

Petrified life

Adorno and Agamben

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In his 1965 lectures on metaphysics, Adorno maintained that ‘the form in which metaphysics impinges on us urgently today’ is ‘the question whether it is still possible to live’.¹ Such a question is speculative, since the possibility of life is taken to have migrated to the margins of human experience. For Adorno, life in postwar capitalist societies was a life that ‘does not live’.²

The contemporary philosopher who has most insistently taken up this theme of a dissolution or destruction of experience in late modernity, encapsulated by Auschwitz, is Giorgio Agamben. Agamben’s work on bare life, Auschwitz and the decay of experience displays a number of affinities with Adorno’s critical project. They share both an account of damaged or bare life in modernity as an empty space in which power can produce and effect responses, and an attempt to delineate forms of critical subjectivity which do not rely on vital notions of desire. Both Agamben and Adorno want to recuperate a concept of ‘life that does not live’, which, as a form of life in which something like a bare life *cannot* be isolated, provides a position for a critical subjectivity. The shared normative structure of these philosophies lies in their attempt to trace this position immanently, within the delineation of the features of a damaged life. Adorno poses it as a ‘new categorical imperative’: humans must attempt to ‘arrange their thoughts and actions so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself’.³

This new categorical imperative becomes a meeting point for metaphysics and politics in the attempt speculatively to construct, through the immanent degradation of life, the possibility of a life that could transcend such immanence. Such a metaphysical project hinges upon a constellation of modal concepts – *possibility*, *potentiality* and *exigency* – and the ways in which they relate to the concept of life. For Adorno, it involved a return of metaphysics to materialism. In this article, I consider these three modal concepts in Adorno,

and Agamben’s work. Both Agamben and Adorno are concerned with a form of experience that is not a sovereign transgression of the bounds of the actual, but instead holds itself in reserve in relation to any project of liberation, whether this be configured in terms of a bursting of the bonds of reified existence through desire, or an affirmation of a life beyond the human. Both thinkers also attempt to resist the nihilistic tendencies of an intrinsically negative thought, through a refusal to embrace pure negativity as such.

This nihilism is a temptation intrinsic to the concept of a ‘life that does not live’: the temptation to emphasize in the denial of life a means beyond life. Such a formulation has a dialectical air about it, but ultimately, if it is thought without mediation, it becomes a simple identification with the forms of power that have produced such a situation. It becomes so because it affirms the site of bare life as the route through which, and by which, redemption occurs. It is an affirmation of the redemptive value of extreme degradation. Adorno introduces an element of this in his embrace of a denial of life as a form of freedom, but then withdraws it:

one might well compare this situation to that of the philosophy of late antiquity, in which, in response to the same question (the possibility of life), people fell back on expedients such as ataraxy, that is, the deadening of all affects, just to be capable of living at all.... I would say that even this standpoint, although it emphatically embraces the idea of the freedom of the individual, nevertheless has a moment of narrow mindedness in the sense that it renders absolute the entrapment of human beings by the totality, and thus sees no other possibility than to submit.⁴

My purpose in reading Agamben and Adorno together on this question is to try and resist the proximity to Adorno of many of Agamben’s positions. The article traces three main differences between Adorno’s

and Agamben's thinking of the speculative experience of life – differences that arise from the extreme proximity in their theories of possibility, potentiality and exigency.⁵ These three main differences concern: (1) Agamben's emphasis on a Heideggerian concept of pure possibility as the opening of experience, as opposed to Adorno's Aristotelian conception of potentiality; (2) Agamben's metaphysics of Being versus Adorno's materialist metaphysics; (3) Agamben's pure philosophy of redemption, in distinction from Adorno's secular, negative philosophy of redemption (a philosophy that dissolves into theology, as opposed to an inverse theology).

My supplementary thesis is that an adequate way of thinking the political and the normative as intrinsically linked to metaphysical experience can only be developed once the trajectory of Adorno's account is differentiated from certain tendencies within it that have become apparent through its similarities with some of Agamben's writing. Agamben thus functions as an evil demon here. He represents the temptation to read Adorno in a way that can only lead us astray. This is a genuine temptation, not least in so far as the convergences between their thought suggest that they might offer a common alternative to a (Nietzschean–Bergsonian–) Deleuzian metaphysics of life. Adorno's and Agamben's work differs from Deleuze's in two main ways. First, it is a thinking of life that centres on the human, rather than life beyond the human. Second, it continues to rely on concepts of potentiality/possibility, in contrast to a conception of the virtual that attempts to destroy the concept of possibility as it has been traditionally thought. My comparison of the different modal concepts at play in Adorno's and Agamben's work is part of an attempt to construct a framework for thinking the relation between metaphysics and life that continues to deploy the concept of possibility.

