

AGAMBEN, G. (2015) *THE USE OF BODIES*. A. KOTSKO, TRANS. STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS.

Prefatory Note

Throughout the book he will mix both critical argument *against* and positive/affirmative argument *for*.

Prologue

He makes a distinction between:

Private Life	Public Life
Clandestine	Apparent
Secret	Open
Personal	Shared
Disconnected	Connected
Particular	General
Bare life – <i>zoe</i>	Politically qualified life – <i>bios</i>

He says we must carry each into the other, in order to go beyond private-public as the split we use to think life. We must do this in order to discover a form-of-life and a common use of bodies. Both public and private will be able to escape to this form-of-life [and thrive there].

PART I – THE USE OF BODIES

§1 – The Human Being Without Work

He wants to install use as a fundamental political category (pace Arendt's *action*). The slave's activity is use of the body, not for economic production, but for the necessary tasks that reproduce bodily life (*zoe*), so that the master can pursue *bios*. The slave is necessary for *bios*, but he must remain in *zoe*. Thus he and his activity, the use of the body, is at the threshold between *zoe* and *bios*.

The slave is not property, he is part (*morion*) of the body of the master. Use of his body = use of the master's body. The master thus cannot contract out the use of the slave. Only the master can use him. The use of the (slave's) body is not for economic production, it is not work, not *poiesis*. It is unproductive praxis and mode of life. Thus the slave is fundamentally different from the capitalist

worker. Slave is for use of the body, not for work/rent/sale. One cannot alienate the use of the (slave's) body, it is not *work*, whereas the worker's work is alienated into the product. There is, Ag thinks, something to be discovered in the figure of the slave, a human being who works, but who is not, and cannot be, a worker.

§2 – Chresis

Somatos chresthai = the affection one receives by being in relation to bodies. *Chresthai* is a verb in which the subject uses and is used, s/he is inside the action. *Chresthai* is both active and passive. It renders subject/object (agent/patient) distinction inoperative, so that a new figure of human praxis can emerge. Not: I use you; but: I am affected and constitute myself and you by entering us both into a relationship of use. [Very Butler here, in that I am necessarily constituted by my encounters with others.] Love is the affection we receive from use. There is a strong idea of the immanent autoconstitution of being here: we make ourselves together through our relations. This makes it hard to distinguish constituent and constituted [see Intermezzo I and the Epilogue for more on this].

§3 – Use and Care

Socrates wants user and used, soul and body, to be distinct (and to set the former as sovereign over the latter), but Ag, through Foucault, wants to make them indistinct. For Ag, to use = to enter into a relation with oneself insofar as one is in relation with others. One's self is subject, but it is constituted necessarily by others [and by one's own use-of-self], and so cannot be sovereign over them, or separated from them, or exist without them. Use is a process of desubjectification [into the swarm?], a prejudicial relation, an exclusive inclusion of others in a community of life. Therefore, use does not know subject and object [just as the Greek verb for use does not], and the indeterminacy between them allows a common and non-despotic experience to flourish. This experience allows for the emergence of "another figure of human praxis," which is something we have lost [since Socrates?].

§4 – The Use of the World

Marx's use value took use to be = utilizability of an object. But we need to know a use that is other than utilizability. Ag finds much potential in Heidegger. H sees Dasein not as a subject separate from the world (and so for H subject and object are indeterminate), but as something that uses the world, whose first immediate relation to the world is use. This relation is familiarity, handiness. Anxiety troubles this familiarity, and so care is needed, and care displaces use from its primary place in Dasein's ontology. Use becomes improper to Dasein, and care proper. And so for H the work of the human excludes the use of the body (even as it includes it). The later H wants to return use to its first place in Dasein's ontology, and here use means more than 'utilize'; it means to enjoy something by having it in use, to let something present come into presence. However, this use is still *energeia*, not *chresthai*. For

Ag we need a use that is not conceived of as realizing potential by making it actual. We need use to be an ontology beyond, or irreducible to, or more than, the potential-into-act conversion.

§5 – Use-of-Oneself

There is no sense of “self” without use. One’s self-awareness, handiness with one’s own body, familiarity, self-regard is all the *outcome* of the use of one’s own body, one’s use-of-oneself. The self is not pre-established, it is forged through use-of-oneself. Use-of-oneself is the mode of being of the living thing. It is not hypostatizing (accreted concrete traces) and not substantializing. Being is not substance, but use-of-oneself; Being is not realized in hypostasis, but dwells in use. The idea of use-of-oneself supercedes binaries like essence/existence and possible/actual. In the activity of use we deactivate the given fact, to open a new possible use-of-ourselves.

