intuit the universal principles of humanity], is what remains of the soul when, at the end of a "dark night", it is stripped of all its attributes and content. The heart of this transcendental experience of the I has been signally described by an Arab mystic, Al-Hallaj: "I am *I* and the attributes are no more; I am *I* and the qualifications are no more…I am the pure subject of the verb. (Agamben, *Infancy*, 34)

The experience of what it means to be human (the fundamental proposition behind the *cogito*) is revealed in its relation to language, in the verb 'to be', and is as such founded upon this 'I' that is said to exist without being, that is, in a state of indeterminable essence, 'stripped of its attributes and content'. The subject, the western political, philosophical and theological subject of so much historical focus and scrutiny, lies in-between its being-in-the-world and language; *it is founded upon this scission*, and this is a fact seemingly only approachable through recourse to near-apophatic language. It is also, and not surprisingly, what is 'revealed' by Agamben as comprising the essence of the various mystical traditions arising from the three traditional monotheistic faiths.

The linkage of medieval mystical traditions to the transcendental subject of modern philosophy becomes a central recurring point of the reference for Agamben throughout his work, as well as the most immediate reference point for grounding his theological musings on the nature of language (see Agamben, *Sacrament*; *Potentialities*). This connection is indeed what lends him the confidence to go a step further and re-articulate the place of the subject in relation to language altogether (Agamben, *Infancy*, 53). Therefore, in the context of perusing the decline of experience in the contemporary world, and of humanity's increased isolation of itself, Agamben declares, in a typically aphoristic manner, that: 'The transcendental cannot be the subjective; unless transcendental simply signifies: linguistic' (54). And there it is: transcendence appears to be nothing more than a veiled attempt (within all religious aspirations) to articulate

the origin of language, one that in the end ultimately fails. And its failure, in turn, gives birth to the subject of western rational thought.

The entire problematic of transcendence, as well as its accompanying transcendental subject, is rendered visible through this fundamental disclosure: truth itself, and the truth of language's existence foremost among them, cannot be spoken of *in* language, or even *by* language, but must only be revealed indirectly. And this, more than anything else, is what has given rise over time to the fundamental impulses behind our most basic religious and apophatic aspirations. As Agamben will most directly formulate the intersection of truth and language in his work *Infancy and History*: 'Truth is not thereby something that can be defined within language, nor even outside it, as a given fact or as an "equation" between this and language: infancy, truth and language are limited and constituted respectively in a primary, historic-transcendental relation…' (58).[6] An essential juncture is consequently reached through the determination of these coordinating points, one that still bears down significantly upon our definitions of humanity. For it is at the moment where infancy, truth and language all meet up that the constitution of the transcendental subject is effected. The subject, the intrusion of the 'I' into language at the point of infancy, must join up with what Agamben, following Mallarmé, will term 'la voix sacrée de la terra ingénue' ('the sacred voice of the unknowing earth'), the language that animals need not conceive because they are already inside it, but which humanity must enter into, must assert themselves within: 'Man, instead, by having an infancy, by preceding speech, splits this single language and, in order to speak, has to constitute himself as the subject of language – he has to say *I*' (59).

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[6] The term 'infancy' can be understood as more of a state that we dwell in rather than a chronological space that we regress to. In many ways, it comes to mirror the Christian language concerning one's 'rebirth' that similarly follows a regressive pattern of thought. Cf. Watkin, *Agamben*, 13.

As Agamben will make foundational to his elaborations on the (in)distinction between human and animal, it is with this understanding that humans must continuously re-constitute themselves against an undefined (undecidable) background of this vacuous sacred language, this empty space wherein the human being is nearly engulfed in the world of its own animality (Agamben, *Open*). Humanity, finding itself in this situation, tries to posit itself as an unambiguous existence, despite the fact that it exists in reality (as 'humanity') because of its fractured dwelling in language.

