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# UNATTAINABLE HUMANITY: NOTES TO GIORGIO AGAMBEN'S *THE HUMAN VOICE*\*

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## Abstract

The article proposes a reading of Giorgio Agamben's *La voce umana* (*The human voice*, 2023) in the context of the development of his philosophy of language, and focuses in particular on the consequences of his theory of the "voice" for his definition of human nature. Agamben establishes an inextricable link between human voice and human nature, but his theory of the voice as what must be (inclusively) excluded in order for signifying speech (*logos*) to emerge also condemns the definition of human nature to an infinite deferral. Since a "true" human voice will emerge only when the division between *phonè* and *logos* is overcome, so only this overcoming will allow for a "authentic" definition of human nature. Particular attention is paid to the fact that this theory frames the human voice, and hence human beings, as an exception to an allegedly uniform animality, and thus upholds – perhaps unwillingly – a form of human exceptionalism.

## Keywords

Giorgio Agamben, bare voice, *logos*, human nature, human exceptionality, animality.

## LA HUMANIDAD INALCANZABLE: NOTAS A LA VOZ HUMANA DE GIORGIO AGAMBEN

### Resumen

El artículo propone una lectura de *La voce umana* (*La voz humana*, 2023) de Giorgio Agamben en el contexto del desarrollo de su filosofía del lenguaje, y se centra en particular en las consecuencias de su teoría de la "voz" para su definición de la naturaleza humana. Agamben establece un vínculo inextricable entre la voz humana y la naturaleza humana, pero su teoría de la voz como lo que debe ser (inclusivamente) excluido para que surja el habla significante (*logos*) condena también la definición de la naturaleza humana a un aplazamiento infinito. Puesto que la "verdadera" voz humana sólo surgirá cuando se supere la división entre *phonè* y *logos*, sólo esta superación permitirá una definición "auténtica" de la naturaleza humana. Se presta especial atención al hecho de que esta teoría enmarca la voz humana, y por tanto a los seres humanos, como una excepción a una animalidad supuestamente uniforme, y defiende así – quizá involuntariamente – una forma de excepcionalismo humano.

### Palabras clave

Giorgio Agamben, voz desnuda, *logos*, naturaleza humana, excepcionalidad humana, animalidad.

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## Introduction

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In "Experimentum linguae," the preface to *Infancy and history* written for the 1989 French translation and also added to the 1993 English translation (and to the 2001 Italian reissue), Agamben writes that *Infancy and History* was the proem to a work that remained "stubbornly" unwritten, of which only a few notes remained, and which was to be called *The human voice*, or, alternatively, *Ethics, or of the voice*.<sup>1</sup> In 2023, more than thirty years later, Agamben will indeed publish a book with this title, which will take up point by point the problems that the philosopher had listed in "Experimentum linguae,"<sup>2</sup> showing how the question of language, and in particular that of the *voice*,<sup>3</sup> has remained the main motivum towards which his thought has always been oriented, beyond the "turns" that have led him in different directions and to deal with other themes. The work of 2023 foregrounds a central aspect of this orientation, namely the inextricable link between the question of language and voice and the question of "human nature." Systematizing the questions and answers he has consistently and systematically proposed throughout almost his entire career, Agamben offers here his summation and final word on the link between language and humanity. While the theses proposed here are undoubtedly consistent with the general framework of his thought, they nevertheless leave many issues unresolved and many questions unanswered. It is these questions and issues that we would like to briefly analyze here, in order to show both the potential and the limitations of the Agambenian proposal in the contemporary debate.

## 1. The question of the voice

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In "Experimentum linguae," Agamben defines, through a series of questions, the terms in which the question of the voice appears in his writings, and which, he argues, Western philosophy has hardly ever asked:

Is there a human voice – he asks – a voice that is the voice of man as the chirp is the voice of the cricket or the bray is the voice of the donkey? And, if it exists, is this voice language? What is the relationship between voice and language, between *phonè* and *logos*? And if such thing as a human voice does not exist, in what sense can man still be defined as the living being which has language?<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Agamben, *Infancy and history*, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Agamben, *Infancy and history*, pp. 3-4, 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> Further evidence of the centrality of this concept to Agamben's thought is the title of his blog hosted on the publisher Quodlibet's online site, *Una voce* (<https://www.quodlibet.it/una-voce-giorgio-agamben>).