§6 – Habitual Use

He wants to get away from understanding *use* as the activation of a potential in order to produce works, outcomes, objects. It is, rather, more a habit, an ability, a skill, a facility – it is not something that *belongs* to a subject. These are not possessions that a subject can *have*. Human beings are not pre-existing entities that can be sovereign, transcendent title holders of such faculties. Rather, we are living beings that continuously constitute ourselves through use-of-ourselves. It is therefore absurd to think that a self/will can *possess* habit/skill/facility; that self/will is *constituted by* the acts-of-use that a habit/skill/facility undertakes. The archetype of use is contemplation: it has no subject and no object. Habit as use-of-oneself is a form-of-life, it is a being disposed, inclined in a certain way (see III, 5), toward a certain mode of existence.

§7 – The Animate Instrument of Technology

An opaque chapter. He is still searching for the figure of the slave, the “animate instrument,” because, recall, it stands/mediates between *zoe* and *bios*, and therefore muddies the division between them, and perhaps therefore points to a way beyond the division. Here the figure of the instrumental cause, an entity that does its own proper thing, but in doing its own thing, contributes vitally to the end goal of some other entity. The slave is just that: he uses his body, but in doing so he is achieving his master’s end goals. The technology/inanimate example here is the axe, whose proper function is to split wood, but which is also vital to the carpenter’s end goal of producing a bed. The splitting function is proper and immanent to the axe; the making the bed function is external to and transcends the axe (“the axe knows nothing of the bed”). Both the axe and the slave are *both* their own *and* belong to another, and it is not possible to distinguish which of these they are. Machine technology was suppose to free modern humans from the bare life of laboring on nature and allow us to be fully human, which (by our reckoning) means to master nature. So, like the slave, machine technology mediates/stands at the

threshold between bare life (*zoe*) and full life (*bios*). Neither figure, on their own, is the solution to the problem of bare life. But Ag. definitely thinks they both hold some potential for thinking beyond bare life. We must reconnect ourselves to our use of bodies.

§8 – The Inappropriable

The idea of this chapter is to sketch the parameters of what is not appropriable, what is common. His underlying move is to urge us away from the idea that *we* should appropriating X instead of *them*, and instead try to see all Xs as inappropriable, to imagine a world without *proprios*, without propriety, without property.

The Franciscans tried to renounce property and find use in the aftermath, but Ag would like to find a use that is not the result of a negation, that is not the outflow of a subject, but a use that is founded on the very nature of things.

An example of the inappropriable is justice, which is not a good that one possesses, but is a state of the world, a good that cannot be made one's own. *Use* is the way we relate to (or take part in) this inappropriable good. For example, the body appears to be our own (ala Husserl [and Locke]), but we find fast that impropriety is just as important to the body as propriety. There is always a foreignness to Dasein's experience. This impropriety makes agent and patient hard to distinguish. Language is the same: it is deeply common (inappropriable), and yet we make it familiar, proper to us, in a way. To use is to oscillate between appropriation and disappropriation, home and abroad, having and not having...i.e. it is to *inhabit*. So the project of inhabiting oneself is to make oneself both proper-and-improper to oneself. Intimacy is the name of our use-of-oneself as a relation to the inappropriable. Privacy wants to appropriate use-of-oneself to create sovereign individuals with proper bodies. The inappropriable, on the other hand, is what is common; to share [in] it is love.

We need to deactivate – render inoperative – the idea of potential-dissolving-into-act, and the idea of activity rendering works of economic value, and any other ideas of appropriated inappropriables (subject, individual, sovereignty, property, commodity, etc.) that we currently take as given.

Intermezzo I

The pivot of this chapter is Foucault's argument that our self as subject is not something that pre-exists our actions, our use-of-oneself (as with A's *hypokeimenon* or Descartes' ego), but that it is in the course of our actions, our use-of-oneself, that our self as subject emerges. There is no pre-given subject, nothing "thrown under and at the base," rather there is just a perpetual process of self-subjectivization [i.e. of throwing oneself under and at the base of oneself]. As a result, it isn't really possible to distinguish between a constituent power (which assumes some subject under and at the base) that then

forms up into a constituted power. There can be no "multitude" that is there beforehand and holds constituent power at the start of history, and then loses it in when constituted powers are formed. Rather society perpetually constitutes itself, and in that process constituent subject and constituted subject are indistinguishable. So are agent/patient, subject/object.

More generally, we need to move away from the conception (creator → the work) and understand the World [or society, with Castoriadis], as a work of art that gives birth to itself, that gives rise to itself as a form-of-life through its own self-creation. And the World never stops doing this activity of giving rise to itself as a form-of-life.

