The Use of Bodies
By G. Agamben (2015)
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Reviewed by Vincent Lloyd

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For Giorgio Agamben, religion is not a matter of ultimate concern. He is not a theologian, nor is he primarily a scholar of religion. Nonetheless, religion appears frequently in his work, particularly Christianity and Judaism, and he has devoted whole books to religious topics such as Paul's messianism and mendicant poverty. Religion is important to Agamben because religion is important to the history of the West, particularly to the history of Western thought. Agamben attends to the great thinkers of the West, and for several centuries those great thinkers were theologians, putting a mark on Western thought that persists today. For Agamben, this theological history is best addressed rather than repressed. If we are dissatisfied with the present, particularly with the political practices of the present, it is important to know how those political practices depend on certain ideas, and how those ideas developed over time. Then, with the strength of their apparent necessity loosened, we may mobilise against them, search for paths not taken, or pursue the alternative possibilities present but unnoticed in our contemporary world.

There are many ways of going about ideology critique. Some pursue immanent critique, showing the contradictions and tensions within the present order. Others provincialise the ruling ideas by pointing to alternatives found among marginalised communities. Agamben's approach, turning to Western intellectual history, is riskier. On the one hand, it prom-

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ises to reveal configurations of concepts that contribute to political domination today, configurations that would remain concealed by immanent critique or by attending to the marginalised. Those configurations sedimented over time, and the logic animating them and giving them import can be nearly invisible without a diachronic perspective. On the other hand, the means by which to discern such a logic, or at least the means that Agamben uses, involves reconstructing a very old-fashioned canon, the great books of Western intellectual history. The risk, then, is that appealing to this canon will reinforce its status, and the repressive effects of studying it will outweigh the power of critiquing it. In other words, Agamben makes it seem as though the world today was formed by the ideas of dead white men, with Christian theologians playing a central role, even as he turns to the ideas of those men to provide openings for challenging the status quo.

While theologians are a part of Agamben's story, they are neither where it begins nor where it ends. The two most important figures, in *The Use of Bodies*, are Aristotle and Heidegger. Religious thinkers reconfigured ideas from Aristotle, and Heidegger secularised ideas from religious thinkers; supporting characters include Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Emmanuel Levinas, Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Marquis de Sade, among others. Agamben repeats a story of Western thought, from the Greeks to the present, in each of the three parts of *The Use of Bodies*, each one focusing on a different dimension of the logic that interests him. The first part centres on the theme of bodies, the second part on ontology and the third part on life. This book is presented as the concluding volume of a nine-volume series that began with the justly acclaimed *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, and it follows Agamben's characteristic style, composed in a series of tightly crafted fragments. Each of these fragments sheds light on the underlying logic that interests Agamben, but that logic only comes to light as the fragments accumulate, each additional fragment shedding more and more light, from new angles, on the logic. This structure scales up: it is the structure within each part of *The Use of Bodies*, it is the structure of the three parts put together, and it is the structure of the nine volumes of the series of which this book is a part. Given this structure, reading only one fragment, or one part of the book, or one book in the series, can leave the reader intrigued at the concealed logic that Agamben has partially revealed but frustrated that it has not been fully revealed. This is how Agamben wants it, and how he thinks philosophy ought to be, because it is how he thinks life ought to be – and he does not intend that even a full reading of his series of nine volumes will provide a crystal clear image of the logic he explores. As frustrating as this method can be, the reader is richly rewarded by the catharsis experienced as the logic comes into view.

What is this logic? Expressing it in any one idiom, in the language of any one historical moment, around any one set of issues, cannot do it justice, as Agamben claims it is more like a gravitational force that pulls thought in the West at each historical moment. As a point of entry, let us focus on just one frame, that having to do with what the title advertises (but which only the first third of the book concerns), the use of bodies in the most literal sense. Aristotle understood slaves as those whose bodies were used like instruments. (Notably, as Agamben points out, the ancient definition of slavery did not focus on labour.) Here, as in each historical vignette Agamben offers, there is both closure and opening, something liberatory and something enchainning. The latter is obvious: the tyranny of another over the body of the enslaved. The former is subtle: by thematising use and bodies, and their relation, Aristotle makes it possible to pose the question for which Agamben thinks all good politics should allow: of what use are we going to make of our bodies? This ought to be a question for us, as individuals, not for a master, not for ecclesial authorities, and not for the state. The problem today, Agamben surmises from Foucault, is that our bodies are no longer ours to use; they are exposed to 'biopolitics', to the state and the forces of capital. Our situation is worse than the Athenians', however, because we do not even have the vocabulary to name this problem – until Agamben retrieves it for us.