<sup>4</sup> Agamben, *Infancy and history*, p. 3. Agamben systematically uses the masculine "man" as a universal neutral to denote the human being. While this usage is still quite common, especially in Romance languages, the feminist critique in recent decades has shown how it is neither neutral nor irrelevant. In analyzing the question of "human nature," Agamben's disinterest in gender issues certainly constitutes a blind spot in his elaboration, which does not allow a number of very relevant issues to be raised. This point cannot be developed or "corrected" within the Agambenian system, so we will not analyze or correct its use here. However, we feel it is important to point out and emphasize this fundamental limitation in his analysis of "human nature."

These terms remain virtually unchanged from the first elaborations in the 1970s to *The human voice*, and are redefined from time to time in a series of refinements that do not change their substance. Agamben's philosophy of language, as Justin Clemens notes, is born already mature and complete.<sup>5</sup>

Agamben's answers to these questions are also well defined in his early writings. In "Experimentum linguae," Agamben points to the famous passage from Aristotle's *Politics* (1523 a 10–18), in which the Stagirite establishes the difference between voice and language, between *phonè* and *logos*:

Only the man of the living has speech. Voice, in fact, is the sign of pain and pleasure, and for this reason it also belongs to the other living beings [...]; language, on the other hand, is to manifest what is useful and what is harmful, as well as what is just and what is unjust; this is what belongs to human beings in relation to the other living beings.<sup>6</sup> (quoted in Agamben 2001: xii–xiii).

This passage will remain central to all of Agamben's philosophy, and the difference between *phonè* and *logos*, ultimately arbitrary,<sup>7</sup> forms the basis of both his philosophy of language and his view of human nature. In *Language and death*, Agamben provides an interpretation of this passage that will remain the basis for his future analyses: in short, in order for the *logos*, the signifying discourse, to take place, the voice – which in the human being, unlike in the animal, is the intention to signify – must be taken away and "go to the ground," thus constituting the foundation of the *logos*. This is the foundation that "opens" the place of language, but it does so in a negative way, by disappearing, and as such it is a negative, unspeakable and "mystical" foundation.<sup>8</sup> Language, Agamben would write more than thirty years later in "Experimentum vocis," "is in the voice, but is not the voice: it is at its place and in place of it."<sup>9</sup>

This means, first of all, that there is no real human voice, and that the human being is therefore "the voiceless animal" (*l'animale senza voce*),<sup>10</sup> a fact that creates a lack and a tension that negatively marks the whole of Western metaphysics. And that obviously also marks the definition of the human, which, as we shall see, remains suspended, so to speak, in this difference and lack. Lack and tension, in turn, generate a *messianic* desire (a term that is not explicitly used in Agamben's early writings on language) for fulfillment, which would consist in arriving at a word that is, as it were, "saved." As Agamben writes in the 1980 lecture "Vocazione e voce" (Vocation and voice), in a formula that has since become fixed, this "saved" word would be a "word, that is, that was [the humans'] own voice, just as singing is the voice of birds, chirping is the voice of the cricket, and braying is the voice

<sup>5</sup> Clemens, *Language*, p. 117.

<sup>6</sup> Agamben, *Infancy and history*, pp. 7–8. We slightly modified the English translation of Aristotle's passage to make it more fitting to Agamben's own vocabulary.

<sup>7</sup> Recent studies on animal languages show that many of them (the difference between a uniform human *logos* and an equally uniform and compact animal *phonè* obviously does not make sense) are not limited to the expression of pain and pleasure but also reach, in various forms, to the manifestation of "what is useful and what is harmful," and even "what is just and what is unjust," so that the Aristotelian distinction between *phonè* and *logos* no longer seems to hold. Agamben, while citing some of such studies (e.g., *Infancy and history*, pp. 56–57; *La voce umana*, p. 56), does not draw the necessary consequences about the Aristotelian definition, thus undermining the whole architecture of his own philosophy of language.