Possibility, potentiality, matter

Both Adorno's and Agamben's concepts of possibility refer back to Aristotelian discussions of the concept, and these readings determine the different paths that the concept of possibility takes in their respective thought. Ultimately, it is a question of matter, in that the salient importance of Aristotle's conception of possibility for Adorno is that it is tied to matter, rather than form, while Agamben does not interpret or refer to this element of Aristotelian theory. Although to refer to 'Aristotelian theory' in general here is somewhat disingenuous, as the concept of possibility, and indeed the form/matter distinction, appear in different guises

in Aristotle's work, and are interpreted in different ways by commentators on Aristotle.⁶ The aim of my argument is not to appraise different readings in terms of a correct interpretation, but to explore how these different emphases in reading Aristotle give rise to divergent constructions of the concept of possibility.

Aristotle's conception of possibility relates to the difference between *dynamis* and *energeia*, which Agamben reads as an opposition of potentiality to actuality. This opposition is important for Agamben since it is through it that he wants to interrogate the meaning of possibility within human action: what it means when someone says 'I can, I cannot.'⁷ The problem for Agamben's reading is that he appropriates these terms from Aristotle's account of possibility, without a sense of their distinctive Aristotelian usage. For Agamben, possibility is prior to actuality, and the problem is how the possible becomes actual. Formally, the problem becomes an attempt to think a form of possibility that does not exhaust its potentiality in its actualization. However, there is no recognition that for Aristotle *actuality is prior to possibility*. In his *Metaphysics* Aristotle writes: 'We have discussed the various senses of "prior", and it is clear that actuality is prior to potentiality.'⁸ This is clearly not the relation between possibility and actuality that we are usually dealing with, for example in terms of causal relations. The reason for Aristotle's distinctiveness here is his attempt to transform the Platonic idea, and preserve elements of its timelessness, but to relate it materially to a world that changes.

The Platonic idea is related to form, to actuality, but this actuality as form is prior to all possibilities which in some way exist in an unfulfilled state in search of a form. As Aristotle writes: 'For of non-existent things, some exist potentially, but they do not exist, because they do not exist in fulfilment.'⁹ This paradoxical statement only makes some sense if related to the distinction between *dynamis* and *energeia*, which does *not* map straightforwardly onto a distinction between possibility and actuality. *Energeia* is form in so far as it is realized in matter, a force which as immanent idea moves matter towards a realization. Form is a substrate, a substance of which the stuff of matter partakes. This is the transposition of Platonic Ideas into Aristotelian philosophy. The Platonic Forms or Ideas exist, but not transcendent to matter, rather as immanent to their development. Therefore *dynamis* as pure possibility is the thought of matter without form, existing in pure possibility awaiting a form. For Aristotle, it is the ideas as substantial immanent forms that have a higher reality than pure possibility



as matter, and need to be thought as prior, but in relation, to possibility. This is why some non-existent things can exist potentially, in terms of Aristotle's formulation, but not actually: because they have not been formed, they are not fulfilled. Adorno thus formulates Aristotle's conception of possibility as a reversal of our understanding of the relation between possibility and actuality: 'To state the position paradoxically, reality in Aristotle's philosophy corresponds to what we call possibility and possibility to what we call reality.'¹⁰ For Aristotle, *energeia*, as form, is the higher form of reality, whereas pure possibility, as matter, is not in accordance with the real or the actual.

Agamben's concept of potentiality and its relation to possibility is not clearly delineated in his writings. He notes that Aristotle refers to two kinds of potentiality. First, there is a potentiality which is developmental in nature, and refers to inherent human capacities that can develop over time. The second form of potentiality relates to a capacity which a person has that can be actualized or not actualized, such as the potential of the poet to write a poem.¹¹ Such a potentiality is related to a contingency, that an action may or may not take place. Such a contingency can be read in terms of either the fact that certain actions take place, but are not necessary, or in terms of an indeterminateness, a contingency in which something can be in one way or another without either having a certain prevalence or priority.¹² For Aristotle, contingency is related to a certain potentiality which can either

become actual or not. That which has a potentiality to be also has a potentiality not to be. In this sense there is a pure possibility as potentiality, which is this radical contingency. For Aristotle, possibility is related to contingency, as each potentiality can fail at any time to be actualized. However, as we have seen, this notion of potentiality resides in a particular conception of the relation between matter and form.

Both Adorno and Agamben stress the concept of *dynamis* in their reading of Aristotle: the concept of pure potentiality or possibility, as a form of radical contingency. However, for Agamben this is a radical contingency related in some way to the *will*. Agamben talks about potentiality in terms of the alternatives 'I can, I cannot.' Agamben moves between readings of *De Anima* and the *Metaphysics*. Perhaps this is why his concept of potentiality does not relate to the context upon which Adorno draws in his reading of the *Metaphysics*' concept of matter as pure possibility. However, for both thinkers, the central issue is that of pure possibility and its mode of existence as pure possibility. Agamben reads this as 'a potentiality that is not simply the potential to do this or that thing but potential to not-do, potential not to pass into actuality.'¹³ He interprets a certain phrase of Aristotle's as stating that all potentiality is an impotentiality, all potentiality exists as potentiality in the possibility that it might not realize itself as actual. The Aristotle is currently translated as: 'What is potential is capable of not being in actuality. What is potential can both be and not be, for the same is potential both to be and not to be.'¹⁴