So, if we self-create our subjectness, there can and should be an ethics to that process. Not a juridical, Kantian ethics of *a priori* rules, but an accreted ethics of norms that emerge from the practice of use-of-oneself. This is what Foucault called care of the self, and it points to the idea that we can be intentional about this process of self-creation of the self, we can ask if the habits we are forming are good, and change them if not. Moreover, we do this in community with others doing the same thing, and this is the problem of democracy, power, domination.

At the end Ag seems to advocate that we think a form-of-life that does not assume a free subject [that exists *a priori*] in an Ungovernable condition beyond domination and power.

PART II – AN ARCHEOLOGY OF ONTOLOGY

Ontology does not point us to the Truth of reality. In any given period, humans construct an ontology for themselves, and that ontology defines what is thinkable, knowable, sayable in that period. This defining operation is important, because we humans are *always* making ourselves, and the ontology we take as given heavily *structures* this self-making activity. Since every ontology is human-generated and historical, it is possible to do an archeology of it, and that is what Agamben proposes to do for the ontological apparatus of the West.

§1 – Ontological Apparatus

In Aristotle's ontology, there is a division between "this man" and "man in general," between existence and essence. Being serves as a presupposition to language, which in turn manifests being. The *hypokeimenon* (the subject) in Aristotle, is a singularity that stands under-and-at-the-base of (i.e. it is a pre-sup-position of) language. For Aristotle, we have to understand the question of being as a historical question: the question of "what it is for a being to be" should be instead, "what it *was* for a being to be." That is, we need to understand a subject/self/being as presupposed in the sense that it is always already known to us through its *use* in *time*. This *hypokeimenon*, Agamben says, is essential to Aristotle's ontological apparatus. It is the pre-existing subject on which he sought [and we in the West

have sought..?] to establish a *polis*. Agamben reminds us here that the vegetative soul is excluded/included in the rational soul just as vegetative/private/reproductive life [*zoe*] is excluded/included in political/public life [*bios*]. Today, the answer to the question of “what it was for being X to be” is bare life, and this fact means that *zoe* and *bios* is now an untenable distinction. Aristotle’s ontological apparatus [and probably also Aristotle’s *hypokeimenon*], Agamben says, is no longer viable.

§2 – Theory of Hypostases

In Neoplatonism and elsewhere, we get this new, hypostatic ontology that sees existence/beings as an outcome/residue of the activity of Being/essence. The main example of this is the trinity: God produces three realizations of himself.

God	Three hypostases
Essence	Existence
Being	beings
Potential	Actualization/realization
Rational human nature	Each actual person
Unity, the One	Plurality, the many

In the modern era, Agamben seems to say, God (the One, the absolute) is dead, and so if we retain this hypostatic ontology, all that would be left is existence as a residue of something that was never there. So we obviously need a new ontology, which he hopes is a modal ontology.

§3 – Toward a Modal Ontology

Agamben is trying to create an ontology that makes it *impossible* to think that A *causes* or affects or rules B; an ontology in which, instead, it is only possible to think that A (or B, or C) causes or affects or rules itself. The problem he is working with here is how something goes from essence to existence, or from common form to singularity. The scholastics thought that multiple existences were different *modes* of the same essence, that modes were affectations of a thing itself, rather than whole other things.¹ Scotus thought the common form/potential was *indifferent* to singular manifestations/realizations; Suarez thought the former had an *aptitude* for the latter; and Leibniz thought the former *demand*ed to be the latter. This last is an important opening for Agamben, though

1 They used the terms “common nature” (i.e. essence) and supposition (i.e. existence) – almost as if the particular must be wrested from the general the way private property must be wrested from the world that God gave to men in common.

he wants to say instead that *both* essence and existence are constituted by, or start from, a demand. For Spinoza [who is clearly a hero for Ag], *substance* (God) constitutes itself in various *modes*, which are affectations of substance. Mode is both identical to and different from substance, and so substance is the immanent (not transitive) cause of the modes, which is to say that substance constitutes *itself* in the modes.² The way substance constitutes itself is by being *modified*. If the *conatus* is the demand of a substance to persist, in demanding this, and in persisting, a substance *modifies* itself, i.e. it cycles through modes of itself. The question isn't *what* substance is, but *how* it is; or, better, how it is currently using or expressing itself in a mode. So, common nature/singularity, or essence/existence, or substance/modes are really only two appearances generated by the conduct of the substance (its use-of-itself)— they are modal oscillations, rhythms, harmonies between substance and mode (or essence and existence, or potential and actuality, or common nature and supposition). Modes are eddies in the infinite field of substance.³

[There is also, in this chapter, the question of how a multiplicity relates to a unity, which is theorized by Leibniz as substantial bonds making a demand on monads and harmonizing them into a new substance. Agamben does not want a unity to obliterate difference, but he also thinks it is “shipwreck” to just let the monads be a nondescript aggregate.]

