The Politics, Ethics, and Aesthetics of
Inoperativity

Edited by

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Inoperativity

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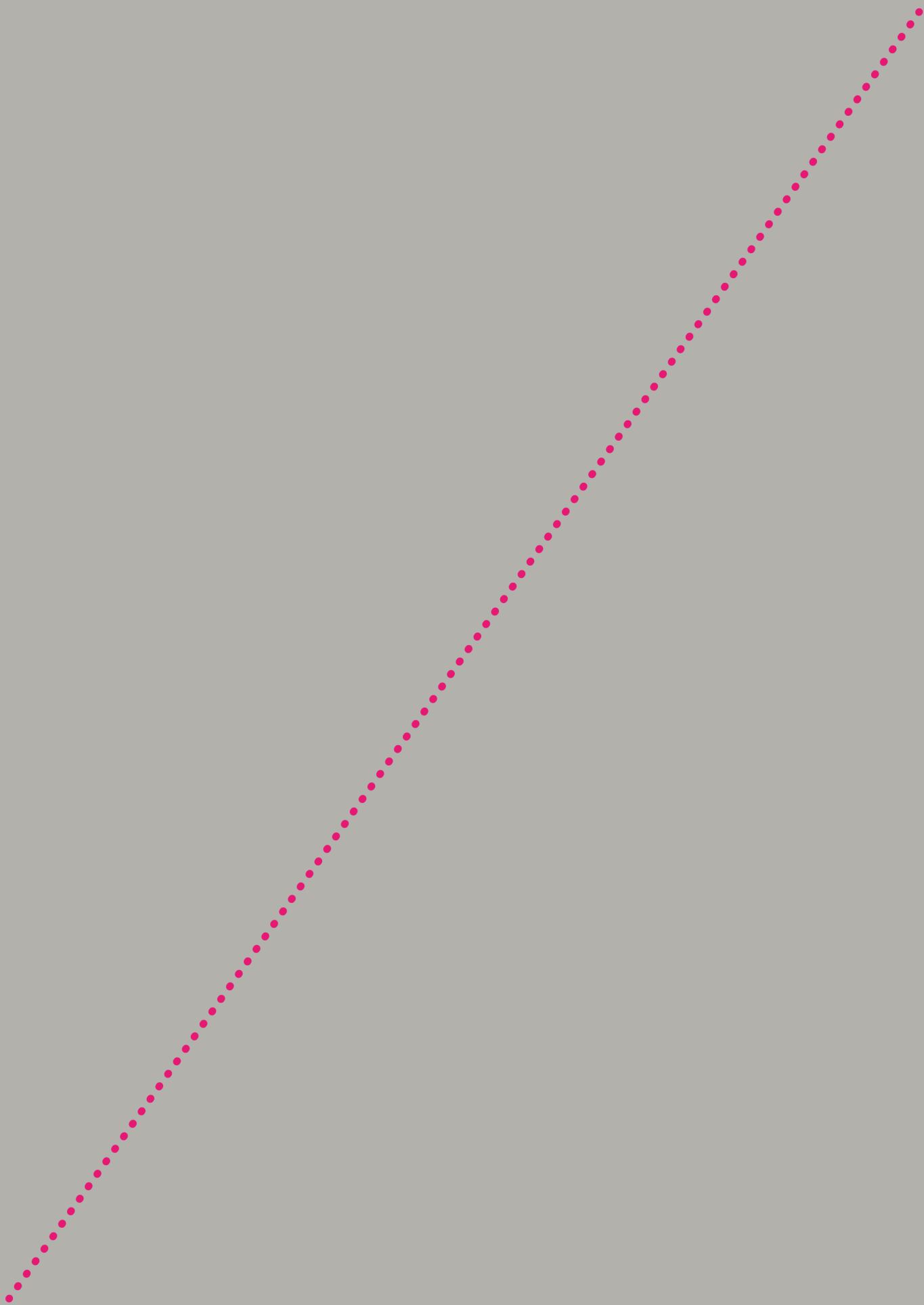
Telling the Truth, or Not: Notes on the Concept of Ethics in Foucault and Agamben

Carlo Crosato

Abstract

In 1997, taking his mark from the last text Foucault wrote before he died, Agamben examines the implications that accompany the definition of truth as an errancy, a straying. Drawing on the insights provided by Agamben's lecture, this article analyses the different perspectives from which the two philosophers study the issue of truth, and the consequent conceptions of ethics which they elaborate. Throughout his multifarious reflections, Foucault maintained his critique of a universal and ahistorical truth, revealing the strategic games that legitimate every conception of truth. Hence, his idea of ethics consists in displacing oneself from the actual discourses and historical relations that subjectivate and subject the individual, in order to constitute one's own subjectivity. On the other hand, the ontological perspective from which Agamben aims to integrate and correct Foucauldian thought leads to a conception of ethics as the deactivation of every form of life and the suspension of the dynamics of constitution in order to regain the original potentiality of the human being.

Keywords: truth, ethics, language, Foucault, Agamben

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In 1997, Giorgio Agamben delivers a lecture, entitled 'Verità come erranza', in the course of which he discusses the issue of truth. The occasion for engaging with such a problem was the last article that Foucault wrote before he died. In this text, Foucault asserts that 'with man, life has led to a living being that is never completely in the right place, that is destined to "err" and to be "wrong"' (Foucault, 1998: 476). This article is Foucault's last homage to his great teacher, Canguilhem, who led him to reflect on the themes of discontinuity, truthful discourses, and the concept of human life. Thanks to Canguilhem, Foucault learnt to move beyond the history of Truth's epiphany without getting stuck in the history of ideas: he learnt to study history, 'dealing with the history of "truthful discourses", that is, with discourses that rectify and correct themselves, and that carry out a whole labour of self-development governed by the task of "truth-

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telling"' (Foucault, 1998: 471). This means that 'error is eliminated not by the blunt force of a truth that would gradually emerge from the shadows but by the formation of a new way of "truth-telling"'.

Drawing on these insights, Foucault elaborates his archaeology and genealogy and so develops the concepts of *episteme*, discursive formations, dispositives, and regimes of truth. In these terms, he describes truth as a historical formation, constituted by knowledge and power relations, and in constant confrontation with error and the anomaly. Canguilhem focused on domains where knowledge is much less deductive, such as biology and medicine. Foucault himself explored the history of medicine, psychiatry, and went on to ask how, as knowledge and power intertwine, discourses of truth are formed. Thus, he can claim that human life cannot be grasped by the exact sciences, and that the concepts involved in scientific discourses and in every truth-telling are always brought to light by a struggle against other discourses. This is the constant relation between life and error, the sciences of life and mistakes, in which Agamben is interested.