Agamben reads this passage as the 'originary figure of potentiality, which we may now define with his own words as the *potential not to be*'.¹⁵ He does not read this passage in the context of the relation of form to matter. In that context, the potentiality not to be is a form of contingency related to the fact that a matter might not find its form. Agamben wants to relate this to a concept of possibility in terms of the will and a passage from potentiality to actuality in terms of the act. But the relation between potentiality and actuality in Aristotle's text here is not related to the problem of a passing over from potentiality to actuality in terms of action, but in terms of the relation of matter as pure possibility to form as its immanent fulfilment. Agamben's characterization of the problem of potentiality as that which is 'truly potential is thus what has exhausted all its impotentiality in bringing it wholly into the act as such' configures the passage from potentiality to actuality in the form of will. This is not immediately present in the relation of form and

matter, as actuality and possibility in Aristotle. The result, for Agamben, is a thinking of possibility as pure negativity, as the existence of a pure negativity as a *hesitancy*, an affirmative concept of negativity. In his concept of freedom he tries to think freedom in relation to this potentiality not to be, a potentiality to hold itself in reserve.

The figure that represents this potentiality without action for Agamben is the fictional character in Hermann Melville's short story 'Bartleby the Scrivener'. Bartleby is a legal copyist who joins a firm and refuses to complete work that he is assigned, and even refuses to leave the building when he is sacked. He ends up dying in a state of 'radical passivity', when he has been forcibly removed from the legal offices.¹⁶ Bartleby is exemplary for Agamben in that he represents the separation of the will from its realization in a determination, an action or a decision. Potentiality is here a radical contingency that refuses to actualize itself, and attempts to hold itself in a state of pure possibility:

Bartleby calls into question precisely this supremacy of the will over potentiality ... Bartleby is capable only without wanting ... The formula that he so obstinately repeats destroys all possibility of constructing a relation between being able and willing ... It is the formula of potentiality ... 'I would prefer not to'.¹⁷

This formula disengages Bartleby's action from any form of will or life, but does not enable those around him to attribute any meaning to his actions. For Agamben, Bartleby is an exemplar of a 'life that does not live', but can find a resistance to any form of power that wants to take hold of it. Furthermore, he resists this power not on the grounds of his will or his desire, but on the grounds of a potentiality that never actualises itself.

In fact, although Agamben claims that this formula is separated from the will, there is still some sense of an active will here. What has happened is that the will has dissolved into an experience of potentiality as potentiality, and discovers itself as will in the formula 'I would prefer not to'. This formula is neither an 'I can' nor an 'I cannot', but just this oscillation between the two modes. Bartleby's relation to potentiality is thus a hovering between affirmation and negation, a hovering between an affirmation of being and a nihilist rejection of being. Agamben terms this an absolute contingent, and it is the basis of his fundamental ontology of potentiality. This absolute contingent relates its contingency (the fact that it could or could not be) to its possibility (as something that can take place). It

holds in reserve its actualization and thus maintains a relation to potentiality as potentiality. This experience of potentiality is an intellectual experience that nevertheless dispenses with a relation to truth, an experience of thought that 'frees itself from the principle of reason'.¹⁸ This is an experience of a form of life in which something like a bare life cannot be isolated; hence its importance for Agamben in political terms as a form of resistance to the sovereign power that operates through the decision on bare life in the state of exception. But what kind of life is this?

Bartleby's existence as impotentiality is radical nothingness itself. It is certainly an escape from the will, but only in terms of a radical depersonalization that ends in death. Agamben's argument as to the decay of experience suggests that the very process which produces bare life as an empty form of life that can be subject to the isolation and decision of what is living and what is dead is also the experience that can move us beyond such a state, since this experience results in an awareness of our lack of identity with ourselves. The dissolution of experience through the emptying of traditions and beliefs, the transformation of experience as *Erfahrung* into experience as *Erlebnis*, results in an opening, due to the very lack of a place in the world. It is the strength of this paradigm of bare life that it leads to such an invocation of a wholly immanent existence; its weakness is that this immanence converts itself into a pure transcendence. This tension is evident in Agamben's account of bare life as both a worrying political ontology of the present (in that the political forms of late modernity are full of examples of such a bare life) and the means by which an alternative politics can take shape through a metaphysics of potentiality.

Mimesis of petrified life

Agamben's concept of potentiality has meaning as one moment within metaphysical experience, as a turning against life, or a recognition of life as deadened. This negative redemptive moment serves as a vacuum which dissolves subjectivity of its rigidity as ego, and at the same time illuminates the world as a deadened existence, as the possibility of a constructed eternal – capitalism itself as eternity constructed in a transient mode. The stasis of the negative redemptive time serves as a mirror for the stasis of society, but at the same time it arrests the process of decay, if only for a moment. This arrest provides a perspective from which the possibility of reconciliation can be viewed in negative terms. Adorno gives an account of such a negative redemptive moment in his essay on Kafka.