Intermezzo II

The whole section is working intimately with Heidegger. The idea is not to see the human being as a substance/essence/nature, but as an activity/mode-of-existing/test/task. It is a little opaque what that task *is*, but it has to do with Being. The human being is the shepherd of Being, s/he is called by Being into the preservation of Being's truth. Or, the task, as a living being, is to be appropriated on the part of Being by means of Dasein. Or, given that we are thrown, the task is to transform the given, the how-things-are-at-present, into the task. Or, the task is to become human-rather-than animal. This last is a task that can never be completed: we can only ever become human-rather-than-animal like we enter a clearing in the forest. We can only ever *suspend our animality*. But, nevertheless, our task is to do so. This task “can be mistaken for a political task.” [Here we could map the task onto the task to move from *zoe*/bare life to *bios*/political life, but we know from the intro that is not Ag's agenda.] To reject life as presupposed, and to see it instead as a ceaseless project of developing a form-of-life, or, perhaps, various *modes* of life, since, as he says near the beginning, existence is not one specific modality.

2 This ontology renders inoperative cause and effect as we know them: the one-causing and the one-caused are not external but immanent to each other.

3 D&G: consistencies that form on the plane of immanence.

PART III – FORM-OF-LIFE

§1 – Life Divided

The pattern we see over and over again is for the machine to divide a thing that is whole into parts, hierarchize the parts, then rearticulate them into a functioning pseudo-whole. Life is divided into life (vegetative/nutritive/growth)⁴ and living well (action/logos/happiness), and then the two are articulated into the good *polis*, which is autarchic (self-sufficient for achieving happiness). What we have to do is to deactivate this machine-that-divides-and-rearticulates-life so we can think life (and politics) properly, to think it as a form-of-life, as life indivisible from its form. In that way, we can see what life can do, what it is capable of, when it is not locked in the machine-that-divides-and-rearticulates-life. [In the same way, we must deactivate the ontological machine that divides-and-rearticulates being/beings and potential/actual.]

§2 – A Life Inseparable From Its Form

A form-of-life is the always political act of anthropogenesis in which habit, potential, and act are all bound up together. We must free ourselves from the Hobbesian scission of life into bare life and political life to create form-of-life, which is a **non-State politics** in which life is lived for itself, for its potential, for use-of oneself, for act-as-potential. Potential is necessarily common, the province of a multitude. [This is true, as Bakunin says, because alone we are capable of far, far less than we are as a collective.] The point of humanity is to continually realize the intellectual potential of humanity (as Dante said). As with man and citizen in Marx, we must reunite bare life and political life in a form-of-life that is thought, that is potential.

§3 – Living Contemplation

Plotninus rejects the idea that there is a rational/happy/contemplative life that is separate from vegetative life. Both are one: living contemplation. [This is a huge step, for Ag, though we seem not to have learned Plotninus' lesson.] Living well/happiness/politics is a part of all-life, common-life, life as an indivisible whole, one that can take different modes of being [analogous to Spinoza's substance]. [Therefore reason cannot be a *sine qua non* of happiness]. The happy life is that which does not *possess* its form, but which *is* its form. Form-of-life, in which *bios* and *zoe* contract into each other, and neither can be separated from the other.

§4 – Life is a Form Generated by Living

Victorinus adds on to Plotninus' insight, hypothesizing a unity between being and life. Now Being/beings, potential/actual, essence/existence, material/form are all thought in terms of living/life. The latter two interpenetrate and cannot be distinguished. Father and Son are two modes (modifications, or manners of being) of one divine substance. Life is just a mode of living. It is a form

4 This is the drive that pushes a thing toward what it tends to be, i.e. its *conatus*.

that living takes. It is thus a form-of-life, a whole-life made up of life's substance and its modes. More generally, substance does not *have* modes; it *is* its modes. [Agamben's minor-philosophical heritage is Plotinus > Victorinus > Spinoza].