Citing Aristotle, Agamben is able to extract the overall import of these reflections by considering how

> …if language is truly man's nature (and nature, on reflection, can only mean language without speech, *genesis synechés*, "continuous origin", by Aristotle's definition, and to be nature means being always-already inside language), then man's nature is split at its source, for infancy brings it discontinuity and the difference between language and discourse. (Agamben, *Infancy*, 59)

Unlike the world of animality, human beings develop a sense (or 'faculty') for history, one grounded precisely in this difference and discontinuity. As it develops, 'It is infancy, it is the transcendental experience of the difference between language and speech, which first opens the space of history. Thus Babel – that is, the exit from the Eden of pure language and the entry into the babble of infancy… – is the transcendental origin of history' (60). As Agamben seeks to stress over and again, we (humans) live in a post-babelian world, one that must recognize its unique situation among the ruins of paradise and become conscious of the transcendental subject at history's center. And it is the logical, and inevitable, conclusion which follows from these premises, that if the singular sacred voice within which all creation lives is continuously brought about by a fractured state through which humanity attempts to elevate itself above the rest of creation, then the task unique to humanity, one that humanity will ultimately have to embrace if

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it is to cease engaging in such violent reductions of being, will be one of *profanation*, of ridding itself of its various notions of 'the mystical' which still haunt our world and which testify only to the fracture within our being without really doing anything about it.

The profanation of our dwelling in language

It should come as no surprise, then, that his most direct expression of the task of profanation inscribes itself at the heart of our dwelling in language. There are perhaps a number of ways that we might envision the 'task of profanation' which Agamben sets before humanity, framed as the daunting and yet necessary operation of the 'coming community' beyond the confines of our ongoing political representations (Agamben, *Community*; *Profanations*, 73-92). It is a 'going beyond' representation that seeks what lies before language and in which humanity more primordially dwells. In other words, it is a profanation which must emerge from a deeper intake of what truly lies at the origins of language and religious thought, indeed from the silence which is said to give rise to both. It is thus entirely beyond the grammar of the mystical-transcendental.

Like Aquinas' 'infinite and indeterminate sea of substance' that is God, the mythogeme of a silent voice becomes a subsequent point of departure for Agamben's reflections on the origin of language, as well as theology's repeated attempts to articulate it. As he describes it, this mythogeme is the ontological ground of language itself, one that likewise appears in the earliest Christian mystical texts (Agamben, *Language*, 63). Again, the history of theology becomes imperative for Agamben as he performs his critical philosophical examination of its

mystical traditions. But it is also necessary for him to examine this theme if he is to conceive of this exercise as one of being both a philosophy of theology and a theology of philosophy, hence situating his reflections within the wide berth of the history of philosophy and the 'end of metaphysics' often suspected as lurking within its core (see Phillips and Ruhr). Within this context, the distance between mysticism and the western philosophical legacy of nihilism is quickly closed, though it is also re-opened from another angle and explored anew. Any attempt to think the negative foundations of speech will be a return to metaphysics proper, even if it is a metaphysics of nihilism, or a metaphysics not immediately recognizable as such.

Here, as he puts it, 'the Abyss (*buthos*)—incomprehensible, unformed, and eternally pre-existent—contains within itself a thought (*Ennoia*) that is silent, *Sigé*. And this "silence" is the primary, negative foundation of revelation and of *logos*, the "mother" of all that is formed from the Abyss' (63). Echoing what were to be the seminal biblical texts on the origin of the *logos* (Proverbs 8.22ff and John 1.1ff), Agamben, without entering into the debate on Christ's nature (*homoousios*), is content to merely circumscribe the boundaries of a silent abyss that could be said to contain God's name, to give rise to the *logos* and to all revelation. This abyss, however, is no small characterization of a rich theological tradition; rather, it forms the basis of how God's self is possibly comprehended. In this sense, there is little difference between language and God, at least insofar as the silence in question 'negatively unveils the arch-original dimension of the Abyss to sense and to signification', and as such becomes 'the mystical foundation of every possible revelation and every language, the original language of God as Abyss (in Christian terms, the figure of the dwelling of *logos* in *arche*, the original place of language)' (63-4).

Ranging over a broad tradition of – and often not discriminating between – ancient Gnostic texts and apocryphal works, Agamben is contented to conclude these reflections with

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reference to a strain of mystical thought found in Augustine's *De Trinitate*, where the 'silent

Word' comes to dwell 'as unspeakable in the intellect of the Father' (64). Or, as another

perspective on the subject would have it, 'In its silent "spiritual prayer," the Syrian mystical

tradition will seize upon this experience, recounting how a praying man arrives at a place where

the language is "more internal than words" and "more profound than lips," a language of

"silence" and "stupor"' (65). This portrayal of 'silence as Abyss' is what allows him to conclude

that the distinctions often made between orthodoxy and heresy, at least in this regard, do not hold

as such; indeed '…there is no absolute opposition between the Gnostic *Sigé* and the Christian

logos, which are never completely separated' (65). The common ground between them, their

shared proximity as it were, is a silence existing as

> …the negative foundation of *logos*, its taking place and its unknown dwelling (according to Johannine theology), in the *arche* that is the Father. This dwelling of *logos* in *arche* (like that of *Sigé* in *Buthos*) is an abysmal dwelling – that is, ungrounded – and Trinitarian theology never manages to fully emerge from this abysmalness. (65)