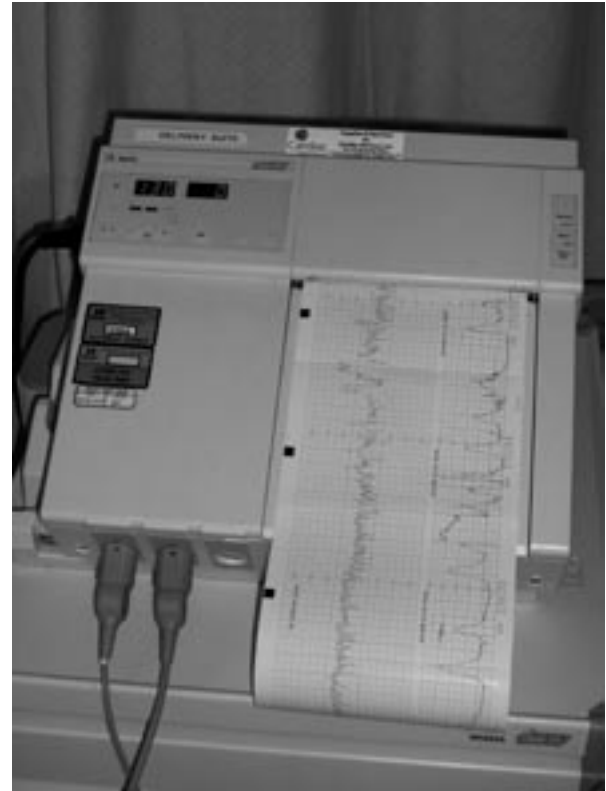
In this essay, Adorno emphasizes the particularity of details within Kafka's works, details which protrude but are incommensurable with any greater meaning. Adorno's intention is to deflect a symbolic reading of Kafka's texts in terms of an existentialist drama of an individuality fatefully existing in an absurd universe. The particularity that most captures Adorno's attention is the emphasis on gestures, both linguistic and non-linguistic. Adorno describes a certain characteristic linguistic gesture of Kafka's in the form of the parable. Kafka's writing often functions through a parable which has no key to interpretation. The sentences affirm an emphatic meaning which when interrogated fails to appear. In this sense, they are analogous to a linguistic gesture, a statement such as 'that is the way it is', which dissolves when the interpreter attempts to decode it. The parable without a key for its interpretation exhausts all meaning in its emphatic presentation as indecipherable linguistic gesture.¹⁹ This linguistic gesture is punctuated by a whole series of bodily gestures and physiognomies that are clearly delineated but hard to understand. There are the figures such as the transformation of Gregor Samsa into the giant bug in *Metamorphosis*, and Kafka's many peculiar animal fables ('Investigations of a Dog', 'Josephine the Mouse Singer'), but also small details in the novels themselves, such as Leni's fingers being connected by a web of skin in *The Trial*, or the frequent descriptions of what psychiatry terms 'inappropriate affect', the accompanying of sad words with laughter, for example. The physical gestures punctuate and dislocate the linguistic gestures:

Gestures often serve as counterpoints to words: the prelinguistic that eludes all intention upsets the ambiguity, which, like a disease, has eaten into all signification in Kafka.²⁰

The prelinguistic, though, is not a bodily moment that can be returned to as if it had not been affected by any destruction of subjectivity. It is not in the bodily gesture that a humanity can refund its embodiment, but the gesture, unwilling, lights up the fate of a certain form of embodiment as a destruction of experience.

What occurs with the bodily gesture in Kafka is something both eternal and ephemeral, slowed down to a point of standstill. The gesture takes on the aura of an eternalized image, but at the same time is purely ephemeral, unwilling and transitory. Adorno refers to such gestures as 'eternalized' and they have the effect, like Benjamin's dialectical images, of bringing 'the momentary to a standstill'.²¹ The gesture is an extreme form of individuation, the bodily expression

of meaning without language and often without intention, but it returns in Kafka as a horrific revelation of something beyond the subjective ego, the revelation of an alienated yet precarious life within the subject. The subject is frightened by its own gestures, and those of others, and, at the same time, invests them with an emphatic and premonitory meaning. What this moment reveals in Kafka's work is a moment of



regression, marked by a revelation of the objectivity within the subject:

The crucial moment, however, toward which everything in Kafka is directed is that in which men become aware that they are not themselves – that they themselves are things.²²

This awareness is horrific, but it also opens on to a dissolution of subjectivity which can reveal itself in the momentary time of a 'now' that does not complete time, but arrests life itself in the gesture, and in this arrest returns the subject to all that it depends on and all it has lost as embodiment. There is a closeness to a redemptive reading of gesture in Adorno here, but the final move of a gathering of this temporal breakthrough as a redemption of all that is lost in a completion of time is lacking. There is no completion, only momentary arrest, and no fulfilment, but only a form of extreme dissociation. The destruction of gesture does not presume an absolute gesturality to which it relates, but only the loss of any relation to the gesture as such.