In these terms, Agamben finds a new kind of 'relationship between the subject and the truth', even the truth of the human itself, beyond the traditional perspective of the Cartesian subject and its reference to an objective world. 'What could a knowledge be that is no longer correlated to the truth of the openness to the world, but only to life and its errancy? How can we think of the subject starting no longer from its relationship with truth, but rather from its relationship with error?' (Agamben, 1997: 13)

Both Foucault and Agamben work to overcome the sovereign subject and the cognitive approach to the truth of the object. But we know that this overcoming brings Foucault to an ontology of actuality, which is to say a historical ontology, whereas Agamben tries to go back to the ontological principles *stricto sensu*, that is, to the very conditions of the historical becoming through which we make ourselves historical subjects. While Foucault examines the conditions we are pragmatically situated in, Agamben reconstructs the ontological condition of being historically situated. Starting from these different perspectives, we can reach two different concepts of "errancy" and two specific notions of ethics as the emancipation from the binding perspective of the sovereign subject's relationship with the world.

1. Historical regimes of truth

The modern subject and the transcendental relationship with an objective world are two of the main critical targets of Foucault's thought. In modern philosophy, the concept of truth is always linked to the question of knowledge, that is, the correspondence of human intellect to pregiven objects in reality. This *adequatio* to objects requires a form of subjectivity equipped with precise universal characteristics which allow it to penetrate the objective truth and retain it over time. The epistemological relation between such a subject and objective reality has been at the centre of Foucault's enquiries since the Sixties, when his archaeology is involved in the critique of *epistemes* and discursive formations. Later on, especially in the Seventies, the ahistorical and transcendental nature of the subject is analysed in its practical dimension by Foucault's genealogical studies of power relations and dispositives. He aims at exposing the strategic features of the self-narration on the part of the sovereign subject, and its immanence within power relations and knowledge, with an eye towards the subject's relation to itself. In so doing, he undermines the foundations of the traditional correspondence theory of truth and the traditional theory of power, from a critical perspective that he calls 'the history of truth' (Foucault, 1990: 6, 8, 11).

'After Nietzsche,' he claims during an interview in 1976, 'the question has changed. No longer: which is the surest path of Truth?, but which has been the hazardous path of truth?' (Foucault, 2001b: 28-40; De Cristofaro, 2008; Mahon, 1992). In Foucault's view, modern philosophy is caught in what he terms the "Cartesian moment", in which the subject is described as the pure "I think" endowed with free access to a clear and distinct truth. In turn, truth, in an epistemological dimension, is the correct knowledge we have to reach in the employment of appropriate scientific instruments, and, in a teleological dimension, the final goal of the accidental path of history. The Cartesian moment is the perspective by which modern philosophy frees the relationship between subjectivity and truth from rituals, practices, *spirituality*, and puts aside the pursuits and experiences 'which are not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject's very being, the price to be paid for the access to truth'. While the historiography of philosophy explains the innovative distinction between philosophy and spirituality with the aim of reconfiguring the significant moments in the approach to truth, Foucault's Nietzschean effort steps back to a scenario where 'the subject is not capable of truth' and 'the truth is never given to the subject by right' (Foucault, 2005: 15).

By proposing a history of truth, Foucault aims at opposing the notions of an *apriori* constituted subject and a preformed object, and moves towards the analysis of the interactive constitution of subjects and objects under what he calls a "regime of truth", a real historical *apriori* that combines Kant's reflections on the conditions for the possibility of knowledge with history. The issues that Foucault faces do not arise from the question of a universal subject and its capability of knowing. Instead, these issues concern, on the one hand, the conditions that produce a subject and enable power to know it, control it, and discipline it; on the other hand, the conditions that regulate the discourses it can make, and the practices it has to respect in order to get in touch with the reality of its time. Indeed, Foucault is interested in the games of discourses and the orders of visibility, in the warp of statements and the weft of spaces required for the objects to emerge as knowable. 'If what is meant by thought is the act that posits a subject and an object, along with their various possible relations, a critical history of thought would be an analysis of the conditions under which certain relations of subject to object are formed or modified, insofar as those relations constitute a possible knowledge' (Foucault, 1998: 459–460). A regime of truth is this complex nexus between the conditions required for both subjects and objects to be positive elements of history; it is the sum-total of games that intertwine subjectivation and objectivation in a certain historical epoch.

Dealing with the function of the intellectual, in 1976, Foucault writes that his concern is with a truth of this world, the truth that every society establishes for itself: 'The types of discourse it harbours and causes to function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true' (Foucault, 1977b: 13). Foucault uses the expression "{a}? general politics of truth" as a synonym for "regime of truth", in order to mark his distance from a merely epistemological conception of truth, as well as to approach a notion of truth that is involved in the foundation and legitimation of power relations. An intertwinement about which Foucault speaks during a lecture from the same year: in any society 'multiple relations of power traverse, characterise, and constitute the social body; they are inseparable from a discourse of truth, and they can neither be established nor function unless a true discourse is produced, accumulated, put into circulation, and set to work'. Power needs a certain economy of discourses of truth, and this order of true discourses 'functions in, on the basis of, and thanks to, that power' (Foucault, 2003: 24). Having set

apart the traditional theory of power and its repressive gesture, Foucault's interest is focused on the 'production of truth' (Foucault, 2001b: 256–269).

From a political perspective, truth is not the original purity by which the transcendental subject acts upon its freedom; hence, truth is not something that we rediscover by freeing it from the ideological veils of power (Foucault, 2001a: 119–120). Since his archaeological experiments, and more specifically during his first courses at the Collège de France, Foucault elaborates a conception of power as a network of relations supported and surrounded by a prolific production of discourses aimed at the constitution of knowable objects, the production of subjectivities. This is what he terms 'the incitement to discourse' (Foucault, 1978: 17–35), that includes the invitation to tell the whole truth to professional or responsible figures, the progressive substitution of abnormal speech by normative speech, and the thorough and periodic inspection of personal growth. According to Foucault, power does not silence us. It rather forces us to talk about our life, actions, thoughts, intentions, to shed light everywhere, to listen, record, observe, question, and formulate (Foucault, 1978: 33): a real "police of discourses" forcing the normative order gradually to penetrate the whole social field. And this is not a matter of a dominant truth imposed in a sovereign manner (Foucault, 1978: 94), but rather of disseminated sets of discursive games following contingent problems and looking for a solution to them through heterogeneous practices that seem to work (Foucault, 2001a: 1–89).

These heterogeneous sets of words and actions are the dispositives, that Foucault describes as 'thoroughly heterogeneous ensembles consisting of […] the said as much as the unsaid'. The dispositive is not one of these elements, but the system of relations that can be established between them. What Foucault identifies in it is precisely 'the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements'. This formation 'has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function' (Foucault, 1980: 194–195; cf. Bussolini, 2010; Bazzicalupo, 2013; Carmagnola, 2015; Chignola, 2017; Crosato 2017).