In a sense, Agamben is concerned with the age-old question of what makes a human being human. He rejects the notion that there is some essence to our humanity, such as reason or will (along with subtle, sophisticated variations on this position). He also rejects the opposite position, an apophatic humanism that would see what it means to be human exceeding all concept or description. Yet he accepts the importance of the question: the human, in his view, cannot be reduced to doing what one does, following norms, interpellated by ideology. The use of bodies – of one's own body – offers the best answer to the question of the human, Agamben suggests. We do not choose how to use our body from a slate of options using our capacity to reason or will. Rather, there are a variety of habits that are available to us in our context, and we fashion ourselves by developing some of these habits. Importantly, these habits mix the rational, the affective and the physical – they involve the body. Moreover, we never ascend above the realm of habits to look down at them and decide which we cultivate. We always remain immanent to the plane of habits, as it were. Agamben's historical research shows how the mechanism through which the cultivation happens, the habit of gaining habits, is *use*.

How exactly this works remains rather unclear, and Agamben embraces this unclarity. He does so by turning to the negative, toward apophasis

(or, when put into practice, *askesis*). Use of one's body, in the sense that Agamben recovers, marks precisely that which cannot be explained in any conceptual terms. It marks a potentiality that is never exhausted: this is what is most essentially human (what Agamben calls the 'inoperative'). And this is how we can be dehumanised: when our ability to use our body is taken away because our body is exposed to be used by others, by a master or, in late modernity, by a state. In the second part of *The Use of Bodies*, this structure is explored through a discussion of the relation of essence and existence (including in Plotinus, Augustine, Athanasius, Henry of Ghent, Suárez, Leibniz and the Kabbalah, among other places); in the third part, it is explored through a focus on the categories of life and living things, with the use of one's own body roughly parallel to discussions of form-of-life. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben argued that modernity collapsed the relationship between bare, bodily life, *zoe*, and political life, *bios*, and in this new book Agamben is attempting to articulate how they ought to relate, 'neither separate nor coincident' (p. 262), for the human to realise her humanity. There is a 'void' that unites them, and it is this void that is pointed to by the concepts of use, ontological difference and form-of-life, when these are all understood properly.

The various thinkers with whom Agamben engages have all started to grasp this, but it is only by Agamben juxtaposing the best of these Western minds that this logic, this meaning of the human, is fully revealed. According to Agamben, the Franciscans almost grasped it when they were explaining their understanding of poverty that meant they could only use, not possess, property, but they fell back into legalism in the face of challenges from the church hierarchy. From quite a different direction, Agamben suggests that sadomasochistic play also points to this logic. The masochist asks for a set of rules to be imposed upon her from her master, with the result that her master makes use of her body through one habit among many possible – and then the roles may reverse, teaching the participants that making use of one's own body always requires a habit that is not fully constructed by the self.

It takes time to learn how to read *The Use of Bodies*. Through his style of writing, Agamben is teaching the reader what to look for and what to ignore as we encounter historical texts – and as we encounter the world around us. The world has a tendency to close off our humanity, to encourage us to forget what it means to be human by offering this definition or that. Agamben attempts to teach us to remember, where this remembering consists most essentially of questioning the habits that we are given – starting with habits of thought. What is unique about our current condition, according to Agamben's understanding, is the alignment of state power and

technology conspiring to give us answers, and consequently making use of our bodies, for forgetting the human means making our bodies available to the powers that be. Where Agamben began *Homo Sacer* worrying that the contemporary condition resembles a concentration camp, he concludes, in *The Use of Bodies*, worrying that it resembles a plantation.

Or does he? Agamben is quite clear that he is interested in a particular kind of slavery, in ancient Greece. He is interested in the centre, not the periphery – not racialised slavery, or colonialism, or patriarchy, or ableism, all of which are not really peripheral at all, but the conditions that make possible the so-called centre, which itself is really a small group of intellectuals. As Achille Mbembe and others have argued, the exposure of life to death-dealing regimes is not a novelty of the Nazis but endemic to the very Western tradition Agamben taps. The challenge, then, is to discern how Agamben's suggestive insights into what it means to be human can help us identify, analyse and challenge specific structures of domination. Where Agamben himself sees an eternal struggle between humanising and dehumanising forces, with the latter gaining an upper hand of late, his examples already hint at the benefits of a more specific focus on mechanisms of domination that function by dehumanising – exposing the bodies marked by race, gender, sexuality or disability to the use of others, stamping out souls.