Agamben writes of gesture in a very similar way, of the gesture being a figure of: ... [an] annihilated human existence, its 'negative outline', and at the same time, its self-transcendence not toward a beyond but ... in a profane mystery whose sole object is existence itself.²³

The 'profane mystery' is related to a concept of an absolute gesturality, which Agamben then outlines as the sphere of a redemptive politics, a politics that would relate itself to an 'absolute gesturality of human beings'.²⁴ But there is no positive redemption of an absolute gesturality in Adorno's negative thinking of the gesture. The similarity with a redemptive experience is that the gesture is an index of absolute loss, as horror, the body confronting the subject as something beyond its control, and in that moment of being beyond control. The gesture also figures a form of reconciliation, a life which could be surprised by the excess of its own embodiment over the structures of its subjectivity.²⁵

In Adorno, this recognition of life as deadened is not affirmed as the site of the redemption of that which is absolutely lost, but is the first moment of the possibility that things could be otherwise. Metaphysical experience begins with the experience of life as deadened, but it does not remain there, or hold itself in such a state. The experience of a potentiality that



holds itself in reserve, a turning against life, is only the *first moment* in metaphysical experience. Adorno gives us a fuller account of Aristotelian possibility than Agamben. It is this account of possibility that will serve as the second moment in metaphysical experience, a response to exigency.

For Adorno, the Aristotelian conception of possibility is an important corrective to the direction in which the relations between possibility, actuality and necessity have been taken in Western metaphysics since Aristotle. In particular, Aristotle's conception of matter as pure possibility serves as a corrective to the migration of possibility into pure form in Kantian

philosophy. Matter is the indissoluble something as the content of any thought. Aristotle's definition of matter as potentiality contains the thought that there can be no form without something as the ground for its synthesis. There must be a material there to be formed. Adorno outlines a tension in Aristotle's theory of matter as pure possibility that he traces in his account of freedom:

There is a curious tension and difficulty in the concept of *ύλη* (matter) in Aristotle; on the one hand it is denigrated, disqualified, censured in every respect, including the moral, while on the other there is the remarkable assumption whereby this element, though heterogeneous with regard to form, is endowed with a kind of animation, a tendency, even a certain kind of yearning.²⁶

This account of matter as inseparable from both possibility and freedom is crucial for Adorno. His account of freedom will rely on a contradiction between a concept of possibility as pure form, which has migrated into the transcendental subject, and an attempt to rescue the concept of matter as pure possibility, both as ground of freedom and as heterogeneous to form.

Adorno attempts to think the subject as a body that thinks. To be more accurate we could call this an experience of the ineliminable materiality of thought itself. What does it mean to call this an experience? At one level, Adorno emphasizes this materialism as a logical implication of all thought, a certain emphasis on the reliance of all ontological categories on a material 'something'. Adorno tends to assert this rather than to argue for it:

There is no Being without entities. 'Something' – as a cogitatively indispensable substrate of any concept, including the concept of Being – is the utmost abstraction of the subject-matter that is not identical with thinking, an abstraction not to be abolished by any further thought process.²⁷

This is more than the Kantian thing-in-itself. Adorno needs more than a noumenon; he needs a material moment as the noumenal which can matter for thought, that can be experienced rather than just conceived.

To try and rectify this aspect of Kant, Adorno argues for a form of thought that is not fundamentally divided from affect. The motive for thought itself, rather than will as transcendental ego, will be related to pleasure and need. Pleasure and need are not separate from thinking but the motor or unrest that drives thinking. The primary drive for such a thinking is the suffering of the body, the physical moment within thought that is registered as a lack of bodily fulfilment. Thinking is deeply motivated by the suffering body. Within a

metaphysical experience, there must be some response to this stored-up but deeply suppressed potential, this reliance of thought upon its material moment. The difficulty is how to understand this return of a suppressed relation to materiality within metaphysical experience. As we have seen, the first moment of metaphysical experience consists in a turning against life, through the experience of a mimesis of deadened life, but this experience must, in itself, produce a response to materiality that is deeply suppressed, a response to a potential that has never been realized as potentiality. Agamben has written about such a concept as an exigency within thought, a modality that he terms specifically ‘messianic’.²⁸

Exigency

For Agamben, exigency is a modality in which something has been completely forgotten, but still remains unforgettable within life. Agamben’s definition of exigency follows quite closely Adorno’s account of Aristotelian possibility. Exigency is the demand of an actual existence for its own proper form of possibility. Agamben writes of it in the following terms:

Leibniz defines the relation between possibility and reality as follows: *omne possibile exigit existere*, every possibility demands to exist ... I do not think this formulation is correct. In order to define what is truly an exigency, we should invert the formulation and write: *omne existens exigit possibilitatem suam*, each existent demands (*esige*) its proper possibility, it demands that it become possible. Exigency consists in a relation between what is or has been, and its possibility. It does not precede reality; rather it follows it.²⁹

This formulation of an existent that hovers in contingency awaiting the process whereby it can become possible, rather than actual, offers us an interesting way of thinking metaphysical experience. Its possibility is the return of something already existing as potentiality, but deeply suppressed, yet its return is not as an actualized existent (since it cannot be actualized within a reified society), but as an active possibility, as an active potential.

