

The coming community / Giorgio Agamben
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Ethics

THE FACT that must constitute the point of departure for any discourse on ethics is that there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize. This is the only reason why something like an ethics can exist, because it is clear that if humans were ~~or had~~ to be this or that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible—there would be only tasks to be done.

This does not mean, however, that humans are not, and do not have to be, something, that they are simply consigned to nothingness and therefore can freely decide whether to be or not to be, to adopt or not to adopt this or that destiny (nihilism and decisionism coincide at this point). There is in effect something that humans are and have to be, but this something is not an essence nor properly a thing: *It is the simple fact of one's own existence as possibility or potentiality.* But precisely because of this things become complicated; precisely because of this ethics becomes effective.

Since the being most proper to humankind is being one's own possibility or potentiality, then and only for this reason (that is, insofar as humankind's most proper being—being potential—is in a certain sense lacking, insofar as it can not-be, it is therefore devoid of foundation and humankind is not always already in possession of it), humans have and feel a debt. Humans, in their potentiality to be and to not-be, are, in other words,

always already in debt; they always already have a bad conscience without having to commit any blameworthy act.

This is all that is meant by the old theological doctrine of original sin. Morality, on the other hand, refers this doctrine to a blameworthy act humans have committed and, in this way, shackles their potentiality, turning it back toward the past. The recognition of evil is older and more original than any blameworthy act, and it rests solely on the fact that, being and having to be only its possibility or potentiality, humankind fails itself in a certain sense and has to appropriate this failing—it has to *exist* as *potentiality*. Like Perceval in the novel by Chrétien de Troyes, humans are guilty for what they lack, for an act they have not committed.

This is why ethics has no room for repentance; this is why the only ethical experience (which, as such, cannot be a task or a subjective decision) is the experience of being (one's own) potentiality, of being (one's own) possibility—exposing, that is, in every form one's own amorphousness and in every act one's own inactuality.

The only evil consists instead in the decision to remain in a deficit of existence, to appropriate the power to not-be as a substance and a foundation beyond existence; or rather (and this is the destiny of morality), to regard potentiality itself, which is the most proper mode of human existence, as a fault that must always be repressed.

Without Classes

IF WE had once again to conceive of the fortunes of humanity in terms of class, then today we would have to say that there are no longer social classes, but just a single planetary petty bourgeoisie, in which all the old social classes are dissolved: The petty bourgeoisie has inherited the world and is the form in which humanity has survived nihilism.

But this is also exactly what fascism and Nazism understood, and to have clearly seen the irrevocable decline of the old social subjects constitutes their insuperable cachet of modernity. (From a strictly political point of view fascism and Nazism have not been overcome, and we still live under their sign.) They represented, however, a national petty bourgeoisie still attached to a false popular identity in which dreams of bourgeois grandeur were an active force. The planetary petty bourgeoisie has instead freed itself from these dreams and has taken over the aptitude of the proletariat to refuse any recognizable social identity. The petty bourgeois nullify all that exists with the same gesture in which they seem obstinately to adhere to it: They know only the improper and the inauthentic and even refuse the idea of a discourse that could be proper to them. That which constituted the truth and falsity of the peoples and generations that have followed one another on the earth—differences of language, of dialect, of ways of life, of character, of custom, and even the physical particularities of each person—has lost any meaning for them and any capacity for

expression and communication. In the petty bourgeoisie, the diversities that have marked the tragicomedy of universal history are brought together and exposed in a phantasmagorical vacuousness.

But the absurdity of individual existence, inherited from the subbase of nihilism, has become in the meantime so senseless that it has lost all pathos and been transformed, brought out into the open, into an everyday exhibition: Nothing resembles the life of this new humanity more than advertising footage from which every trace of the advertised product has been wiped out. The contradiction of the petty bourgeois, however, is that they still search in the footage for the product they were cheated of, obstinately trying, against all odds, to make their own an identity that has become in reality absolutely improper and insignificant to them. Shame and arrogance, conformity and marginality remain thus the poles of all their emotional registers.