Though he provides no further comment here upon these Trinitarian claims, Agamben's

presentation of the relation between *logos* and *arche* is fundamental for the structuring of

western thought as a whole, and it is what will enable him later to once again pick up this strand

of Trinitarian thought, as we will see in a moment (see Agamben, *Kingdom*). Here, however,

culture itself, in all its varied and multiple forms, rests upon this silent unpronounceable abyss of

dwelling from which everything else proceeds, akin only to Aquinas' 'infinite and indeterminate

sea' that is God and from which all else (and not just the Trinity) proceeds. All creation is to be

found here (see Agamben, 'Creation and Salvation', *Nudities*). As he phrases it,

> It is important to observe here how the "conscience" of Western philosophy rests originally on a mute foundation (a Voice), and it will never be able to fully resolve this silence. By rigorously establishing the limits of that which can be known in what is said, logic takes up this silent Voice and transforms it into the negative foundation of all knowledge. On the other hand, ethics experiences it as that which must necessarily

> remain unsaid in what is said. In both cases, however, the final foundation remains rigorously informulable. (*Language* 91; cf. Agamben, *Remnants*)

More than a 'veiled theology', it is important to note, Agamben's remarks here appear as a nod in the direction of the very grounds upon which theology is deemed possible, the point of its articulation within an all-too-human thought. It is a solid movement perhaps best situated within the Kantian search for religious structures of thought, yet with a linguistic twist, that which aims toward depicting the grounds of possibility for the existence of theology *tout court*.[7]

The stakes for understanding the significance of this import are great. Agamben proposes nothing less than a reformulation of western thought, or that which was once heavily based upon its onto-theological foundations. In fact, 'The mystical is nothing but the unspeakable foundation; that is, the negative foundation of onto-theology' (Agamben, *Language*, 91). The task of profanation, one of the central recurring terms in Agamben's philosophical corpus, is here opened up by the erasure of what presents itself as the mystical: 'Only a liquidation of the mystical can open up the field to a thought (or language) that thinks (speaks) beyond the Voice and its *sigetics*; that dwells, that is, not on an unspeakable foundation, but in the infancy (*in-fari*) of man' (91). The conclusion is stark: this side of our infancy, the mystical has no currency, no economy in which it could be said to function. It is only an opening to our 'infantile dwelling' in language which characterizes this age in which we live, the result of an 'extreme nihilistic furor' which has seen the liquidation of all ontotheological masks (92). In turn, and as a result of this context in which we are immersed, metaphysics must make an attempt to 'think the unthinkable', to comprehend its own negative foundations, but not to solidify them into a dangerous ontic political form, one that operates with traditional representational limits, as Heidegger had once

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[7] Agamben's 'linguistic turn' engaged in relation to Kant is something which he is inspired to pursue based on the reflections of Walter Benjamin on language. See, among other places, Agamben, *Infancy*, 50-1.

been tempted to do (see Žižek 7f). This is a case of language expressing its own existence; in short, to think that which he will term 'the Absolute'.

Indeed, thinking 'the Absolute' becomes, for Agamben, a thinking beyond conceptual oppositions, beyond the scissions and negativity that mark our dwelling in this world (our being-in-the-world) (Agamben, 'Paradigm', *Signature*). It is that which returns to its own place and which he will equate directly with the appearance of the Voice, for 'Only the Voice with its marvelous muteness shows its inaccessible place, and so the ultimate task of philosophy is necessarily to think the Voice' (Agamben, *Language* 92). This is an 'ultimate task' indeed, one that comes in many ways to mirror the Hegelian quest for the 'absolute spirit', which in this case *is* language. To think the 'Absolute' then, beyond any signified conceptual oppositions, appears as the primary initiative embedded in the search for Voice. And the *Absolute*, as it traverses the history of philosophical thought, becomes a process of crossing over both 'negativity and scission in order to return to its own place' (92). This is the unending journey that characterizes the potential of our existence, or its 'pure potentiality' as it were (Agamben, 'On Potentiality', *Potentialities*; see also Bartoloni).