<sup>8</sup> Agamben, *Language and death*, pp. 87–88, 91.

<sup>9</sup> Agamben, *What is philosophy?*, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Agamben, *Vocazione e voce*, p. 88. This lecture is not included in Agamben's *Potentialities*.

of the donkey."<sup>11</sup> In "La fine del pensiero" (The end of thought) (a short text published in the same year as *Language and Death* and added as an epilogue to its 2008 Italian reprint), this lack and longing is even referred to as the origin of thought itself: "our being unique, voiceless in the infinite chorus of animal voices" is essentially what triggers both language and thought: "And so we try to speak, to think."<sup>12</sup>

Even from this brief sketch it is clear how the terms of the "question of the voice" in Agamben establish an essential difference between the human and the nonhuman ("our being unique") based, quite traditionally, on language. However, Agamben rejects the traditional terms of this difference and redefines it in a new and original way. In particular, for Agamben, the human is not that being who "has" language as one has other qualities,<sup>13</sup> and is indeed always in search of a word – and a nature – which, as we shall see, she can never attain. And yet, the terms of differentiation remain the same. It remains that the division between *phonè* and *logos*, as with the entire Western tradition, lies at the origin of this divide and the need to bridge it.

## 2. The divided language

For Agamben, human language is divided in many senses: not only into *phonè* and *logos*, but also into *onoma* and *logos*, nouns and phrases, *impositio* and *declinatio*, lexicon and speech in action, *langue* and *parole*, etc., and it is this dual structure that, Agamben writes, distinguishes it from animal languages.<sup>14</sup> The fact that human language is divided, that it is not the "unitary" phenomenon that are (according to Agamben) the braying of the donkey or the chirping of the cricket, has consequences that determine not only the definition of human (or rather "man"), but also human metaphysics, history and politics. That is to say, the divided structure of language functions, for Agamben, both as the origin and model of all phenomena that determine human history and society, and in this sense it definitely serves as the arch-transcendental that determines every other phenomenon.<sup>15</sup>

Already in "Experimentum Linguae" the fundamental question is that of the articulation between the two separate elements. The key reference for Agamben (also recurring since then) is Aristotle again, but this time in a passage from *De interpretatione* in which he looks for what articulates the transition from animal voice to *logos* – and consequently from nature to the *polis* – which Aristotle identifies in *grammata*, the letters.

<sup>11</sup> Agamben, *Vocazione e voce*, p. 88.

<sup>12</sup> Agamben, *La fine del pensiero*, p. 137.

<sup>13</sup> In *Infancy and history* (pp. 51-52) Agamben writes: "It is not language in general that marks out the human from other living beings – according to the Western metaphysical tradition that sees man as a *zoon logon echon* (an animal endowed with speech) – but the split between language and speech, between semiotic and semantic [...], between sign system and discourse. Animals are not in fact denied language; on the contrary, they are always and totally language. [...] Animals do not enter language, they are already inside it."

<sup>14</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 19. This is the only reference Agamben makes to animal languages in *The human voice* – but in earlier works there are not many more. Indeed, this thesis is repeated uncritically, such as in "Experimentum vocis" (*What is philosophy?*, p. 14): "since its origin, human language has experienced a series of splits, which are not paralleled in any animal language." We think it is important to point out that Agamben, even in his most recent studies, is almost never interested in ethological or philosophical studies of nonhuman languages, thus limiting his intended reinterpretation of Aristotle and the grammarians and linguists of the Western tradition.

<sup>15</sup> Geulen, *Giorgio Agamben zu Einführung*, p. 76.