The fact is that the senselessness of their existence runs up against a final absurdity, against which all advertising runs aground: death itself. In death the petty bourgeois confront the ultimate expropriation, the ultimate frustration of individuality: life in all its nakedness, the pure incommunicable, where their shame can finally rest in peace. Thus they use death to cover the secret that they must resign themselves to

acknowledging: that even life in its nakedness is, in truth, improper and purely exterior to them, that for them there is no shelter on earth.

This means that the planetary petty bourgeoisie is probably the form in which humanity is moving toward its own destruction. But this also means that the petty bourgeoisie represents an opportunity unheard of in the history of humanity that it must at all costs not let slip away. Because if instead of continuing to search for a proper identity in the already improper and senseless form of individuality, humans were to succeed in belonging to this impropriety as such, in making of the proper being—thus not an identity and an individual property but a singularity without identity, a common and absolutely exposed singularity—if humans could, that is, not be—thus in this or that particular biography, but be only *the* thus, their singular exteriority and their face, then they would for the first time enter into a community without presuppositions and without subjects, into a communication without the incommunicable.

Selecting in the new planetary humanity those characteristics that allow for its survival, removing the thin diaphragm that separates bad mediatized advertising from the perfect exteriority that communicates only itself—this is the political task of our generation.

WHATEVER IS the figure of pure singularity. Whatever singularity has no identity, it is not determinate with respect to a concept, but neither is it simply indeterminate; rather it is determined only through its relation to an *idea*, that is, to the totality of its possibilities. Through this relation, as Kant said, singularity borders all possibility and thus receives its *omnimoda determinatio* not from its participation in a determinate concept or some actual property (being red, Italian, Communist), but *only by means of this bordering*. It belongs to a whole, but without this belonging's being able to be represented by a real condition: Belonging, being-*such*, is here only the relation to an empty and indeterminate totality.

In Kantian terms this means that what is in question in this bordering is not a limit (*Schranke*) that knows no exteriority, but a threshold (*Grenze*), that is, a point of contact with an external space that must remain empty.

Whatever adds to singularity only an emptiness, only a threshold: Whatever is a singularity plus an empty space, a singularity that is *finite* and, nonetheless, indeterminable according to a concept. But a singularity plus an empty space can only be a pure exteriority, a pure exposure. *Whatever, in this sense, is the event of an outside*. What is thought in the architranscendental *quodlibet* is, therefore, what is most difficult to think: the absolutely non-thing experience of a pure exteriority.

It is important here that the notion of the “outside” is expressed in many European languages by a word that means “at the door” (*fores* in Latin is the door of the house, *thyrathen* in Greek literally means “at the threshold”). The *outside* is not another space that resides beyond a determinate space, but rather, it is the passage, the exteriority that gives it access—in a word, it is its face, its *eidōs*.

The threshold is not, in this sense, another thing with respect to the limit; it is, so to speak, the experience of the limit itself, the experience of being-*within* an *outside*. This *ek-stasis* is the gift that singularity gathers from the empty hands of humanity.

WHEN GUY Debord published *Society of the Spectacle* in November 1967, the transformation of politics and of all social life into a spectacular phantasmagoria had not yet reached the extreme form that today has become perfectly familiar. This fact makes the implacable lucidity of his diagnosis all the more remarkable.

Capitalism in its final form, he argued—radicalizing the Marxian analysis of the fetishistic character of commodities, which was foolishly neglected in those years—presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles, in which all that was directly lived is distanced in a representation. The spectacle does not simply coincide, however, with the sphere of images or with what we call today the *media*: It is “a social relation among people, mediated by images,” the expropriation and the alienation of human sociality itself. Or rather, using a lapidary formula, “the spectacle is capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image.” But for that very reason, the spectacle is nothing but the pure form of separation: When the real world is transformed into an image and images become real, the practical power of humans is separated from itself and presented as a world unto itself. In the figure of this world separated and organized by the media, in which the forms of the State and the economy are interwoven, the mercantile economy attains the status of absolute and irresponsible sovereignty over all social life. After having falsified all of production, it can

now manipulate collective perception and take control of social memory and social communication, transforming them into a single spectacular commodity where everything can be called into question except the spectacle itself, which, as such, says nothing but, "What appears is good, what is good appears."