Much like Aristotle before him, and as his later development of the concept of 'potentiality' will only further cement, Agamben turns to the problematic latent within the basic principles of thought in order to delve further into the line between potentiality and actuality, to move closer toward the former in the form of the *Absolute* which remains *Absolute* only through avoiding its concretion in actuality. For Agamben, this will mean that

> To think the Absolute *signifies*, thus, to think that which, through a process of "absolution," has been led back to its ownmost property, to itself, to its own *solitude*, as to its own *custom*. For this reason, the Absolute always implies a voyage, an abandonment of the originary place, an alienation and a being-outside. (Agamben, *Language*, 92)

This is an abandonment that is at the same time an 'absolution', something which will later be developed in his work under the banner of 'profanation' (see Agamben, *Profanations*). It is also what he considers, following the German poet Novalis, to be a form of 'nostalgia', or the 'desire to be at home everywhere' and thereby 'to recognize oneself in being-other' (92). It is only because philosophy is not 'at home with itself' that it must entertain the journey back to itself, and this is exactly the process of 'absolution' we search after (and often unknowingly), another theological term re-appropriated for its profane and entirely immanent usage. Implying the full theological cycle that would see human existence through from its entrance into language and the original sin of signification, to its absolution (as a sort of 'forgiveness' to this state of sin) upon return to its infancy, Agamben circulates a pseudo-theological grammar that could be said, in many ways, to hinge upon the experience of being 'born again', or perhaps even 'resurrected', here expressed as a continuous act of returning to our infancy (see Agamben, *Idea*, 98; *Infancy*).

What we again seem to find here, as elsewhere in his work, is an immanently profaned *re-birth to the theological itself*, one where the terms are de-stabilized and inverted, providing a significant reflection on the shift in perceiving God as immanent rather than transcendent, or as a form of transcendence-in-immanence or immanence-in-transcendence perhaps (Agamben, *Time*, 25). Rather than perceive philosophy as *ancilla theologiae* (the 'handmaiden') to theology, as Aquinas among others was wont to do, this movement is one that would rather posit philosophy as that which points toward the realm of the divine and theology as a purely immanent exercise, yet with an absolute gulf still existing between them. Philosophy remains in the domain of the immanent and transcendence remains muted, a silent partner on the other side of the abyss. Theology is therefore historically perceivable as an attempt to formulate this chasm between the immanent and the transcendent, but not strictly established as a discourse *on* the transcendent as

such. Rather it exists today as a sort of ruin, a failed historical (and political) attempt to bridge an unbridgeable gap.

Thus, when referring to these processes of a purely immanent absolution, Agamben can determine that philosophy is capable of doing what theology is not, of providing us with a 'revelation' of its own:

> Philosophy is this voyage, the human word's *nostos* (return) from itself to itself, which, abandoning its own habitual dwelling place in the voice, opens itself to the terror of nothingness and, at the same time, to the marvel of being; and after becoming meaningful discourse, it returns in the end, as *absolute* wisdom, to the Voice. Only in this way can thought finally be at home and "absolved" of the scission that threatened it from there where it always already was. Only in the Absolute can the word, which experienced "homesickness" (*Heimweh*) and the "pain of return" (*nost-algia*), which experienced the negative always already reigning in it habitual dwelling place, now truly reach its own beginning in the Voice. (Agamben, *Language*, 93)

The Voice can be found in our immanent dwelling, and only established thus as 'Absolute'. This is the *ethos* of humanity, that which, according to Heraclitus, and as Agamben tells us, lacerates and divides into a demonic (*daiomai*, *daimon*) scission that must be fought and resolved. Philosophy, in many ways functioning here as if a quasi-'theological' paradigm in its own right, becomes for Agamben, that which guides and renders meaningful the search throughout life for this return to our origins, our infancy.

Philosophy is hence considered to be a dialogue between humanity and its Voice, to be an embodied search for this Voice, one that faces the certainty of death at the same time as it attempts to 'assure language of its place' (95). It is only through the death of the Voice that something like the end of philosophy could be considered, and this would likewise be the only possible way to experience a language without negativity or death. What it could also be, however, is the starting point of a theology *that has yet to be written*. The possibility of such an experience – no matter how difficult it might seem to formulate – is what appears to fascinate

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and center Agamben's philosophical quest. His articulation of this goal is consequently rather sharp: 'What is a language without Voice, a word that is not grounded in any meaning? This is something that we must still learn to think' (95). And if this goal is achievable, then '…with the disappearance of the Voice, that "essential relation" between language and death that dominates the history of metaphysics must also disappear' (95). Only then can *something-else* appear.[8]