The animal voice is “confused” while the human voice is *énarthros*, “articulated,” thanks to the letters that enable it to be written: “the letter is what always pre-exists within the moat between *phone* and *logos*, the primordial structure of signification.”<sup>16</sup> In *The human voice* Agamben therefore writes: “Human language is constituted through an operation on the voice, which ‘articulates’ it (*artron* – from *ararisko* – is the joint, the articulation of the parts of a body that makes it fit to perform its function), inscribing in it the *grammata* as its elements. This ‘articulation,’ which makes the voice intelligible and meaningful, is, in fact, alphabetic writing.”<sup>17</sup> Here Agamben specifies that “[a]lso in humans is given a garbled voice such as ‘laughter, whistle, hiccup,’ but this voice that cannot be written, agrammatic, has nothing to do with the voice that has been com-prehended with letters [...], which is the properly human voice.”<sup>18</sup> This specification is often used by Agamben as a criticism of Derridean grammatology, which claims the primacy of the *gramma* over the voice and thus does not overcome but repeats, for Agamben, the original metaphysical structure.<sup>19</sup>

The problem with this divided and dual structure is that one of the two parts (here the voice) is always presupposed as an unknowable and unnameable substratum that must disappear and “go to the ground” in order for the other part, the knowable and nameable “substance” (here the *logos*, articulate discourse), to emerge. This presupposing structure always leads to the subjection and domination of one party over the other (of the *logos* over the voice), subjection and domination that must be deactivated and overcome in a salvific perspective. Beginning with *Homo sacer*, Agamben grafts onto his traditional reading of Aristotle the structure of exception derived from Carl Schmitt, whereby the operation that articulates the passage from voice to *logos* through the disappearance of voice takes the Schmittian name of “inclusive exclusion” – which is almost *the transcendental matrix* of all Agamben’s analyses since the 1990s.

The introduction to *Homo Sacer* then rereads the passage in *Politics* on the transition from voice to *logos* from a new Schmittian perspective, emphasizing the link, already present and clear in Aristotle, between language, humanity, and politics:

The living being has *logos* by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the *polis* by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it. Politics therefore appears as the truly fundamental structure of Western metaphysics insofar as it occupies the threshold on which the relation between the living being and the *logos* is realized. In the “politicization” of bare life – the metaphysical task *par excellence* – the humanity of living man is decided. [...] There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion.<sup>20</sup>

The presuppositional structure of language, as inclusive exclusion, gives rise to and determines the structure of all other apparatuses of exception, and in particular of law.

<sup>16</sup> Agamben, *Infancy and history*, p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 43.

<sup>18</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 31, emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. e.g., Agamben, *La voce umana*, pp. 79-80; Agamben, *What is philosophy?*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>20</sup> Agamben, *Homo sacer*, p. 8.

Language is the sovereign – Agamben writes – who, in a permanent state of exception, declares that there is nothing outside language, that language is always beyond itself. The particular structure of law has its foundation in this presuppositional structure of human language. It expresses the bond of inclusive exclusion to which a thing is subject because of the fact of being in language, of being named.<sup>21</sup>

These refinements of the initial theses will return consistently in all subsequent elaborations of Agamben's theory of language. In recent years, the analogy between the political state of exception that produces "bare life" and the linguistic state of exception has received a new refinement aimed at further emphasizing the fact that we are talking about the same structure. In Ammonius of Hermonopolis's commentary to Aristotle, Agamben finds the expression "bare voice" (*phonè haplos*), which is, just like "bare life," that which is excluded-included from the *logos* (and the *polis*) so that the latter can emerge:

Just as man's natural life is included in politics through its very exclusion in the form of bare life, so human language (which founds, after all, according to Aristotle – *Politics* 1253 a 18 – the political community) takes place through an exclusion-inclusion of the "bare voice" (*phonè haplos*, in Ammonius' words) in the *logos*.<sup>22</sup>

This structure has important consequences not only for Agamben's political theory, but also and above all, as emerges in *The human voice*, for his definition of the human (which is, moreover, an exquisitely political problem), which is also built, as we shall see, on the structure of the exception. The inclusive exclusion of the voice in the *logos* is what ultimately makes the human being an "exceptional" being, but it is also what denies them, according to Agamben, a stable and defined "nature." This is why, as we will argue in the next section, in the Agambenian theoretical construction *humanity* always remains *unattainable*.