Today, in the era of the complete triumph of the spectacle, what can be reaped from the heritage of Debord? It is clear that the spectacle is language, the very communicativity or linguistic being of humans. This means that a fuller Marxian analysis should deal with the fact that capitalism (or any other name one wants to give the process that today dominates world history) was directed not only toward the expropriation of productive activity, but also and principally toward the alienation of language itself, of the very linguistic and communicative nature of humans, of that *logos* which one of Heraclitus's fragments identified as the Common. The extreme form of this expropriation of the Common is the spectacle, that is, the politics we live in. But this also means that in the spectacle our own linguistic nature comes back to us inverted. This is why (precisely because what is being expropriated is the very possibility of a common good) the violence of the spectacle is so destructive; but for the same reason the spectacle retains something like a positive possibility that can be used against it.

This condition is very similar to what the cabalists called "the isolation of the Shekinah" and attributed to Aher, one of the four rabbis who, according to a celebrated Haggadah of the Talmud, entered into Pardes (that is, into supreme knowledge). "Four rabbis," the story says, "entered Paradise: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Aher and Rabbi Akiba... Ben Azzai cast a glance and died... Ben Zoma looked and went mad... Aher cut off the twigs... Rabbi Akiba left unharmed."

The Shekinah is the last of the ten Sefirot or attributes of the divinity, the one that expresses the very presence of the divine, its manifestation or habitation on earth: its "word." Aher's "cutting off the twigs" is identified by the cabalists with the sin of Adam, who instead of contemplating all of the Sefirot chose to contemplate the final one, isolating it from the others and in this way separating the tree of knowledge from the tree of life. Like Adam, Aher represents humanity insofar as, making knowledge his own destiny and his own specific power, he isolates knowledge and the word, which are nothing but the most complete form of the manifestation of God (the Shekinah), from the other Sefirot in which God is revealed. *The risk here is that the word—that is, the non-latency and the revelation of something (anything whatsoever)—be separated from what it reveals and acquire an autonomous consistency.* Revealed and manifested (and hence common and shareable) being is separated from the thing revealed and stands

between it and humans. In this condition of exile, the Shekinah loses its positive power and becomes harmful (the cabalists said that it “sucked the milk of evil”).

This is the sense in which the isolation of the Shekinah expresses the condition of our era. Whereas under the old regime the estrangement of the communicative essence of humans took the form of a presupposition that served as a common foundation, in the society of spectacle it is this very communicativity, this generic essence itself (i.e., language), that is separated in an autonomous sphere. What hampers communication is communicability itself; humans are separated by what unites them. Journalists and mediacrats are the new priests of this alienation from human linguistic nature.

In the society of spectacle, in fact, the isolation of the Shekinah reaches its final phase, where language is not only constituted in an autonomous sphere, but also no longer even reveals anything—or better, it reveals the nothingness of all things. There is nothing of God, of the world, or of the revealed in language. In this extreme nullifying unveiling, however, language (the linguistic nature of humans) remains once again hidden and separated, and thus, one last time, in its unspoken power, it dooms humans to a historical era and a State: the era of the spectacle, or of accomplished nihilism. This is why today power founded on a presupposed

foundation is tottering all over the globe and the kingdoms of the earth set course, one after another, for the democratic-spectacular regime that constitutes the completion of the State-form. Even more than economic necessity and technological development, what drives the nations of the earth toward a single common destiny is the alienation from linguistic being, the uprooting of all peoples from their vital dwelling in language.

For this very reason, however, the era in which we live is also that in which for the first time it is possible for humans to experience their own linguistic being—not this or that content of language, but language *itself*, not this or that true proposition, but the very fact that one speaks. Contemporary politics is this devastating *experimentum linguae* that all over the planet unhinges and empties traditions and beliefs, ideologies and religions, identities and communities.

Only those who succeed in carrying it to completion—without allowing what reveals to remain veiled in the nothingness that reveals, but bringing language itself to language—will be the first citizens of a community with neither presuppositions nor a State, where the nullifying and determining power of what is common will be pacified and where the Shekinah will have stopped sucking the evil milk of its own separation.

Like Rabbi Akiba, they will enter into the paradise of language and leave unharmed.