

I. Temporality, Eternity, Possibility

If there is one area in which the inadequacies of the received tradition of Western representationalism crystallize, it is in its understanding of time. Human being exists in the dimension of time, it *is* primordially the experience of time. Yet we cannot represent time as we can the other three dimensions in which exist. In fact, we can only represent objects in 3-d space by abstracting them from their being-in-time. I can represent the table in front of me, say, by describing its physical qualities. But my representation, no matter how precise, will never accrue to the object's occurrence in time, its *being* a table.

For a more poignant example, consider how we represent ourselves. If you asked me to tell you about myself, I could relate to you some of the things I do, my likes and dislikes, my personal qualities. But, in a very important way, the "person" I have thus reproduced is not truly myself. I have merely represented an object present-at-hand with various characteristics attached to it, passing over the fact that these qualities, these possibilities for my being, are only ever made manifest through a constant leaping-into-time. Representation can give us objects and qualities, but never their unfolding; it can give us the "world," but not its worlding; it can give us "ourselves," but never our being.

Representationalism's inadequate grasp of time is at the heart of Agamben's critique of what he sees as the progressive destruction of experience in the history of the West in the essay "Time and History." The root of this destructive trend, he claims, is the fact that "the human mind has the experience of time but not its representation" (IH, p. 91). Rather than accepting time as a point of incommensurability between experience and representation, Western metaphysics stubbornly attempts to represent time spatially as a continuous succession of isolable instants. Yet even this deadened experience of time fails to satisfy metaphysics' demand for representation, as we see in a passage from Augustine that Agamben reproduces:

"But the two times, past and future, how can they be, since the past is no more and the future is not yet? On the other hand, if the present were always present and never flowed away into the past, it would not be time at all, but eternity. But if the present is only time, because it flows away into the past, how can we say that it is? For it is, only because it will cease to be...

"If we conceive of some point of time which cannot be divided even into the minutest part of moments that is the only point that can be called present: and that point flees at such lightning speed from being future to being past, that it has no extent of duration at all. For if it were so extended, it would be divisible into past and future: the present has no length."

The past has already been, and the future is not yet; the present continually recedes into the past, so that Augustine cannot say that it is. With its understanding of being as "that which can be represented" (Heidegger, "Age of the World Picture"), Western metaphysics is forced to posit time as non-being and to seek being in an eternity that envelops time but is distinct from it.

Hegel falls into the same representational traps as Augustine in characterizing time as "that which is not when it is, and is when it is not" (IH, p. 98). Time only *is* for Hegel insofar as it is representable—that is, from the eternal perspective of Spirit, the *telos* of history, which, as Absolute *Being*, negates the non-being of time. In its fallen,

historically situated form, spirit is alienated from this eternal dimension of being, and time *is not*. Hegel's devaluation of the historical instant in favor of history viewed as a total, social process goes hand in hand with his belief that authentic history is at odds with "the single individual, whose ideal is happiness" (IH, p. 99). As a fulfillment of Spirit, history is thus produced by men who "know nothing of what is commonly called happiness," who "once they have reached their goal, sag like empty sacks" (IH, p. 99).

Agamben argues convincingly that Hegel's understanding of time and history, more than any other, expresses "the as yet unexplored link between the annulled experience of time for Western man and the negating power of his culture... For the dialectic is above all what makes possible the containment and unification [*dia-legesthai*] of the continuum of negative fleeting instants" (IH, p. 98). The Hegelian dialectic and the experience-denying culture to which it corresponds produce the State, as embodiment of a universal, ahistorical essence unconnected to the individual pursuit of happiness, as the authentic subject of history (IH, p. 99).

Agamben presents Marx's modification of the Hegelian dialectic in stark contrast to Hegel's view of history as a fallen state of Spirit,. For Marx,

"History is no longer, as in Hegel, man's destiny of alienation and his necessary fall within the negative time which he inhabits in an infinite process, but rather his *nature*, in other words, man's original belonging to himself as *Gattungswesen*, from which alienation has temporarily removed him. *Man is not a historical being because he falls into time, but precisely the opposite; it is only because he is a historical being that he can fall into time, temporalizing himself*" (p. 99).