However, there are two problems with Agamben’s definition. The first lies in the notion of a proper possibility for an exigency. This becomes the motor for an affirmative redemptive move within Agamben’s philosophy. The exigency becomes messianic in its total identification with what is lost and forgotten and it is only through the total dissolution of the subject in an identification with all that is lost and forgotten, that a messianic redemption of what has been lost can

be retrieved. Normatively, the demand of what is lost is not a demand for remembrance or commemoration, but a demand for the dissolution of the subject in an act of faith towards that which is lost, an act of faith that Agamben grounds as a historical and political responsibility. It is not this act of faith that is necessarily a problem, but the redemptive move, which identifies the place of what is lost and forgotten as the only proper possibility of its remaining unforgettable. This dissolves any possibility of a response to the process of loss and forgetting other than through a complete identification with it, in the hope of redemption.

The second difficulty concerns thinking something as completely lost yet nonetheless unforgettable. However, this is important if reification has in fact become so complete that the possibility of life rests in an experience at the limits of possibility. How does that exigency within thought return within metaphysical experience, as a potential that demands its possibility? If the first moment of metaphysical experience is a mimesis of deadened life, then within that experience there must be a return of all that thought depends on that is other to it. One way to think of this would be in terms of the Freudian ‘return of the repressed’. Repressed material, whether of a primal repression (a repression that denies the repressed content any entrance into consciousness) or a secondary repression (what Freud terms ‘repression proper’, where instincts entering consciousness are repressed), maintains the character of something completely unconscious, completely lost, but unforgettable because it constantly returns in displaced ways, and substitutes itself for other objects and fetishes.³⁰ Adorno supplements Freud’s ahistorical concept of repression with an account of the importance of forgetting within a history of reification. Forgetting is a process that is necessary for life and, of course, for memory, but it is how we forget that determines the nature of an experience of recall (*Erinnerung*).

In the letter to Benjamin in which Adorno writes about this, he points to Benjamin’s critique of Freud’s lack of a distinction between *Erinnerung* (active recall) and *Gedächtnis* (memory)³¹ and links this with Benjamin’s account of shock and reflex experience. There is a form of forgetting in which the material forgotten never entered consciousness with enough depth in the first place. Such a forgetting irretrievably loses what it forgets; it is what Adorno terms a ‘reflex forgetting’. On the other hand, what Adorno terms ‘epic forgetting’ is a forgetting that retains the possibility of a recall which could awaken what is lost, in experiences such as the *mémoire involuntaire*.³² If

all reification is a forgetting, as Adorno argues, then there are two processes of the forgotten within reification: one which remains unforgettable, because of the way it entered experience in the first place; the other which is irretrievably lost. If forgetting is increasingly becoming a forgetting of reflex experience, then the process of attempting to recall that which has been forgotten or repressed becomes harder and harder. The response to such an exigency of the forgotten within the metaphysical experience is therefore twofold. First, there is the experience of memory itself, whether involuntary or not, of the possibility of a different relation with objects other than that of a dominating identification. But this possibility relies upon a form of reification in which what has been forgotten has not been irretrievably lost. The increasing reflex character of modern experience raises the possibility that all that lies in metaphysical experience itself is a mimesis of deadened life, which does not open up a recall of other ways of relating to objectivity. Then the response within metaphysical experience would become simply a response to suffering, the affective remnant of all that has been lost in the process of reification.

The Open, the place name

Up to this point, I have traced two moments within metaphysical experience. First, there is the turning against life, encapsulated in a mimesis of deadened life. This is produced through a determinate negation of reified life. Agamben articulates this moment through the idea of a potentiality that holds itself in reserve, but does not then relate that potentiality to a material exigency, in the way that Adorno's thought attempts. This leaves us with a metaphysical experience, in Agamben's philosophy, that dissolves into an experience of ideal possibility, of an opening to Being, whether as an irretrievable exigency from the past or the hope of a Messianic redemption to come. What is problematic from the viewpoint of the relations between metaphysical experience and politics is that the site of bare life (reified life) itself becomes the vehicle through which redemption occurs. The difference between bare life and a form of life in which a bare life cannot be isolated is minuscule, and it has to be, because of the belief that redemption can only come about through the dissolution of the subject via an identification with that which is absolutely lost and forgotten.

Agamben concludes *Homo Sacer* as follows:

This biopolitical body that is bare life must itself be transformed into the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life and a bios that is only its own *zoē*.³³

He poses a question as to how a *bios*, a way of life, can be its own *zoē*. How can a mode of existence seize hold of the bare life that escapes it? This, for Agamben, is the meeting point of metaphysics and politics: 'how can a form of life (i.e. bios) seize hold of the very *haplōs* that constitutes both the task and the enigma of Western metaphysics.'³⁴ Agamben posits a form of life corresponding to the Greek *haplōs*, which he defines as the philosophy of pure Being. The possibility that lies in an experience of radical potentiality is the possibility of an experience beyond materiality, an experience of Being itself, but an experience that can only mark its distance from the immanence of bare life, through its closeness to bare life. The possibility that lies at the culmination of a metaphysical experience, for Agamben, then, is the possibility of an experience of 'the open', of the 'unconcealedness—concealedness of being'.³⁵ The late Heideggerian pedigree of this position is obvious. The concept of the open names an experience of possibility beyond all potentiality, beyond all exigency, an experience of ideal or pure possibility. However, the link between the experience of potentiality and that of the open remains unclear. The experience of potentiality merely appears to transcend itself into an experience of the open.