The rejection of a universal theory of power — according to which power is monolithic and limiting — and the refusal of a universal theory of truth — which identifies truth with the overcoming of the ideological veil — run parallel to the conception of the microphysical and positive intertwinement of discourses and power relations consistent with typical problems and responses in a given epoch. These productions of truth cannot be distinguished from power and its mechanisms, both because these mechanisms make possible and induce these productions of truth and because these productions of truth have themselves some

effects that involve us (Foucault, 2001b: 399–414). The subject is involved in these networks not as a sovereign agent but as the nodal point produced by this complex set of relationships. Thus, in the Eighties, Foucault wonders 'how men govern (themselves and others) by the production of truth', and repeats that by "production of truth" he means 'not the production of true utterances but the establishment of domains in which the practice of true and false can be made at once ordered and pertinent' (Foucault, 2001a: 230).

2. Beyond history

Since the Scientific Revolution, the Western conception of knowledge 'presupposes that there is truth everywhere, in every place and all the time'. Every positive entity has its own truth and everything can be questioned about its truth. Although our historical existence and our human limits can make truth hard to find, it lives everywhere and it can be looked for at every moment. Furthermore, what is more important for Foucault is that no one is exclusively qualified to get in touch with the truth. Anyone can access it, provided that they have 'the instruments required to discover it, the categories necessary to think it, and an adequate language for formulating it in propositions' (Foucault, 2006: 236). Our conception of truth is scientific, in that it consists in a technology for the observation and the universal demonstration of truth. During a lecture in 1974, Foucault calls this notion "truth-sky", to depict its universality. He also hypothesizes that, in archaic times, there was a completely different conception of truth, which he terms "truth-thunderbolt" or "truth-event". This latter conception has a precise topology in its history and geography, and has messengers or privileged agents. It is not universal: 'It is a dispersed truth, a truth that occurs as an event' (Foucault, 2006: 237).

By resisting every universal theory of truth, Foucault situates his reflection on truth at the historical level, questioning the conditions of what historically is and is not. He links truth to the history of events, whilst also excavating the strategic processes by means of which a contingent positivity becomes a universal and hegemonic category. The notions of truth-event and historico-political knowledge do 'not belong to the order of what is, but to the order of what happens, they are not given in the form of discovery, but in the form of the event, and they are not found but aroused and hunted down' (Foucault, 2006: 237). Foucault studies the production rather than the apophantic dimension of truth so as to show 'how truth-knowledge is basically only a region and an aspect, albeit

one that has become superabundant and has assumed gigantic dimensions, but still an aspect or a modality of truth as event and of the technology of this truth-event' (Foucault, 2006: 238).

The first step to take is the rejection of the 'cloak of universals' (Foucault, 1998: 383) which hides the 'shock or clash' caused by the conflictual course of events (Foucault, 2006: 237). Beginning with his very first archaeological works, Foucault tries to invert the traditional method of historico-philosophical researches, which consisted in extracting certain universal truths from their accidental history. Instead of drawing from the universal, Foucault's archaeo-genealogical method focuses on particular statements and practices in order to bring to light their conditions of possibility. In 1969, he writes of his desire to free the facts of discourse from 'all the groupings that purport to be natural, immediate, universal unities' (Foucault, 1972: 29); in 1979, he explains that, '[i]nstead of deducing concrete phenomena from universals, or instead of starting with universals as an obligatory grid of intelligibility for certain concrete practices, I would like to start with these concrete practices and, as it were, to pass these universals through the grid of these practices. [...] Historicism starts from the universal and, as it were, puts it through the grinder of history. My problem is exactly the opposite. [...] Let's suppose that universals do not exist. [...] So what I would like to deploy here is exactly the opposite of historicism: not, then, questioning universals by using history as a critical method, but starting from the decision that universals do not exist, asking what kind of history we can do' (Foucault, 2008: 3).

Even though he has Nietzsche as one of his main references, Agamben does not break with the traditional chronological and teleological conception of history by questioning the particular facts and their singular positivity — as was the case with Foucault — but rather by embracing a messianic conception of time which sheds light upon the indistinction between particular and universal (Prozorov, 2009a). This conception provides the interpretative framework with which to analyse the idea of irreducible errancy that Agamben proposes.

In Foucault, rejecting universals means that the philosopher has to write stories by choosing a series of relevant elements as paradigms. Although they are actual and real things, these elements never coincide with reality as a whole. Foucault aims at understanding history by drawing his criterion of pertinence not from the discourses and practices he is analysing, but rather from the crucial questions of the present. In the distinction between present and actuality (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994: 112) lies the meaning of history as *fiction*, that is, a glance toward the past with the aim of making other discourses speak where they would

otherwise be marginal (Foucault, 2001b: 829–838; Chignola 2019: 96). Agamben's ontological perspective, on the other hand, leads his paradigms to the transcendentally original dimension where the distinction between particular and universal has not yet occurred.

The dichotomy between the individual and the universal originates from human language and from the way it gives form to our knowledge. Even though in our experience we always encounter singular things, we can talk about them only by employing universal concepts. The logical shape of our language, Agamben writes, 'transforms singularities into members of a class, whose meaning is defined by a common property' (Agamben, 1993b: 9). We use nouns as labels of universal sets of features to talk about a particular experience that we have lived, but that we cannot say in its very singularity. Thus, the possibility of our speaking about an experienced object is subordinated to a process of conceptualisation, which makes the object accessible to thought but, at the same time, makes it impossible to return from this concept to the actual empirical thing in its particularity. In 1982, Agamben describes this ineluctable process as a symptom of the close relation between Western metaphysics and nihilism, that is to say, of the fact that 'any attempt to express sense-certainty signifies to experience the impossibility of saying what one means [...] due to the fact that the universal itself is the truth of sense-certainty, and thus it is precisely this truth that language says perfectly' (Agamben, 2006: 11). In order to be known, every raw and actual object of sense-certainty is immediately transformed into an ideal creature of language. Therefore, our cognitive concept of knowledge represents a relation between subjects and objects which is always mediated by the linguistic form.

The human dwells in the openness between an ineffable experience and the objects of thought, between the thing itself and its being-said. Agamben's paradigms are moulded to pave the way towards this openness which is the dimension where sayability as such lies: the example, indeed, is a 'concept that escapes the antinomy of the universal and the particular', being included in the very class whose members it exemplifies. According to its etymology, the 'paradigm' is that which is 'shown alongside', which shows its singularity as such: its life is purely linguistic since it is not defined by any property, apart from its being-called. (Agamben, 1993b: 10). The paradigm 'calls into question the dichotomous opposition between the particular and the universal which we are used to seeing as inseparable from procedures of knowing, and presents instead a singularity irreducible to any of the dichotomy's two terms'. It shows the truth beyond its historical empirical particularity and its linguistic universality and so

reverses the typically exceptional movement. Thus it illuminates the medial dimension in which the individual comes into contact with reality. 'The paradigmatic relation does not merely occur between sensible objects or between these objects and a general rule; it occurs instead between a singularity (which thus becomes a paradigm) and its exposition (its intelligibility)' (Agamben, 2009: 23).