In short, theology is reborn as a purely profane endeavor. And so, as the task of profanation, or living in a world marked by God's absence, will later encapsulate, this experience of a language severed from negativity and death is one wherein humanity must regain a connection with its primordial infancy. It must face the terror of remaining within the absence of Voice, face in fact its own silence: 'To exist in language without being called there by any Voice, simply to die without being called by death, is, perhaps the most abysmal experience; but this is precisely, for man, also his most *habitual* experience, his *ethos*, his dwelling…' (96). As his reflections upon the history of theology have already illustrated quite well, this is a state that was '…always already presented in the history of metaphysics as demonically divided into the living and language, nature and culture, ethics and logic, and therefore only attainable in the negative articulation of a Voice' (96). Breaking free of the Voice would posit a humanity freed from God, from the Name-of-the-Father that calls us into a realm of signified things and which constitutes the 'original sin' of human-being (see Agamben, *Infancy*, 32; *Community*, 80). Thus it is with the eclipse of the Voice that it becomes possible for humanity to experience a more radical poverty of world than hitherto known (Agamben, *Language*, 96). We must share in the animal's poverty of world, enter the Open space between things and realize ourselves anew

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[8] It should be noted here, however, that it is precisely this issue of appearance (and of representation then) that needs to be nuanced in relation to Agamben's own formulations. This is where, I would add, the Pauline 'division of (representational) divisons' plays such a fundamental role in Agamben's attempt to go beyond – though without discarding completely – the realm of representations on the whole.

(Agamben, *Open*, 49-56). But it is a poverty, no doubt, that is also humanity's most natural state of dwelling and to which we must and will return to over and again. This, and little else, is what actually serves to situate the various discourses of his 'homo sacer' series (see Agamben, *Homo*; *State*; *Remnants*). It is likewise the basis for what Lorezno Chiesa, among others, has referred to as Agamben's 'Franciscan' (because 'poor' or 'weak') ontology (Chiesa 162). As Agamben will himself speculate, it is perhaps within this loss, within this poverty, that humanity can sever the 'chain of tragic guilt' that seems to exist without resolve, and enter a land free from pain.

Utilizing a Greek term that was to become so fond to Derrida (Derrida, *Name*), Agamben foresees how

> This *chora*, this country without pain where no voice is spoken at death, is perhaps that which, beyond the Voice, remains to be thought as the most human dimension, the only place where something like a *me phunai* is possible for man, a not having been born and not having nature. (Agamben, *Language*, 96)

This is a utopian dream, a hope that human nature can get beyond cultural significations, beyond political representations and enter into an unforeseen world that can only be conceived as rightly theological inasmuch as it is (paradoxically) free of the theological. In what might be the simplest clarification on what paradise could in fact be: '…here language…returns to that which never was and to that which it never left, and thus it takes the simple form of a habit' (97). For Agamben, of course, this state seems only just out of reach, something nearly obtainable that should yet be here. It is an eschatological dimension within being itself that will bear a strong affinity with the writings of Saint Paul, though perhaps more strongly with the early Paul, the new apostle for whom the Kingdom of God was so near at hand that he advised the earliest churches not to invest too heavily in their worldly life (see, e.g., his advice on marriage in 1 Corinthians 7).

This is to conceive of the end of philosophy as the beginning of a theology of sorts, an entirely immanent theology that is severed from all false notions of sacrality which have come to dominate our world through their imposition and alignment with worldly forces of sovereignty – ontotheological notions based solely on the interplay of the sovereign and the *homo sacer* as constitutive of the political domain in which they were conceived (see Agamben, *Homo*; *State*). This previous model involved a theology of sacrifice and its requisite blood, and which functioned solely on the principles of (political) representation and exclusion. The profanation of such models, on the other hand, and as Agamben continues to edge closer toward, provides a theology almost unrecognizable to the historical discipline of theology proper because it is not wedded to a sovereign-transcendent political paradigm. Though this may appear to some like a headlong plunge into a form of political (or even theological) nihilism[9], in many ways, what Agamben offers is a revelation for those who are able to see it, for those with ears to hear it, a dismantling of our most fundamental representational contents and yet a presentation (or *revelation*) of our true nature.