§5 – Toward an Ontology of Style

Form-of-life doesn't pre-exist living, it is manifested in the act of living. We need to neutralize the *zoe/bios* split [something the Franciscans did], to liberate form-of-life, which is the only life that can be happy [a goal he seems to retain, even if he does not share the Greeks' idea of what it is or what we must do to achieve it]. We must live life actively and always, a constant project of life that can only be perceived in its traces⁵ [form-of-lives may be better seen among the excluded/destitute/ill?]. And that life, made up of actions/movements/choices is not random, but is guided/motivated by taste/inclination/style, and the latter is something we can work on, shape, alter toward some tastes and not others. Hence there is an ethics to style. But also an ontology, since the inclinations make up the form-of-life itself. We are not pre-existing subjects with attributes. Form-of-life *is* only its *inclinations toward*, inclinations that can be cultivated, through an ethics of the *clinamen* [a la Foucault's care of the self]. And these inclinations are in *contact* with (not in *relation* with) a complex context that is also itself constitutive of our form-of-life.

§6 – Exile of One Alone with One Alone

Deactivate the division-and-relation of *zoe* and *bios* so that they are indiscernible, and we will see a way out, a happy life as exile/intimacy, beyond/without the *polis*. Intimacy puts us together beyond/without any *relation* (as in the *polis*) or representation. We are only in *contact*. We seek a politics in intimacy that is unmediated by relation, a non-representative politics, that is only forms-of-life in contact and in use.

§7 – “That's How We Do It”

Wittgenstein on chess and language. The pawn is not a thing whose attributes are defined by *a priori* rules. The rules about its use are the same thing as *how it is used* in the game and the same thing as what it is. The accretion of *ways* it is used, the paths it travels. The same is true of language: the rules of grammar don't exist before we speak and then govern how we speak; they are the same thing as *how we use* language. That is, the rule is immanent to use, it does not transcend and pre-exist use. The same is true of being: it is not there at the beginning to manifest itself in beings, it is autoconstituted by beings through use-of-themselves. As animal-and-rational, we form our lives by living them, through use-of-ourselves. That is form-of-life: usage, customs, habits, institutions, norms...

§8 – Work and Inoperativity

Ethical practice should be seen as a test, as an ongoing project. In form-of-life there is no work to

5 Very D&G (new Land made up of flight), or Latour/ANT, or time-geography.

show for life, there is only life/use. Form-of-life *is* its form (mode). It is the contemplation of its own potential to do. Form-of-life renders “the work” inoperative; it renders itself inoperative, in the sense of not being able to “produce a discernible work” [which is what it means to be *operative*] that it can be recognized for. As a result, it is able to constitute itself as a form-of-life. For example, the painter is not a sovereign subject who pre-exists her creative operation, but an anonymous being who constitutes herself as form-of-life. She is not the owner of the work, not the rights-holding author. A form-of-life cannot be recognized for its work, its activity exists in a zone of irresponsibility. In living, form-of-life enters into contact with itself in use-of-itself.

§9 – The Myth of Er

Weird-ass chapter, just like the last book of *The Republic*. The myth says that each soul chooses the form-of-life that it will return to earth as. P wants to hold the souls responsible, as though there is free will (in reality, Ag. says, the choice is greatly constrained). P wants us to engage in the praxis of continually choose the best form-of-life available to us, by using reason to find the mean between extremes. For Ag., the myth is saying: the soul is not *zoe* or *bios*, but *in them and between them*. It keeps them united and prevents them from coinciding. There is contact between *zoe/bios/soul*. There is no representation. That soul is analogous to form-of-life.

Epilogue: Toward a Theory of Destituent Potential

The kicker, which sets out his positive agenda, such as it is. We have to understand the nature of modern political power as an apparatus that carries out a division-hierarchization-rearticulation in a system (e.g. political life-bare life, nomos-anomie, human-animal). We need to render these apparatuses inoperative. The constitutive/constituted power couplet is popular with radicals. But all constituent power can ever do is produce constituted power in a State, and constituent power is then reduced to revising the constitution [at least in liberal democracies]. Destituent potential/power, on the other hand, destabilizes the juridical order *per se*, not only this or that instance of it. DP is free of the sovereign relation, of every relation. It never resolves into a constituted power; it is a violence that does not aim to found a new law. It is a potential that does not aim to resolve itself into an act (but instead hold potential-and-act in contact). It thinks politics beyond any relation, renders relation destitute. [The problem with relation is that it presupposes each element as previously existing, before the relation, as *unrelated* to each other. That is, it assumes ontologically separate entities that add a relation as an additional aspect of their character.] DP renders the relations the apparatus has constructed inoperative, but it does not obliterate the parties to the relation (e.g. *bios* and *zoe*), it causes *contact* between them, which allows them to enter into different uses. So for example democracy holds demos and a-demia, or archy and anarchy, in divided/relation. DP renders the held-in-relation inoperative and allows them to come into contact, so that they can discover what they are capable of when they are not captured in this divided/relation.