Agamben describes this space as a mediality that is always presupposed, a quasi-mystical dimension transcendent to every speech act which is cast into oblivion so as to make every concrete speech act possible. This is the real habitat of the human, whose most extensive potentiality corresponds to his impotence. While Foucault proposes his fictional history to answer the questions of the present, Agamben takes into account the deeper "demand" of all the potentiality dissolved into the act (Agamben, 2018a: 29–34). This is why he describes human truth as an irreducible errancy (apparently similar to the one Foucault was looking for in Binswanger's concept of the imagination in 1954 (Foucault, 1993), even though that was subordinated to a phenomenological notion of subject which both Foucault and Agamben criticise).

In the 1997 lecture from which we begin ('Verità come erranza'), this dimension is gained by leaving aside the concept of the sovereign subject and the perspective of cognitive knowledge. Unlike Foucault, however, Agamben does not conduct his reflection by means of an analysis of the historical conditions of the actual subject.

Agamben enquires into the possibility of separating knowledge from cognition, starting from a technical question in mediaeval philosophy. It is the issue of whether the intelligibility of a thing, that is, its truth, is to be considered as other than the thing itself and other than the act of knowledge. This aporia concerns what was known as "intentional being", or the truth. In the first chapter of his *Commentary on John*, Meister Eckhart defines the aporia in these terms: if the form or species by which a thing is seen or known is different from the thing itself, we could not know the thing through it; but if it were completely indistinct from the thing then it would be useless for knowledge. In both cases, it would be either useless or even a hindrance to knowledge (Eckhart, 1981).

This aporia can be explained in other terms: the truth or intelligibility of a thing can be neither simply another thing nor the thing itself. What is crucial is the ontological status of truth. And this is an aporia that affects all mediaeval culture, shaping for example the fundamental attunement of Stilnovist poetry (Agamben, 1993a: 63ff).

Observing this aporia, Agamben finds the opportunity to separate truth and cognitive knowledge, since the intentional relation does not run between a subject and an object, but rather between the Being and its own intelligibility, its truth. Therefore, it is not a matter of a relationship between a knowing subject and a known object: it is 'an internal tension, an *intus tensio* of the Being', akin to the urgency which, in Heidegger, is bestowed upon the human being thanks to the original disorientation caused by its not having a language and not always being a subject (Agamben, 2004: 57–62).

Unlike modern thought, Agamben defines the ontological and non-cognitive status of truth by interrupting the relation between subject and object through the question of intelligibility as such; and, in just the same way, the question about visibility disrupts the conception of vision as a relation between seeing and seen, and the question of sayability breaks with the conception of language as a mere means of communication.

'In all these cases the truth is removed from the cognitive sphere and restored to ontology', that is, it assumes the form of a potentiality, which somehow underlies and yet is never taken as a theme by theoretical considerations regarding that relationship of subject and object. In Agamben's opinion, this is the only way we can rediscover the real essence of truth: it is not a self-evident *adequatio*, but rather an unstoppable straying, making Plato's fictitious etymology of *alé-theia* as 'divine errancy' an inexhaustible movement of Being itself. Summarising Heidegger (2002), Agamben writes: 'Errancy is not a dimension in which the human being finds itself by happenstance; it always moves in the errancy, which, as *Un-Wahrheit*, non-truth, belongs to the essence of truth itself and is inseparable from the very opening of *Dasein'* (Agamben, 1997: 16).

Setting aside the cognitive status of truth, Agamben suggests that we think of truth as a 'contemplation without knowledge', an ecstatic staring at the "voiceless suspension" — the hanging thought — before the linguistic determination allows the human being to define itself as a historical animal, and before the movement of the exception defines every form of life (Abbott, 2011; Castanò, 2018).

Indeed, when Agamben writes about truth and a new concept of ethics, he is thinking of the emancipation from a dispositive. But this dispositive is conceived more broadly than Foucault's: Agamben's dispositive is, first of all, a mechanism which initiates the historical plot of mankind, the beginning of which leads back to the fundamental distinction between *zoé* and *bios*, that is, the elementary ontological dichotomy that gives form to human life. Rather than the disposition of historical relationships of force that combines subjectivation and subjection,

Agamben's dispositive combines subjectivation and de-subjectivation, fulfilling life and yet reducing it to its identities.

3. Telling the truth

In the Introduction to *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault describes the history of truth as the analysis of 'the problematisations through which being offers itself to be, necessarily, thought'. Yet, this is not a Heideggerian or Hegelian claim, since Foucault immediately specifies that these analyses can be carried out only by studying 'the practices on the basis of which these problematisations are formed' (Foucault 1990: 11). In an interview from the same year, the French philosopher describes his own work as writing the history of the relations between thought and truth, 'the history of thought as thought of the truth', that is, the history of the events and the practices that allow things to enter the games of true and false (Foucault, 2001b: 1487–1497).

We saw how Foucault interprets the *shift* in the conception of truth from Descartes to Nietzsche, overcoming the conception of the subject intrinsically capable of truth solely by virtue of his acts of knowledge. What he eventually identifies as 'truth' is not a pure dimension destined to be entirely fulfilled through the sublation of all accidents at the end of history. As a matter of fact, according to Foucault, truth is the dispositional order that shapes and conditions all historical positivities, such as 'procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements'. This policing of discourses and practices, and the systems of power are intertwined with one another: they produce and sustain each other; and this reciprocal implication creates a regime of truth, an expression that Foucault uses to distinguish this conception of truth from ideology and superstructure. Every system of power relations and every epoch has its own truth regime: 'The political question, to sum up, is not error, illusion, alienated consciousness, or ideology; it is truth itself' (Foucault, 2001a: 132–133).

The Nietzschean philosophy proclaims the end of the *Cartesian moment*. And hot on its heels, Foucault addresses the way in which certain moral discourses and prescriptions have turned into the ahistorical and universal description of human nature, and the variety of practices by which the subject is formed as a historical positivity in relation to the events of truth. Foucault uses the word *alethurgy* to define this relation between subjectivity and the events productive of truth. This term is intended to replace the Heideggerian notion of *alētheia* as the unveiling of

truth with the conception of both produced and productive truth (Foucault, 2014: 6–7; Deere, 2014: 523). Setting aside the cognitive notion of truth, Foucault embarks on a reflection concerning ethics conceived as the critical spirit in connection with the actual historical conditions governing the discourses and relations we are surrounded by.

In the Eighties, Foucault begins to construct the positive side of his archaeology: while the archaeological analysis brought to light the warp and weft by which a regime of truth is created, Foucault now begins to consider the ways in which we can play 'the same game differently' or play 'another game, another hand, with other trump cards' (Foucault, 1997: 295). Since there is no *dehors* to the truth games — which are the condition for every discourse and act — Foucault provides the historical tools necessary to take them into account critically and play the game differently. In light of this shift, Foucault plays ethics off against morality.

The first significant occurrence of the word 'ethics' in Foucault's work may be found in the Preface that he writes for the English translation of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, in 1977. He defines this work as a manual for the 'art of living', an 'ethics' (Foucault, 1977a). Five years later, Foucault describes his *History of Sexuality* in the same terms (Foucault, 1997: 131).