Revelation, or the name of God as presupposition of the existence of language

Revelation, for Agamben, is not a theological matter of little worth today, in many ways shattered and left in pieces only to be discarded by the secuarlized world in which we live. To conceive of it as such is to grossly misrepresent the trajectory of his thought as it bends toward

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[9] See the charge of 'political nihilism' in Agamben's work has been levied by Ernesto Laclau, 'Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy?' and William Rasch, 'From Sovereign Ban to Banning Sovereignty' both found in Calarco and DeCaroli, *Agamben*, 22 and 107 respectively. Catherine Mills also draws attention to the viability of his end to politics in the conclusion to her *The Philosophy of Agamben*.

its ultimate goal of profanation, something drawn by him in stark contrast to secularization, as well as the (often theological) materials with which he works, so diligently preserving their historical and conceptual implications (Agamben, *Profanations*, 77ff). Indeed, as he will there succinctly put it, it is the structure of revelation that conditions 'the very possibility of knowledge in general' (Agamben, *Potentialities*, 39). Thus, again and again, Agamben will approach the bedrock of our linguistic being, the origin of language and its potential for exposition through the richness of the western theological tradition, revealing it for what it is and with the full consequences of this revelation on display. In this regard, Agamben chooses to focus his remarks on the manner in which language coincides with religious pronouncements on the nature of revelation, finding no complete similarity between them and yet no great difference either: that is to say, revelation expresses nothing if not the existence of language itself (Agamben, *Sacrament*). For this reason, 'It is this radical difference of the plane of revelation that Christian theologians express by saying that the sole content of revelation is Christ himself, that is, the Word of God, and that Jewish theologians affirm in stating that God's revelation is his name' (Agamben, *Potentialities*, 39). Both traditions in fact participate in the same essential task, the return of all our discourses to the foundation of language. For Agamben, 'That there is language is as certain as it is incomprehensible, and this incomprehensibility and this certainty constitute faith and revelation' (42).

In these foundational terms, he conceives of language as the 'nullification and deferral of itself', hence rendering the signifier as 'nothing other than the irreducible cipher' of the 'ungroundedness' at the heart of religious thought (44). This is a de-stabilization of traditional religious frameworks indeed, but also perhaps their only hope of survival. In this sense, he is able to underscore the remarkableness of a recent shift in the borders separating philosophy and

theology, for, though it was once thought that theology determined its content to be 'incomprehensible' to reason, it now stands to reason that the 'incomprehensible' object is the very foundation of all comprehension itself (44-5). Despite this being the general trend of recent thought, however, Agamben, seeks to go beyond this formulation and to reawaken the true philosophical impetus to free thought of all presuppositions, even from the incomprehensibility that nonetheless remains along the margins of our world, supporting the world as it were (Agamben, *Idea*, 32ff). In this manner, Agamben intends to be free of theology, or at least of that historical discourse which has, and would, continue to attempt to comprehend what is, in the end, incomprehensible.

The Wittgensteinian proposition 'How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God does not reveal himself in the world' (Wittgenstein, §6.432) thereby gives Agamben the chance to attach new meaning to the claim that 'God is dead', or rather than 'dead', *unknown* just outside our world, which in a practical sense amounts perhaps much to the same thing. Our world is to be profaned, on track toward its 'absolute profanation', and it is *as if* God were really dead, an *as if* that may or may not be expressing reality *as such* (see Johnson). This equivocity on the existence of God is really a claim intertwined with what could be called 'God's abandonment' of the world, something intriguingly close to Jesus' dying words on the cross ('My God, my God, why have you forsaken [or *abandoned*] me?'). As Agamben himself will substantiate the point, 'If God was the name of language, "God is dead" can only mean that there is no longer a name for language. The fulfilled revelation of language is a word completely abandoned by God' (Agamben, *Potentialities*, 45). This is an attempt to reside in the sphere of the profane, of the world abandoned by God, but also the space where the revelation of language is fulfilled, something which more than casually reflects the claims of the

logos to be a fulfillment of the revelation which preceded it and which was seemingly

accomplished at a moment when God appeared to be absent (or 'dead'). Hence, it would seem to

be a fundamentally *Christian* theological presupposition that defines the structure of Agamben's

thought here, inasmuch as it is also a theological presupposition, he might otherwise argue,

which attempts to disclose the (more) fundamental fact (in that it is ontologically prior) of our

linguistic existence prior to any onto-theological presuppositions themselves.