### 3. Unattainable humanity

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From the outset Agamben identifies the transition from animal to human – what in time he will call "anthropogenesis" – in the articulation between *phonè* and *logos*.<sup>23</sup> In *The human voice* this becomes the central and explicit focus of the whole problem of the voice. Agamben writes: "The problem of human nature then has in the voice its locus, and any attempt to define it must necessarily confront the problem of the articulation between *phonè* and *logos*."<sup>24</sup> Agamben thus repeats the traditional gesture of defining the humanity of the human in relation to language, but, against the metaphysical tradition of the *zoon logon echon*, in a sense he reverses its terms. "If human nature is not something that is given to be thought of independently of language," he states, "this is because, as has been appropriately suggested, language is 'the spiritual form and historical embodiment of man's becoming human.'" This is a quotation from Johannes Lohman's *Philosophie und Sprachwissenschaft*, and on this quotation Agamben builds his thesis (certainly not new

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<sup>21</sup> Agamben, *Homo sacer*, p. 21. In *Il linguaggio è il sovrano*, Carlo Salzani has specifically explored the presuppositional link between language and politics.

<sup>22</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 59. See also Agamben, *What is philosophy?*, p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> In *Agamben e l'animale*, Ermanno Castanò has illustrated and explored this recurring structure in Agamben's major works.

<sup>24</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 58.

but here rearticulated and refined) that “man’s becoming human has the form of language.” But since language has a divided structure, so too “anthropogenesis is constitutively split, as broken and divided as human language.”<sup>25</sup> And thus “the speaking subject – the *homo sapiens loquendi* – is just as split as language.”<sup>26</sup>

As we have seen, the binary structure of human language is the paradigm and origin of every structure of exception, and thus anthropogenesis and human nature also present this form: just as the *logos* is articulated on *phonè* in a process of inclusive exclusion, so too is the human articulated on the animal, culture on nature, the *polis* on bare life.<sup>27</sup> Importantly, these are not merely analogous processes, but are in fact different names for *the same process*: the articulation between *phonè* and *logos* is intrinsically and simultaneously already anthropogenesis, acculturation, and the foundation of the human community. According to Agamben, this structure makes human nature very “difficult to grasp,” and this is because the two terms of the structure are not substances given once and for all.<sup>28</sup> The articulation between *phonè* and *logos* is problematic, unstable and contingent, and consequently such is also human nature.

Agamben then proposes a thesis that constitutes the heart of his interpretation of human nature (and thus also the theoretical core of both *The Open* and *The human voice*): “Anthropogenesis – the becoming human of the primate *homo* – did not occur once and for all in a prehistoric archi-past: it is a process that is still ongoing, that never ceases to take place.”<sup>29</sup> Ever since *Infancy and History*, Agamben has been arguing that the acquisition of language – the articulation between *phonè* and *logos* – is a contingent process that needs to be incessantly enacted, and is also, as such, invariably deferred and updated. This thesis is not immediately obvious. It certainly helps to explain how, historically, the definition of human has always been a political apparatus of inclusion and exclusion to demarcate the limits of the community, as Agamben explains in *The Open* and also repeats in *The human voice*.<sup>30</sup> But at the same time this thesis constructs an opposition between the human and the nonhuman, extracting (as an exception – from *ex-capere*) the human from the supposedly uniform mass of nonhuman animals, just as the *logos* is extracted from a *phonè* that is arbitrarily constructed as uniform. We will return to this point shortly.

The central point, however, is that the anthropogenesis is, for Agamben, “a historical operation”: “man,” he writes, “is the living being who can access his nature only through history.”<sup>31</sup> Thus history, too, is a product of the articulation between *phonè* and *logos* – which means, very traditionally, that only human beings have a history. In these writings Agamben does not explicitly contrast the human with the nonhuman (as he still did in the 1970s and 1980s<sup>32</sup>), but this contrast is nevertheless the implicit outcome of his

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<sup>25</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, pp. 58–59.