In the Introduction to the second volume of the *History of Sexuality*, the distinction between ethics and morality is clearly stated: 'By "morality", one means a set of values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies'. Sometimes, these rules and values are explicitly taught by coherent doctrines and systematic ensembles, but more often they form a complex and diffuse interplay of elements. But morality is also assigned a narrower meaning: 'The real behaviour of individuals in relation to the rules and values that are recommended to them', the level of obedience or resistance to prescriptions and values, the fulfilment or transgression of a standard of conduct.

But prior to all morality, one must take into account how, by acting with reference to the prescriptive elements of the code, one forms oneself as an ethical subject. This is 'ethics' proper: given a code prescribing how we ought to act, there are different manners in which we might conduct ourselves morally and 'different ways for the acting individual to operate, not just as an agent, but as an ethical subject of this action' (Foucault 1990: 25–26). Ethics concerns the hiatus between a moral code and the way one practises its prescriptions. It is not simply a matter of self-awareness: given a historical set of relations and discourses, ethics is a process of self-formation through which one moulds oneself as an ethical

subject by delimiting a particular part of the self upon which the moral practice will rebound, defining one's relation to the precepts that one will follow, and deciding on a certain attitude as a moral goal (Foucault, 1990: 28). Ethics is indissociable from ascetics, that is, work, exercise, decision, self-constitution. The overcoming of the subject in the modern sense does not lead Foucault to the freezing of human action, as is the case in some structuralist perspectives. In fact, it leads him to reconsider ethics as a process of emancipation from historical conditions of subjectivation: 'The formation and development of a practice of the self which aims at the constitution of oneself as the fabricator of the beauty of one's life' (Foucault, 2001b: 1487–1497).

Foucault does not deal with a substantial self, but with a *relation to the self*. Subjectivity rather than subject; the practical reflexivity by which one constructs oneself, rather than a substance or a transcendental determination (Foucault, 1997: 289–291; Gros, 2005). There is not a sovereign subject, but rather a life-long exercise of mastering and constituting oneself as an aware subject of action. Thus, sovereignty is not a given fact, but is achieved through an awareness of the historical conditions in which we live, and which produces us as raw material for our ethical elaboration. Among these productive conditions, there is what Foucault calls morality or moral code, even though it cannot erase all possibilities of free action: the many-layered complexity of Foucault's dispositive implies the interplay of multiple relational segments, which variously condition the individual. Such complexity is precisely what allows the individual to forge an ethical project in the gaps left by dispositional constraints.

This was already the case in the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* and the interviews on the analytic of power, in the Seventies. In the Eighties, as Foucault comes to concentrate more on subjectivation than subjection, he explicitly treats a historical substance we are required to obey, but that we can try to mould aesthetically, making our life a work of art.

While our Christian world is characterized by obedience to laws and moral prescriptions, 'Greek ethics is centred on a problem of personal choice, of aesthetics of existence'. It is not a question of a revival of Greek ethics: 'I think there is no exemplary value in a period which is not our period', says Foucault. It is a question of embracing 'a treasury of devices, techniques, ideas, procedures, and so on, that cannot exactly be reactivated, but at least constitute, or help to constitute, a certain point of view which can be very useful as a tool for analysing what is going on now — and to change it' (Foucault, 1983: 234–236).

Perhaps due to the neoliberal revolution (Dean, Zamora, 2019; Brown, 2015: 73–78), Foucault felt that the time of the moral code based on obedience

was almost up (Foucault, 2001b: 1549–54)it was time to imagine a way to take advantage of the spaces of freedom that seemed to open up. In the *History of Madness* and in the books and courses of the Seventies, Foucault already dealt with an objectifying cure that extrapolates the truth of the subject, makes it the object of knowledge and gradually replaces it with a normalised truth. In the Eighties, studying Greek ethics, essentially in the Stoic and Epicurean texts, Foucault puts the care — *souci* — of the self in the foreground.

Descartes, Foucault explains, cuts scientific rationality loose from morality (Foucault, 1983: 279–280). But the modern State expands the task of caring for one and all that the Christian pastorate had produced in its first centuries. This care is no longer aimed at a transcendent redemption, but rather at the demand of security coming from modern societies. As a function of this task of care, procedures of examination and control of the individual's reality are adopted to produce a detailed and economic knowledge to which the individuals and their relationships are subjected. The events of this production, the issues it faces, and the new problems it raises can only be seen from a critical perspective, outside of a merely cognitive relation with truth, from which one can reveal the historical and pragmatic feature of categories which are believed to be universal and necessary. Taking care of the self — which is not just a call to introspection and an endless interpretation of one's secret nature — means exercising the ability to observe obliquely the discourses and the set of relationships that transform us into objects of knowledge and power, displacing ourselves from what we are in order to master ourselves and tell our own truth (Chignola, 2019: 6). Self-knowledge is not a matter of objectifying one's self in introspective observation, but is rather a practice of concentration and self-guidance aimed at the complete possession and mastery of the self.

Thus, perfect and absolute immanence to the self is the first condition, but this does not mean that the care of the self is a solitary activity that closes the individual off from the world. Introducing a certain distance from the world does not lead to the escape from the world; rather, it allows the individual to act properly in the collective life, thwarting any chance of being heterogeneously dominated and intensifying its regulated and deliberated political action. The care of the self is not a cognitive knowledge of the self. It implies a knowledge intrinsically oriented towards *ethopoiesis*, the shaping of one's behaviour by establishing a close correspondence between acts and words. To give life a particular form; to give form to our impatience for liberty.

We are far from a cognitive sense of knowledge and we are beyond a propositional conception of truth: the correspondence between acts and words,

again, leads to a pragmatic relation to truth. It is not a matter of knowing a truth: beyond the distinction between theory and practice, truth is both learning and fighting, *logos* embedded in the *bios* (Foucault, 2016: 34). Here the sources of inspiration are the Cynic example and *parrhesia*, the practice of freedom — that is not a practice of liberation, since there is not 'a human nature or base that, as a consequence of certain historical, economic, and social processes, has been concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression' (Foucault, 1997: 282) — consisting in the free-spokenness, that is, the courage to tell the truth even beyond the roles one is called to respect by the actual pragmatic conditions, the bravery to cause a scandal not by saying something propositionally wrong or new, but rather transgressing the pragmatic order of sayability (Foucault, 2010: 61–74; Simpson, 2012; Lorenzini, 2015; Sforzini, 2019).

4. Nothing to enact or realize

In reformulating the relation between the subject and the truth, Foucault is led to refuse both the conception of a universal and ahistorical truth, and the *apriori* theory of the transcendental subject. Foucault rejects a theory of the subject so as to ask how a given form of knowledge is possible. Thus, he tries to show how the subject constitutes itself, in one specific form or another, through certain practices and games of truth. Rejecting *apriori* theories of the subject, he aims to analyse 'the relationships that may exist between the constitution of the subject or different forms of the subject and games of truth, practices of power, and so on' (Foucault, 1997: 290). Moreover, rejecting the substantial nature of the subject, Foucault describes it as a form that is not always identical to itself, but rather depends on the type of relationship it enjoys with itself and its circumstances.