In what appears to mimic the phenomenon of glossolalia (or 'speaking in tongues'), and

perhaps then also the tongues which are spoken at the origins of the Church in the moments soon

after the *logos* had been fulfilled and thus departed (Acts 2.1ff), Agamben ponders how

humanity is left on its own to search for a way to communicate meaningfully – that is, '…human

beings are thrown into language without having a voice or a divine word to guarantee them a

possibility of escape from the infinite play of meaningful propositions' (45). There is only a

radical sense of alienation, coupled indissociably with a profound sense of mission and energy,

the rising perhaps of the potentiality of our being which yet refuses to become a concrete form in

actuality. For this reason, the overlap between the seminal, biblical moments after the death of

Jesus (the 'death of God') and its alignment with Agamben's work are not to be underestimated,

despite his at times only vague references to it. For Agamben, this is the moment indeed when

no decision (historically aligned with the rule of sovereignty) need be made, and the gamble to

move toward our infancy must be realized:

> Thus we finally find ourselves alone with our words; for the first time we are truly alone
> with language, abandoned without any final foundation. This is the Copernican
> revolution that the thought of our time inherits from nihilism: we are the first human
> beings who have become completely conscious of language. For the first time, what
> preceding generations called God, Being, spirit, unconscious appear to us as what they
> are: names for language. (45-6)

Perhaps this is also why the apostle Paul will later on appeal so strongly to Agamben, for it is Paul who appears most forcefully to grind all representations to a halt through an entrance into what could only surface as a kind of cultural death (Agamben, *Time*, 47ff; Badiou). This is the apostle indeed who considered all representations to be as nothing, and who considered the ultimate act of fidelity to the *logos* to be an embraceable death in imitation of this loss (Galatians 3.28; Romans 7). This is, as much as it was, a welcoming of the abandonment of God in order to work beyond speech and rather through the activity of the Spirit (Romans 8).

If Agamben is correct, then what Paul was actually advancing was a genuine profundity for religious thought historically, beyond the bounds of any one particular tradition, an embracing of the 'nihilistic' tendencies that would see all political representations ground to a halt, their dialectics brought to a standstill in time. Like the curtain in the Temple that tore in half only to reveal that the sacred dwelling place of God was empty (Matthew 27.51) – an act of profanation if ever there was one – the only thing to be shown is the emptiness within, the fact that nothing was there except the words we had formed around the absent center in order to demarcate a 'sacred space' in the first place.

This would be, for Agamben, the birth of a 'religious nihilism' in Paul that *should* only become more central to religious thought over time (see, among others, Vattimo). As he elsewhere stresses the importance of this fundamental shift,

> Nihilism experiences this very abandonment of the word by God. But it interprets the extreme revelation of language in the sense that there is nothing to reveal, that the truth of language is that it unveils the Nothing of all things. The absence of a metalanguage thus appears as the negative form of the presupposition, and the Nothing as the final veil, the final name of language. (Agamben, *Potentialities*, 47)

This last act of the Gospels, one ultimately of blasphemy, sacrilege and indeed profanation, was the essential gesture of a religious tradition brought to its pinnacle expression through the full

disclosure of the *logos* that yet remains *completely immanent* to our world. Under these

conditions, we may greet the *logos* as if nothing were transcendent to this encounter, because,

truly, there *is* nothing transcendent within it. The *logos* is all that matters, as many a Christian

commentator has been at great pains to demonstrate. But this realization is also a self-conscious

revelation that Agamben cannot simply contend is a subtle retooling of the theological tradition,

allowing it thus to continue along *as if* this revelation counted for little or nothing. As he

summarizes the stakes,

> This is why for us, any philosophy, any religion, or any knowledge that has not become
> conscious of this turn belongs irrevocably to the past. The veils that theology, ontology,
> and psychology cast over the human have now fallen away, and we can return them to
> their proper place in language. We now look without veils upon language, which, having
> breathed out all divinity and all unsayability, is now wholly revealed, absolutely in the
> beginning. (46)

This is an interesting return to the *logos* in *archē* within a western context wherein the 'religions'

of the past are being jettisoned at a great pace. Here, for Agamben, there is only a return to our

infancy, to our 'being-without-God' that is the absolute profanation of the world, one that may

yet harbor a silent transcendence along its borders, forever inaccessible yet grounding everything

that is said, one that exists, if at all, *as if* it did not really matter at all. This is to behold a

revision of theology that perhaps appears to some to amount to a practical form of atheism.

Perhaps. Or, it might appear as an absolute kenotic self-emptying of God to the world, perhaps

even *becoming* the world itself as it were. And these two positions are as radically similar as

they are *dis*-similar.

In effect, what this situation testifies to is the fact that there are at least two theologies at

work in Agamben's thought: the historical theology of the Church, with the veils it seeks to

throw over the eyes of humanity due to its failure to accurately articulate the 'other side' of our

infancy, one in league with a certain historical legacy of ontotheology, *and* yet another

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'theology', the *possibility* for another theology, one that remains as obscure as it is informulable, and yet perhaps the only true path open to the possibility of a divine presence in our world.