<sup>26</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 60.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 59.

<sup>28</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 60.

<sup>29</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 60. Cf. Agamben, *The Open*, p. 79.

<sup>30</sup> “The problem of the voice – insofar as the definition of human nature is at issue in it – is an essentially political problem, in which the decision of what is human and what is not is at stake every time” (Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 60).

<sup>31</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 61.

<sup>32</sup> For example, in “On potentiality,” a paper originally given in 1987, Agamben writes: “Other living beings are capable only of their specific potentiality; they can only do this or that. But human beings are the animals who are capable of their own impotentiality. The greatness of human



entire theoretical architecture. Another fundamental difference with the nonhuman, and a consequence of the historicity of its nature, is that the human "is never certain that it has once and for all grasped it, it may miss its nature."<sup>33</sup> The leading thesis of *The Human Voice* is that

Human nature and language are the two terms of a problem that cannot be solved, because it coincides with the history of the human species. The human species has a history because it cannot come to terms with its nature, and it cannot do so because that nature is inseparably joined to an exosomatic element, itself divided: language. The millennia-long attempt through which humans try to come to their own nature through a historical operation can only fail in its purpose.<sup>34</sup>

"Man [sic]," therefore, "never ceases to become human and remain animal and inhuman."<sup>35</sup> This means that human nature is and remains *elusive and unreachable*: "And equally elusive is language – the *logos* in which the human has articulated and lost its voice – caught as it is in an inexhaustible process of transformation, of death and rebirth, which will remain so beyond any attempt to fix it forever in a grammar."<sup>36</sup>

These theses do not fail to leave us puzzled. How a being can *miss* their own *nature* is not immediately apparent nor can it be explained outside this argumentative framework. Nor does Agamben ever explain what humanity and animality consist of outside the apparatus of articulation between *phonè* and *logos* (and nature and culture, nature and history, etc.), which is, however, taken for granted and taken as a presupposition of the whole analysis. Ultimately, what Agamben means is that the human being is a "potential" being, free of (and free from) the fixed and ahistorical determinations that cage instead (in his view) the *nature* of other living beings, and is therefore a *free being* (while all the others are prisoners of biological necessity) – a central thesis that he has been repeating since the 1970s and that the "biopolitical turn," and especially the theses proposed in *The Open*, despite the many anthropocentric openings to the nonhuman, do not seem to have modified.<sup>37</sup> Equally "traditional" is the gesture of transforming a (supposed) lack (that of a stable, full, immediate nature) into an ultimately positive trait, because it is what ultimately gives human beings their *exceptional* freedom.<sup>38</sup>

Agamben concludes this discussion with the characteristic gesture of his philosophical critique, that of pointing out the necessity of overcoming the divisions and ruptures of metaphysics (which in practice coincides with human history) in order to arrive at a new, salvific unity: "something like a human nature – a voice – will only be able

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*potentiality is measured by the abyss of human impotentiality*" (Agamben, *Potentialities*, p. 182, emphasis in the original).

<sup>33</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 59.

<sup>34</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 61.

<sup>35</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 88.

<sup>36</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 88.

<sup>37</sup> On the persistence of a certain anthropocentrism in Agamben, see Salzani, *Agamben and the animal*; Salzani, *Gli animali di Agamben*.

<sup>38</sup> In this regard, Derrida (in *The animal that therefore I am*, p. 20) writes, "it is paradoxically on the basis of a fault or failing in man that the latter will be made a subject who is master of nature and of the animal. From within the pit of that lack, an eminent lack, a quite different lack from that he assigns to the animal, man installs or claims in a single stroke *his property* (the peculiarity [*le propre*] of a man whose property it even is not to have anything that is proper to him), and his *superiority* over what is called animal life. This latter superiority, infinite and par excellence, has as its property the fact of being at one and the same time *unconditional* and *sacrificial*."