Foucault severs the traditional relation between the subject and the truth, as well as between the subject and the truth about itself: the truth is replaced by games of truth, discourses and actual relations of force, dispositives that are never stable and which vary their order with each action that is taken. The subject is both constituted as a subject and subjected as an object of knowledge and conduction. Leaving aside the traditional conception of truth, ethics cannot be defined as the right behaviour to reach true knowledge, salvation, security. Ethics is the way in which the individual takes into account the actual historical conditions which produce it and affect its thought and action, how it dares to take control of its own subjectivation and has the courage to loosen the surrounding relations.

Even in Agamben, the lack of a human essence leads to a rethinking of ethics that ends up far from the prescriptive perspective. But the ontological point of view from which Agamben strives to correct or, at least, complete Foucault's thesis — as we have already seen — implies that truth be given a broader meaning and, hence, that we fashion a new concept of ethics, detached from the notions of actuality and history.

Agamben proposes his first definition of ethics in the concluding lines of *Language and Death*, in 1982: '*Ethos*, humanity's own, is not something unspeakable or *sacer* that must remain unsaid in all praxis and human speech. Neither is it nothingness, whose nullity serves as the basis for the arbitrariness and violence of social action. Rather, it is social praxis itself; human speech itself' (Agamben, 2006: 106). The whole seminar aims at demonstrating that, unlike the other animals, the human has no voice of its own, and so it trembles in anguish, looking for a language to name the things that crowd its world and to create its own environment in which to dwell. The human lacks a language and constantly tries to master a language that it has learnt and that is not its own; this is testified to by certain discursive elements devoid of any semantic reference. These elements are the shifters — the meaning thereof depends on the singular enunciative instance — which can render manifest the existence of language itself (Agamben, 2006: 24–26), that is to say, the presence of a dimension where the language takes place and communicates its own communicability without meaning, implied in every utterance as an unsayable presupposition. That dimension 'is included by means of an exclusion' (Agamben 1998: 7), since it is the ontological condition of every use of language but is not an objective reference for the language itself.

The simultaneous exclusion and inclusion of this Voice, through which man can express determined meanings, is analogous to the movement of the exception by which an original dimension is crossed by a decisive cut that sacrifices it in favour of a determination. This is the gesture that Agamben defines as the intimate relationship between metaphysics and nihilism (Agamben, 2006: xiii), which characterizes every actual thought, speech, act, every decision and determination as violence.

Due to its groundlessness, the human being creates itself by enacting — and so exhausting — its original potentiality. History is the process by which the human being tries to give a definite shape to its groundlessness by deciding what is human and what is not, what has to be done and what does not, sacrificing its potentiality first, and then ruling out anything incompatible with the historical definitions of the human. In 1990, Agamben offers a more explicit definition of ethics, starting from the fact that 'there is no essence, no historical or spiritual

vocation, no biological destiny that the human must enact or realise' (Agamben 1993b: 43). Even though ethics is commonly thought to be an ensemble of rules that allows one to reach one's destiny or realise an essence, it is precisely the lack of a certain substance and a certain destiny that make an ethical experience possible. Otherwise, there would only be mere tasks to achieve. In fact, Agamben is not embracing a nihilistic perspective according to which humans are senselessly abandoned to nothingness: '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*, beyond every actual form one can constitute for one's life.

In Agamben's conception, ethics is not a matter of taking into account the conditions that produce and influence our thought and action in the direction of transgressing the pragmatic order which regulates what can be said and what can be done. If we wanted to continue to use the Foucauldian word "courage", we could say that, in the Agambenian conception, ethics is the courage to bear the groundlessness, the impotence which is intrinsic to the original potentiality of the human, the deep angst of being thrown into the world without anything to do and no language with which to orient one's self within it. Ethics is the dwelling where words and actions take place, the horizon in which human beings discover their *poietic* nature before enacting it as the production of will (Agamben, 1999b: 68–76).

Every determinate form of life enacts the original potentiality intrinsic to the ethical dwelling of the human: 'The only evil consists 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' (Agamben, 1993b: 44).

While Foucault, by rejecting the traditional relation between the transcendental subject and truth, suggests that we embed ethics and politics in an alethurgic perspective, Agamben moves towards the coming ethics and politics as a wandering horizon where 'inoperativeness and decreation are the paradigm' (Agamben, 2001; Agamben, 2010; Cavalletti, 2010; Didi-Huberman, 2017). The theme of inoperativity is taken up by Agamben from Kojève's, Blanchot's and Nancy's texts, and redefined in a brief note to *Homo Sacer*. In Agamben's lexicon, this word does not mean the simple absence of work or a sovereign and useless form of negativity. In fact, inoperativity is the concept by which Agamben thinks 'the existence of potentiality without any relation to Being in the form of actuality' (Agamben 1998: 47): it is 'a generic mode of potentiality that is not exhausted (like

individual action or collective action understood as the sum of individual actions) in a *transitus de potentia ad actum'* (Agamben, 1998: 62; Marchesoni, 2017; Spina, 2019).

Some years later, in *Means without End*, we find a definition of politics which is very similar to that offered in *The Coming Community* for ethics. The common ground is the original inoperativeness of the human being, the radical being-without-work to which politics corresponds. Just like ethics, 'there is politics because human beings are *argós* — beings that cannot be defined by any proper operation — that is, beings of pure potentiality that no identity or vocation can possibly exhaust' (Agamben, 2000: 140). The adjective used by Agamben is "*argós*", that is, *ergos* prefixed with an *alpha* privative, the same word used to define the messianic horizon as the time which deactivates any nominal determination and profanes any sacrifice: *katargéo* (Agamben, 2005: 73–92; Agamben, 2007). The opposite meaning of Foucault's *alethurgy*, *alētheia-ergon*, the production of truth.

In *The Time that Remains*, Agamben describes a messianic time in which the factical forms of human life are revoked, which does not mean that they are merely erased or replaced by 'another figure or another world' (Agamben, 2007: 25), but rather that they are suspended, and lived as if they were not. While identities, conditions, forms of life are possessed as if they were one's own and, in turn, as if they possessed one's life, the messianic vocation leads to their being used *as if not*, present but inoperative. Thus, the suspension of their efficacy in capturing life restores the human to its pure potentiality by making every form of life inoperative, exposed and open to new possibilities.

We find the same soteriological perspective in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, in which Agamben describes a messianic deactivation of every governmental dispositive, including subjectivity and the very language in which it takes place, in order to regain the original inoperativity as a whole. 'In this inoperativity, the life that we live is only the life through which we live; only our power of acting and living, our act-*ability* and our live-*ability*. Here *bios* coincides with *zoè* without remainder' (Agamben, 2011: 251).