Marx's view of history as constitutive of human being is at odds with representationalism's understanding of time as a succession of non-representable instants and its consequent negation of time insofar as it is alienated from an eternal, ahistorical perspective. On the latter account, as Agamben points out, "truth [historical actuality] will always vie with the process as a whole, and man will never be able concretely, practically, to appropriate his own history" (IH, p. 100). Thus, he claims, an essential task for Western thought since Marx has, been to reconcile a view of human existence as essentially historical with an incompatible, experience- and history-denying, received understanding of time.

Agamben presents several accounts of time from antiquity and modernity as alternatives to the representationalist tradition. Each in a different way challenges two related sacred cows of this tradition: the favoring of a representational, rather than participatory, basis for understanding time, and the consequent need to posit eternity as a departure from the non-existent (because non-representable) flow of time.

Stoicism, for example, saw the view of time as a homogenous succession of instants as "unreal" and bound up with an "infinite postponement" of human *participation* in time. In contrast to this state of passive reflection, the Stoics favored the "*cairos*, the abrupt and sudden conjunction where decision grasps opportunity and life is fulfilled in the moment" (IH, p. 101). Significantly, part of what is appropriated in the *cairos* is a "distill[ation] of different times" in their relation to the moment, allowing the sage to play a role in creation "like a god in eternity" (IH, p. 102). The eternal, unifying element of time is thus thought not as an externality that envelops time (as in Augustine), nor as a *telos* toward which history points (as in Hegel). Rather, eternity is something

very near to us, something we make manifest every time we take possession of our existence by participating in the unfolding of time, rather than merely reflecting on it.

In a similar vein, Walter Benjamin calls for a participatory and anti-representational account of time in the context of a revolutionary political intervention in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” with his injunction that we must “attain to a conception of history” in keeping with what the oppressed have always known, that “the state of emergency is the rule,” not the exception (IH, p. 102). Echoing Stoicism’s delimitation of eternity, Benjamin seeks to normalize the state of exception, which occupies a negative role in traditional political thought similar to that of eternity in traditional theology. Benjamin privileges a view of the moment not as an essentially transitional instant but as a “messianic cessation of happening,” which “comprises the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgment” (IH, p. 102) (cf. the Stoic distillation of different times in the *cairos*). For Benjamin, living in close proximity with the double threat posed by Nazism and Stalinism, “every second was the ‘strait gate through which the Messiah might enter’” (IH, p. 102), an opportunity for a cessation of history and politics as usual.

One additional attempt to reverse representationalism’s binary and oppositional view of the relationship between temporality and eternity, which Agamben does not mention, is Kierkegaard’s *The Concept of Anxiety*. Kierkegaard’s account of time in this book hinges on an experience he terms “the moment.” He distinguishes the ordinary sense of this term as “abstraction from eternity” (p. 86), from a technical usage he introduces, in which the moment designates “that ambiguity in which time and eternity touch each other... whereby time constantly intersects eternity and eternity constantly pervades time” (p. 89). Importantly, Kierkegaard’s understanding of eternity here is emphatically not something abstracted from temporal experience, a *telos* and/or container for history. Rather, it is a space of potentiality that always precedes actuality as the future that we are continually projecting ourselves into. Kierkegaard explicitly distinguishes this experience of self-projection as unfolding from an understanding of it as a relation to a distant futurity. The latter understanding, which corresponds to an immature form of spirit, exemplifies the pitfalls of a representationalist understanding of time by sectioning off “present” and “future” as two distinct instants. Only from an authentically eternal (that is, futural, possible) perspective can the moment be thought, rather than represented, (a distinction Kierkegaard draws with prodigious clarity) in its aliveness as an unfolding into and out of a futural space of possibility.

In *Infancy and History*, Agamben attempts to provide a framework for returning human existence to a primordial relation to what he calls infancy that closely resembles the Kierkegaardian moment. Infancy is a space between potency and act, language and speech, in which a community’s articulation of its self is on the cusp of making the leap from possibility to actuality. The impetus for this return to infancy for Agamben is, again, the destruction of experience. Here, Agamben argues that scientific rationalism, in conflating truth with certitude, has destroyed authentic experience by taking as its objects only events and phenomena that can be accurately predicted based on prior empirical observation. Thus, the current state of human existence is such that we no longer truly *have* experiences, but merely undergo them—that is, assimilate them within our ever-expanding scrolls of representational knowledge without ever letting a single experience become the temporary limit of our selfhood, to permeate us.