to appear by arresting and deactivating the anthropogenetic machine that is here uninterruptedly at work.<sup>39</sup> So human nature and human voice, which here are made to coincide, will finally and only emerge when the split between *phonè* and *logos* is recomposed. And this will be possible only by deactivating the anthropological machine which, as Agamben argues in *The open*, can only ever produce unstable and “false” forms of humanity and only bare life. Sergei Prozorov therefore argues that this halting and deactivation would in effect constitute a “reversal of anthropogenesis,” leading to the indifference of the distinction between human and nonhuman and between the human voice and the chirping of the cricket or the braying of the donkey.<sup>40</sup>

The arrest and deactivation of divisions would thus lead to the overcoming of the human exceptionalism that still persists in Agamben’s thought. One might legitimately ask, however, if Man and Animal are somehow products of the exception device, to what extent is it possible to think them beyond it? Certainly the exception is what the deactivation of the anthropological machine should overcome (although deactivation as such would not eliminate differences). Kevin Attell proposes an interesting reading here: he argues that deactivation would lead to the overcoming of the view of the human as “sovereign exception” (what it is now) but to the preservation of its difference (and perhaps of all differences) as “effective exception,” that is, as pure power, in the sense of elevation to power of the power that is the living itself.<sup>41</sup> This may be Agamben’s most intimate intention, but the philosopher never devotes explicit treatment to it and instead tends to slip more and more into an emphasis on what is “properly human,” where the nonhuman animal serves merely as background and contrast.

## 4. Deactivating language

Just as the terms of the “question of the voice” remain virtually unchanged from the beginning, so too the solution of the problem is already explicitly formulated all along, and returns in the same terms in *The human voice*: “A correct position of the problem of the voice will only be possible by deactivating the *phonè/logos*, language/speech, nouns/discourse apparatus, through which the voice has been included-excluded in language. Only at this point can something like a voice appear.”<sup>42</sup> Sometimes this deactivation seems to go in the direction of the “reversal of anthropogenesis” suggested by Prozorov, as in the (for some people surprising) conclusion of *The sacrament of language*:

It is perhaps time to call into question the prestige that language has enjoyed and continues to enjoy in our culture, as a tool of incomparable potency, efficacy, and beauty. And yet, considered in itself, it is no more beautiful than birdsong, no more efficacious than the signals insects exchange, no more powerful than the roar with which the lion asserts his dominion.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 61.

<sup>40</sup> See Prozorov, *How to Chirp Like a Cricket*.

<sup>41</sup> Attell, *Beyond the threshold of deconstruction*, p. 173.

<sup>42</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 62.

<sup>43</sup> Agamben, *The sacrament of language*, p. 71.

More often than not, the solution is posited in the terms of a deactivation of signification, and the primary site of this deactivation has always been, for Agamben, poetry. Since the writings of the 1970s and 1980s, from *Stanzas* to *Language and death* to *Idea of prose*, and overwhelmingly in the essays of *The end of the poem*, poetry is taken as the model of a word that deactivates the communicative and informational functions of language and thus exposes its pure "mediality." In *The kingdom and the glory* we find, for example, this definition: poetry marks the point at which language "rests within itself, contemplates its power of saying [*potenza di dire*] and in this way opens itself to a new, possible use."<sup>44</sup>

In *The human voice*, the paradigm of poetry is evoked in the analysis of the vocative,<sup>45</sup> which constitutes an instance of language that calls or invokes the thing named and thus situates itself between the semiotic and semantic, and, as such, lays bare and turns on its head the "splitting of language into two distinct planes."<sup>46</sup> Through the vocative, language seeks to grasp what constitutively exceeds it: "This something, this element that calls and does not mean, has to do with the voice," that is, with the voice "in its pure calling, as it were the *factum nominis* or, rather, the *factum vocis*."<sup>47</sup> An analogous case to the vocative is that of onomatopoeia: this is a form unrelated to both sign and meaning, an agrammatical form that interrupts the normal course of the sentence. This is precisely the use of it in, for example, in the poetry of Giovanni Pascoli, in which "the animal voice slips into the language to the same extent that the latter breaks into animal voice."<sup>48</sup> In onomatopoeias as in vocatives, "what calls can only be a voice. [Onomatopoeias and vocatives] are the way in which the Italian language, by interrupting itself, evokes and calls within itself the language of birds or frogs – or, inversely, allows itself to be called by it."<sup>49</sup>