All these elements are fundamentally implicit in the confrontation with Foucault's ethics of care, in *The Use of Bodies* (Agamben, 2016: 31–37, 95–108; Chiesa, 2018). The issue of use as an ethical matter traverses the entire Homo Sacer series (Stimilli, 2016). In *Opus Dei*, Agamben states that the coming philosophy must think 'an ontology beyond operativity and command and an ethics and a politics entirely liberated from the concepts of duty and will', that is, beyond the enacting of potency (Agamben, 2013b: 129). A year before, in *The Highest Poverty*, Agamben had analysed the Franciscan example of life, underlining

the merit of having pitted use against ownership, yet pinpointing the limit of having thought it 'only negatively with respect to the law'. Use is never conceptualised in itself by the Franciscans. The book ends with the question as to whether it is possible to translate use — 'that is, a relation to the world insofar as it is inappropriable' — into an *ethos*. Agamben asks: 'What ontology and which ethics would correspond to a life that, in use, is constituted as inseparable from its form?' (Agamben, 2013a: 144).

Having set aside the idea of a human essence to be fulfilled, and having claimed that human dwelling is the errancy without one's own voice in a horizon of potentiality, it follows that every time a form bestows an identity upon a life, every time a will enacts the means-end chain, every time we claim ownership over the world, we fall into a violent game that involves limiting our original potentiality. This is why Agamben examines the ontological implications of a new kind of (inoperative) relation, that of use.

And it is not a matter of a different economy of relations as a possible horizon for a different politics, as Foucault would suggest with his concept of manifold dispositives and ethics of the care of the self (Agamben, 1998: 187). Bartleby, Agamben says, is not revealing a new truth through his life and is not giving a new form to his life: Bartleby places himself in the horizon of pure mediality without content (Agamben, 1999a); also, in the "gesture" and the dance, Agamben finds the paradigm of a new conception of ethics that results from the separation of the subject and the actual action (Agamben, 2018c). 'Inoperativity is not another action alongside and in addition to all other actions, not another work beyond all works: it is the space — provisional and at the same time non-temporal, localized and at the same time extra-territorial — that is opened when the apparatuses that link human actions in the connection of means and ends, of imputation and fault, of merit and demerit, are rendered inoperative' (Agamben, 2018b: 85). As a matter of fact, in every actual form of life, in every (self)-constitutive movement, we are always taken by a biopolitical dispositive; this is why the evil is not a discrete action, but the act itself. The concept of use is intended to deactivate this ontology.

In *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben takes into account the Greek verb "to use": *chrēsthai*. To us, "to use" means the transitive action of a subject on an object. However, the meaning of the Greek verb is different, since its very form is neither active nor passive, but rather stands in the diathesis that ancient grammarians called "middle", an indeterminate zone between activity and passivity where what is referred to is not the relation to an object but rather the relation the subject has with itself. Agamben explains the particular function of this verb, writing that the

subject who performs the action, by the very fact of achieving it, is not acting transitively on an object, but above all affects itself in the process; that is to say, on the other hand, the subject does not stand transcendentally aloof from the action, since it itself is the place of its occurring. 'We can therefore attempt to define the meaning of *chrēsthai:* it expresses the relation that one has with oneself, the affection that one receives insofar as one is in relation with a determinate being' (Agamben, 2016: 28–29). Use is a new figure of human praxis, by which the dichotomy of agent and patient is deactivated, and subject and object, constituent and constituted, are indeterminated.

Foucault himself, working on the relation with the self, comes up against the problem of the meanings of the verb *chrēsthai* during his lectures in 1982, but his interpretation slips back into the concept of care of the self. To him, taking care of the self means to concern oneself with the subject of a series of *uses*, conducts, inclinations, behaviours. In Foucauldian terms: 'Taking care of oneself will be to take care of the self insofar as it is the "subject of" a certain number of things [...]. It is insofar as one is this subject who uses, who has certain attitudes, and who has certain relationships etcetera, that one must take care of oneself. It is a question of taking care of oneself as subject of the *khresis'* (Foucault, 2005: 57).

According to Agamben, Foucault seems to ignore the fact that the word *chresis* already designates a relation to the self by which every possible reference to a subject is removed. On the contrary, the fact of dealing with the active subject of care as a subject which has a relation of care to the self, and defining care as the relation of concern with the subject of use, means that what one is taking care of is the subject of the relation of use. Therefore, the subject of care is transcendent with respect to an object and, in turn, calls for yet another order of care with respect to himself .

In fact, the risk of a *regressus ad infinitum* is probably exaggerated here. Foucault tempers the risk of a solipsistic relationship between the subject and the self by introducing care into a series of relations. The care of the self is not a solitary activity: it always presupposes the accompaniment of an older brother or a master (Foucault, 2005: 58), and it takes the form of eminently social activities (Di Gesù, 2019; Gros, 2005: 702). If the care of the self is a process of education and self-constitution, it is always a relational activity. The self is not a pre-existent thing which the subject establishes a relationship with.

Trying to replace the principle of the transcendence of the *ego* with an enquiry into the subject's forms of immanence, Foucault offers the example of care as a work that 'does not aim to split the subject, but to bind him to himself [...] in a form in which the unconditional character and self-finality of the

relationship of the self to the self is affirmed'; and this work is possible within the relation of a master and his pupil (Foucault, 2005: 532). In other words, the subject is the relation that is established by these relational activities, thanks to which one learns to recognize the archaeological geometries and genealogical histories that produce it.

Hence, we can ask why Agamben overlooks this Foucauldian insight about the teaching relation (Cavalletti, 2017). As a matter of fact, it would have made the understanding of the Foucauldian passage which Agamben cites less enigmatic: 'The self with which one has the relationship is nothing other than the relationship itself [...], it is in short the immanence, or better, the ontological adequacy of the self to the relationship' (Foucault, 2005: 533).

Foucault aims at uncovering the self-narration of a transcendental subject and looks for new forms of subjective immanence. His reflection leads to a new definition of ethics, that is not a mere set of norms, but a relational form of life. Foucauldian ethical life flourishes only thanks to relational activities of care by which one learns to recognise in critical terms the ensembles of forces and discourses, and the games of truth that give shape to one's life, in order to constitute one's self autonomously. These relations and the historical games of truth that produce them are the critical starting point, and the constitution of new political relations is a consequence of the care of the self.

The Agambenian critique of the cognitive relation between the subject and truth leads to the ethics of inoperativity and the concept of use, as Agamben's project of integrating Foucault's thesis in an ontological way is aimed at the overcoming of the metaphysics of relation. Therefore, ethics is not a matter of relations, but rather of overcoming the form of the relation, which is always a 'positing of relation with the nonrelational' in the form of the ban (Agamben 1998: 29). Agambenian ethics is the effort of regaining the nonrelational dimension that is presupposed by every thought, discourse, act — including that of care and self-constitution — and that is the dimension of unexpressed potentiality (cf. Prozorov, 2009b).

While Foucault aims at renewing the relations of power by disrupting the constituent movement — for example through the observation of sadomasochistic relations — and by submitting to it the praxis of use, Agamben designates the exceptional geometry that underlies constituent power as his own critical objective, in order to offer a destituent gesture. The space in which bare life has been exiled is also occupied by the form-of-life, which inverts the movement of the exception: the form-of-life is not a determined form of life, but the object of

the ban that 'no longer has the form of a bond or exclusion-inclusion of bare life, but of intimacy without relation' (Agamben, 2016: 236).