However, this problem also haunts Adorno's account of metaphysical experience. Metaphysical experience begins in the negative redemptive moment of a turning against life, of a mimesis of deadened life. Within that moment, there is a recognition that this petrified life reveals all that thought depends upon as non-identical with thought, and that it reveals this through forms of recall, either conscious or unconscious, of other ways of relating between subject and object in a non-dominating fashion. This is the response to exigency that we talked about earlier. Nonetheless, it is still not clear how this produces the possibility of a different mode of relating to objects, the possibility of reconciliation. Following the revelation of life as deadened, and the realization that this is not all there is to life, there must be some glimpse of reconciliation within metaphysical experience. This is a changed concept of reconciliation, of a form of cognition and a state of society which could allow a relationship between subject and object that would not be dominating.

Reconciliation would release the non-identical, would rid it of coercion, including spiritualised coercion; it would open the road to the multiplicity of different things and strip dialectics of its power over them. Reconciliation would be the thought of the many as no longer inimical, a thought that is anathema to subjective reason.³⁶

Reconciliation in both reason and society would be that state in which what was alien to thought and identification remains in its difference within thought. This would be a different model of fulfilled experience. This fulfilment does not lie in completion, or even rational identification, in the sense of a completed coincidence of subject and object. Error, fallibility, the fact that thought fails in its identifications, would all still be the marks of an unreconciled society, but would nonetheless be constitutive characteristics of rational experience itself. However, for the negative redemptive moment to open up the possibility of reconciliation, this possibility must have some deeply suppressed potential as an exigency within life.

One account Adorno gives of a metaphysical experience is in Proustian terms of the promise of the place name:

One thinks that going there would bring the fulfilment, as if there were such a thing. Being really there makes the promise recede like a rainbow. And yet one is not disappointed; the feeling now is one of being too close, and not seeing it for that reason ... what it takes to form this universal, this authentic part of Proust's presentation, is to be entranced in one place without squinting at the universal.³⁷

The important thing here is not necessarily the experience of the promise of happiness and its inevitable failure; it is the model of experience contained in the happiness of the place name itself, which means that the disappointment is not experienced when the place does not fulfil the hoped-for requirements. This is undoubtedly a model of transcendence, experience as transcendence, but it is distinctive in that it is related to the fullness of experience, rather than to intellectual intuition.

What kind of possibility is opened up by the experience of the place name? One could see this as an ideal conception of possibility in the sense that the lack of fulfilment opens up the subject to an experience of pure possibility. In the lack of disappointment encapsulated in the experience of the place name lies an experience of pure but empty possibility, an experience simply that things could be different. However, this would return us to the migration of possibility to an empty, contentless experience, which Adorno criticized in Kant. What the experience of the place name reveals is the antinomial nature of such metaphysical experience. The desire within the place name is for all that is invested within the concept (the name) to be revealed within actual experience, but the reality is that there is always something intransigent within experience

to such a utopian longing for the true substance of cognition. Utopia would lie in a concept that truly identified its object, but the possibility of such happiness is necessarily thwarted by the lack of fulfilment constitutive of experience, in which there is always a moment of non-identity within any identifying procedure. Nonetheless, the lack of disappointment opens up a different relation to the possibility of a true identification, a relation in which it is possible to cling to the yearning for identity, yet at the same time to exist in the acknowledgement that this is not possible – which in its turn opens up an experience of possibility that would not demand substance or complete actualization, but would exist somewhere in the space between actualization and idealization. The place name, then, reveals a tension between ideal and material concepts of possibility, a tension that is constitutive of metaphysical experience itself.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno writes the following about the relation between utopia and possibility:

To want substance in cognition is to want a utopia. It is this consciousness of possibility that sticks to the concrete, the undisfigured. Utopia is blocked off by possibility, never by immediate reality; this is why it seems abstract in the midst of extant things.³⁸

The yearning for substance within the concept is the yearning for the possibility of a true identification, but such an identification is always blocked off by the non-identical. Possibility is therefore the constant rebuke to the demand within the concept that it coincide perfectly with the object or the experience itself. The model of a utopian experience would be an emphatic and non-dominating coincidence, a 'that's the way it is'. But such a utopia is blocked by possibility itself, which lies in the moment of non-identity to any identifying procedure. The metaphysical experience of possibility is an experience that remains within the yearning for coincidence, but at the same time acknowledges the impossibility of such a coincidence, for the sake of another kind of possibility, the possibility of the non-identical. Within metaphysical experience, there is an interplay between an ideal concept of possibility (the possibility that the concept could completely identify the object) and a realization, an experiential and material realization, that such an experience does not occur, is not possible. What occurs within the metaphysical experience is that the yearning for identity becomes dislocated from the domination intrinsic to the identifying procedure and exists alongside the realization of the impossibility of its fulfilment as an opening of possibility itself.