In the end, Agamben seems to point most directly toward the 'idea of language' as a 'vision of language itself', *as such*, as an 'immediate mediation' which is the only way to reach the infancy of an 'unpresupposed principle', a 'pure potentiality' within our being (47). We are returned, in no uncertain terms, to the thoughts of Aristotle, to Aristotle's thoughts on thought, to the thinking of thought itself and the principle of the 'unmoved mover' behind it all, the original ground of a form of deism or theism upon which Agamben appears in many regards to leave open as a genuine possibility. As he formulates this 'belief' in relation to the work of the early Wittgenstein, a reference point to which he returns again and again in contemplation of the linguistic immanence of our being: 'The proposition that God is not revealed *in* the world could also be expressed by the following statement: What is properly divine is that the world does not reveal God. (Hence this is not the "bitterest" proposition of the *Tractatus*)' (Agamben, *Community*, 91). Not the 'bitterest' proposition perhaps because it leaves open the chance that God still does exist though there is no way of knowing whether or not any such conjecture is possible. This in fact remains the silence of that which would be transcendent (Agamben, *Time*, 25). Thus also are the terms traditionally reserved for theological dogma displaced and inverted, illustrating again the proximity of Agamben's thought to theology, but also his absolute distance. As he himself will demonstrate it,

> Revelation does not mean revelation of the sacredness of the world, but only revelation of its irreparably profane character. (The name always and only names things.) Revelation consigns the world to profanation and thingness—and isn't this precisely what has happened? The possibility of salvation begins only at this point; it is the salvation of the profanity of the world, of its being-thus. (Agamben, *Community*, 90)

And this remark is immediately followed by another parenthetical one: 'This is why those who try to make the world and life sacred again are just as impious as those who despair about its profanation'.[10]

There is a new theological horizon opened up by this disclosure, one that is not as 'new' perhaps as it might seem: it is the only option left to this form of rationalism, one that Spinoza had detected many years ago and which is the only sufficient successor to the deistic model of Enlightenment thought (Spinoza). This option is an immanent materialism, an immanent theology, as Antonio Negri has noted concerning Agamben's position (Negri).[11] It is perhaps even a form of pantheism or panentheism, as difficult to discern in Agamben's work as it was in Spinoza's (see Dombrowski; Keller). Yet everything in Agamben's thought seems only to draw towards this conclusion: 'The world—insofar as it is absolutely, irreparably profane—is God' (Agamben, *Community*, 90). And, perhaps, this is the real revelation that Agamben has been working toward all along.

Conclusion

As a theorist who works directly to end all forms of cultural and political representation, to bring about a pure presentation beyond representation as a philosophical task (see Ross), Agamben here comes closest to those theological frameworks (mainly feminist and postcolonial)

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[10] And, he continues, 'This is why Protestant theology, which clearly separates the profane world from the divine, is both wrong and right: right because the world has been consigned irrevocably by revelation (by language) to the profane sphere; wrong because it will be saved precisely insofar as it is profane'.

[11] There is, of course, a deep resonance in Agamben's thought with that of Gilles Deleuze precisely on this point. See Deleuze, *Spinoza*; as well as his essay on 'Immanence: A Life'. Agamben deals with these texts in his essay 'Absolute Immanence', *Potentialities*.

which would likewise envision some model of pantheism or panentheism as preferable to the transcendent-male-sovereign ones that have already dominated centuries of theological discourse. Indeed, feminist theology, for its part, has consistently looked toward pan(en)theism as a way to open up humanity to the immanence of our gendered being (Daly; Jantzen; Welch), something which theology as a whole has been loathe to acknowledge, but for which Agamben's formulations might provide yet another avenue of expression. The problem of merging such a view with an historically revealed religion, however, remains a central problematic needing to be more fully resolved (Surin; Crockett). Yet it is a problematic that Agamben's work situates within the confines of traditional onto(theo)logical arguments, thus, in a sense, attempting to provide a more 'solid' foundation outside these confinements than those critical-discourses which would only seek to de-stablize and not re-construct the traditions they dismantle (see Dickinson, *Canon*). For this reason, Agamben's theological profitability, I would conjecture, should only increase over time, offering a plausible ontological re-working for theological claims of representation, including those most dogmatic representations (i.e. of Christ's nature, of the Trinity, etc.) that seem perhaps otherwise forever unalterable.

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