5. Conclusion

1. In his last article, Foucault writes that life is nothing other than 'what is capable of error'. The subject would not arise, therefore, in relation to truth, but in the furrow of errancy.

Agamben interprets this "erring" as "going astray", that is not mistaking, but wandering; not as the opposite of the truth, but as its condition. Erring means to move without knowing one's goal, and this is the movement that places subjectivity within the ethical dimension. During a lecture delivered in 2009 at the European Graduate School, Agamben exposed this concept by referring to the "*lignes d'erre*" that Fernand Deligny drew in order to describe the paths of autistic children's movements on transparent sheets which, once superimposed, showed not only a tangle of senseless lines but also the recurring of certain singular points. These lines of wandering trace the boundaries of a form-of-life which must not be confused with the sovereign conscious subject, but which nevertheless arises as a condition of every act. Similarly, erring would indicate the configuration of a subjectivity as a form-of-life, caught in such a destabilizing errancy that makes possible a discourse on truth detached from knowledge.

2. Rather than simply completing the Foucauldian reflection, Agamben ends up demonstrating Foucault's belonging to a very problematic ontological scenario, which has to be overcome consistently with the denunciation of the link between Western metaphysics and violence. Foucault's and Agamben's concepts of 'errancy' seem to arise from very different intentions: Foucault interprets this inexhaustible movement as a constant and self-constituting self-critical dislocation; Agamben, denouncing the aporias of the constituent movement, envisions a gesture of decreation that redeems actuality, bringing to light the potential horizon against which it stands out, and that in ethical terms is errancy itself.

Foucault is placed on a historical level, providing ethical and political tools for critique and struggle. Agamben, adopting a messianic perspective, imagines a deactivating practice aimed at happiness beyond history, and leaves many troubling questions of human life unanswered. Even within an optimistic perspective, from which an idea of a happy life can be foreshadowed, the

paradigmatic figures offered by Agamben are dramatic monads, exhausted not only by the power that seizes them, but also by the same attempt to inhabit the horizon of impotence.

3. It is possible, however, to consider the profanatory movement — which disrupts the historical positivities and allows them to retain their potentiality within their actuality — as the preliminary moment for a critical analysis aimed at establishing a more conscious relationship with reality and with others in history. Rather than dwelling on the ontological horizon as such, this would allow the preservation of the image of the panorama against which every experience stands out: we cannot embrace the whole transcendental horizon, but we can assume it as the very scenario in which we get in touch with actual positivities.

It would be a meditative practice in the true sense of the word: a posture that, even though in a problematic way, would allow us to adhere to history without remaining imprisoned within it. In order to prevent a dramatic starvation as occurred in the case of Bartleby, this would demand an inexhaustible alternation between constitutive and destituent movements: exactly what Agamben does not admit, speaking as he does merely of the *praxis* of *inoperare*, a praxis whose positive movement corresponds to a deactivating gesture.

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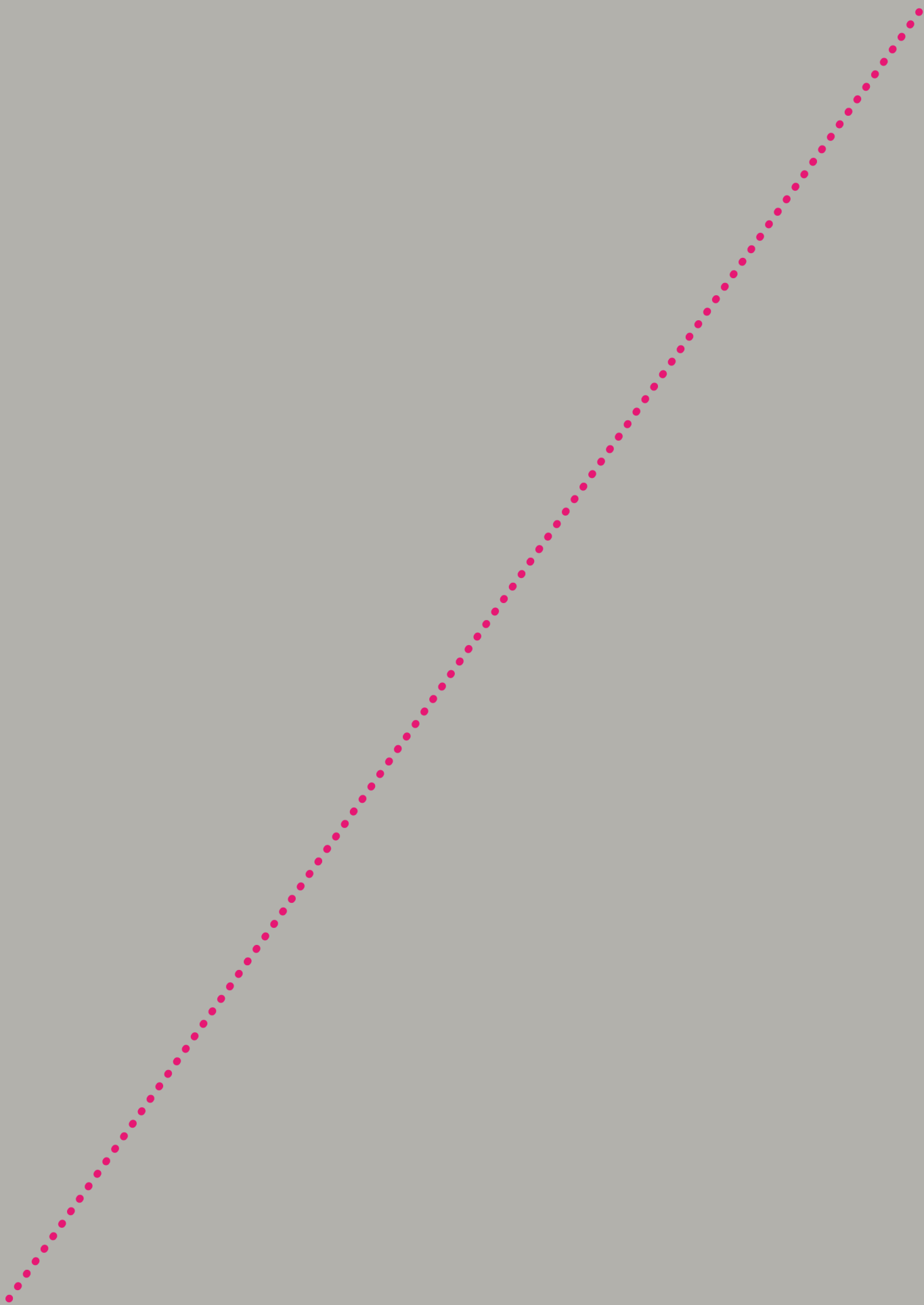
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