In these instances of the deactivation of signification what emerges is the voice as the pure "place" or "matter" of language,<sup>50</sup> and only in this sense is it its origin. Agamben insists, in his conclusions, on this point: "The voice is *chòra* – that is, the taking place and the matter of language" in the sense that it is its "being-in, mattering [*materiarsi*] and taking place."<sup>51</sup> In other words, "the voice is what, remaining unspoken in it, gives place to language, disseminates its elements in its uninterrupted flow: *forma fluens*, only in this sense matter, because only matter flows, only voice is fontal."<sup>52</sup> Evoking Walter Benjamin's observations on mimesis, the voice can be defined as "that which appears when both apostrophe and naming, both nouns and speech, are lost in a pure dictability. By calling, the voice imitates and by imitating it calls – what? Another voice? The song of birds? The language of men?"<sup>53</sup> Here, however, *The human voice* abruptly breaks off and almost drops the subject into a philosophical questioning that flows into the poetic verse.

It seems to us that this somewhat hasty abandonment of the issue greatly limits the scope of Agamben's proposal. Yet Agamben had earlier pointed to another possible and fruitful "way out," one that might also succeed in ferrying the "question of the voice"

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<sup>44</sup> Agamben, *The kingdom and the glory*, pp. 251–52.

<sup>45</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, pp. 18–19.

<sup>46</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 19.

<sup>47</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, pp. 73, 76.

<sup>48</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 39.

<sup>49</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 38.

<sup>50</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 56.

<sup>51</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 62.

<sup>52</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 63.

<sup>53</sup> Agamben, *La voce umana*, p. 64.

beyond the shoals of human exceptionalism that it so struggles to cross. In the appendix of *What is Philosophy?*, titled "The supreme music. Music and politics," Agamben declines the thought of the "bare voice" (as the inarticulate voice of the living) on the idea of voice as *song* and thus as *music*. Re-reading Plato and the role of communal songs in the Athenian *polis*, and against the supposed primacy of the *logos*, Agamben asserts that the "primary opening of man to the world is not logical but musical."<sup>54</sup> The musical aspect of voice is, in this sense, the point at which language is in contact with being, that is, with the taking place of speech, and singing "symbolizes the speaking being's impossibility of integrally appropriating the language in which he has made his vital abode."<sup>55</sup> An important aspect of this approach is that singing as bare voice is not necessarily and exclusively human, and indeed it deactivates the exceptionalism of the articulation between *phonè* and *logos*. But then the question of the voice would lose that distinctive importance in defining the human that it still retains, as the title clearly expresses, in *The human voice*.

It is here, then, against the rock of the bare voice as song, that, it seems to us, Agamben's thought ultimately *makes shipwreck*. Indeed, the theme of "bare voice" has never found in Agamben's work a space comparable to that of "bare life," of which it was supposed to be the model and counter-song. Instead of continuing on the path of song and music, Agamben's more recent works mark, on the contrary, a decisive return toward *writing*, which brings the question of language back to that of the "letter"<sup>56</sup> and "literature."<sup>57</sup> In the recent *Il corpo della lingua (The body of language)*, Agamben states that every philosophy has its own peculiar shipwreck, from which it probably cannot escape. We believe that Agamben's philosophy makes shipwreck precisely on the question of the voice: by refusing to develop the suggestion of voice as song (which would necessarily have led beyond the human), his thought not only abandons the work for possible continuation by others, but also fails to meet what is its most vivid Benjaminian intention: the elimination of the unspeakable from language. And the unspeakable is the voice.

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<sup>54</sup> Agamben, *What is philosophy?*, p. 100.

<sup>55</sup> Agamben, *What is philosophy?*, p. 99.

<sup>56</sup> See Agamben, *Lo spirito e la lettera*.

<sup>57</sup> See Agamben, *Il corpo della lingua*.

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