This possibility is ideal, in the sense that it opens the subject to that which does not exist, but it does so only through a complex interaction with, first, a determinate negation of reified life (the turning against life, the mimesis of deadened life) and, second, the response to exigency as a suppressed potential, which becomes actualized as potentiality (matter) within metaphysical experience. For Adorno, the path to a life in which bare life cannot be isolated can only be traced through a critique of its place within metaphysical experience, rather than a redemptive identification with bare life itself, of the kind we find in Agamben's metaphysics.

Notes

1. Theodor W. Adorno, *Metaphysik: Begriff und Probleme, Nachgelassene Schriften*, vol. 14, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1998, p.175; *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 112.
2. Adorno takes as the epigraph to Part 1 of *Minima Moralia* Ferdinand Kürnberger's aphorism, 'Life does not live'. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (1951), trans. E.F.N. Jephcott, New Left Books, London, 1974, p. 19.
3. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik, Gesammelte Schriften 6*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1996, p. 358; *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, Routledge, London and New York, 1966, p. 365.
4. *Metaphysik/Metaphysics*, pp. 175/112.
5. In his recent article 'The Dreambird of Experience: Utopia, Possibility, Boredom' (*Radical Philosophy* 137, May/June 2006, pp. 36–44), Peter Osborne outlines four concepts of possibility in philosophical usage, which he lists as: the formal-logical concept of possibility (Kant), the concept of potentiality, as the 'already-actually possible' (Aristotle), an existential concept of possibility (Heidegger), and a concept of virtuality which dissolves possibility into an ontology of difference and becoming (Bergson and Deleuze). My main concern in this article is with an Aristotelian concept of potentiality as it is used differently by Adorno and Agamben, and with an ideal conception of the possible, which I relate variously to a Kantian formal transcendentalism (i.e. the possibility of the noumenon as that which is contentless but necessary, as a thing-in-itself, for the operation of thought) and a Heideggerian conception of possibility, which is more associated with the possibility of an experience of the event of Being, than with the existential conception outlined in *Being and Time*.
6. See Jonathan Barnes, 'Metaphysics', in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 94.
7. Giorgio Agamben, 'On Potentiality', in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. with an introduction by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1999, p. 177.
8. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book IX, (Θ), 1047b, in *A New Aristotle Reader*, ed. J.L. Ackrill, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987, p. 326.
9. *Ibid.*, 1049b, p. 326.
10. *Metaphysik/Metaphysics*, pp. 60/37.
11. Agamben, 'On Potentiality', p. 179.
12. See Jaako Hintikka, *Time and Necessity – Studies in Aristotle's Theory of Modality*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973, pp. 27–34 and pp. 94–9, for discussions of the relations of potentiality, contingency and possibility.
13. Agamben, 'On Potentiality', p. 180.
14. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book IX (Θ), p. 332.
15. Agamben, 'On Potentiality', p. 182.
16. The phrase 'radical passivity' is taken from Thomas Carl Wall's book *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot and Agamben*, SUNY Press, New York, 1999.
17. Agamben, 'Bartleby, or On Contingency', in *Potentialities*, p. 255.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 259–62.
19. T.W. Adorno, 'Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka', in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 10.1, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1996, p. 255; 'Notes on Kafka', trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber Nicholsen, in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. with an introduction by Rolf Tiedemann, and trans. Rodney Livingstone and others, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2003, p. 212.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 258/215.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 263/219.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 267/222.
23. Giorgio Agamben, 'Kommerell, or On Gesture', in *Potentialities*, p. 84. Agamben also writes on gesture in an essay entitled 'Notes on Gesture', in *Infancy and History*, pp. 137–40.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
25. Alexander García Düttmann has written about Adorno's thought as a gesture, in terms of its emphasis on the necessary exaggeration of all thought, a thought that always overshoots its object. See his 'Thinking as Gesture: A Note on Dialectic of Enlightenment', *New German Critique* 81, Fall 2000, pp. 143–52.
26. *Metaphysik: Begriff und Probleme*, pp. 117/74.
27. T.W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1996, p. 135; *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, Routledge, London and New York, 1966, p. 135.
28. Agamben, Giorgio, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2005, p. 39.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
30. Freud, Sigmund, 'Repression', in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards, Pelican Freud Library vol. 11, Penguin, London, 1991, pp. 150–51.
31. T.W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz and trans. Nicholas Walker, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1999, p. 321.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 321.
33. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 188.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2004, p. 57.
36. *Negative Dialektik/Negative Dialectics*, pp. 18/6.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 366/373.
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 66/57. I am indebted to Simon Jarvis, who pointed me in the direction of this passage from *Negative Dialectics*.