Agamben argues that, at this point, the only way to reclaim experience is by existing constantly in relation to the inexperienceable—that which cannot be assimilated within our pre-existing framework for ordering experience. Agamben sees this relation as the common property of humanity. Infancy, as a transcendence of the subject that pre-exists every linguistic formulation, including the purportedly foundational Cartesian “I think,” is a crystallization of this common, unassimilable inexperience. In *The Coming Community*, Agamben thinks this space linguistically as “being-such,” the condition of all predication, devoid of any particular predicate we might attach to ourselves or our community. Human ethicality for Agamben is our forging of the link between potency and act, being being-in-language and speech, that is proper to ourselves, rather than, as for Hegel, a community’s embodiment of a universal, ahistorical principle.

II. Good and Evil

In its relationality to being-such as the not-yet-articulated, common property of all human communities, Agamben’s utopian vision of community would, among other things, call for a relinquishing of the view of the demarcation of an “inside” and an “outside” to a community as ontologically determinate structures reflecting natural reality, rather than predicates attached to a community’s being-such (“I am this, not this”) with no essentialist weight. To take a community’s constitutive exclusions as naturally given is to participate in a mode of sociality Nietzsche identifies in his *Genealogy of Morals* as *ressentiment*. In that book, Nietzsche argues that human moral systems have historically arisen as pragmatic, politically motivated constructions that have subsequently been granted the status of ahistorical descriptions of a naturally given set of prescriptions for human behavior. In defining “good” in terms of qualities of weakness, passivity, and self-effacement, Nietzsche argues that Christian “slave morality” initially arose not because it reflected anything inherent in the constitution of reality, but because it *empowered* those who lacked power by positing a moral superiority in their state of degradation. The production of slave morality was thus, in spite of its elevation of what Nietzsche sees as “life-denying” qualities, no less life- and power-affirming than the noblemen’s morality that preceded it. Slave morality exemplifies *ressentiment*, externalizing a set of qualities associated with one’s enemies as irrevocably evil and other, while overlooking the fact that, in the very act of externalizing them, one has in fact manifested those same qualities.

In a book that examines the usefulness of various conceptions of evil from the history of Western philosophy in accounting for twentieth-century atrocities like the Holocaust, Richard Bernstein concludes, against many commentators, that Nietzsche’s deconstruction of the categories of “good” and “evil” is in fact extremely valuable for this purpose. In spite of the distortion of Nietzsche’s views by numerous anti-Semites seeking a philosophical basis for their bigotry, Bernstein notes that Nietzsche himself actually saw the anti-Semitism of his day as a paradigmatic example of the *ressentiment* he so despised. Bernstein takes this as an indication that Nietzsche’s critique of *ressentiment* would likely have extended to the perpetrators of twentieth-century atrocities like the Holocaust. Moreover, Bernstein notes that, while Nietzsche proposes that we move beyond the categories of “good” and “evil” as they have traditionally been defined and allocated, Nietzsche himself does not exclude “evil” from his own final vocabulary:

“Evil from this perspective is not to be confused with its meaning as used by the priests. When the narrator of the *Genealogy* declares that the priests are the most evil enemies because of their impotence, he is asserting that evil is the violent manifestation of *ressentiment*—the most pervasive and dangerous feature of our modern morality” (Bernstein, p. 129).

In *The Coming Community*, Agamben articulates a conception of the exclusion of evil and the evil of exclusion with strong Nietzschean overtones. For Agamben, the externalization of evil in *ressentiment* is the consequence of an impoverished understanding of the god. In his view, “authentic,” “true,” and “good” are not real predicates that can be attached to an object but rather refer to an object’s taking-place or being-such—its ability to have predicates attached to it:

“God or the good or the place does not take place, but is the taking-place of the entities, their innermost exteriority. The being-worm of the worm, the being-stone of the stone, is divine. That the world is, that something can appear and have a face, that there is exteriority and non-latency as the determination and the limit of every thing: this is the good. Thus, precisely its being irreparably in the world is what transcends and exposes every worldly entity.”

As the condition of this exposure of entities and the attachment of predicates to them, the good for Agamben can never be posited as any particular entity or quality of an entity. The good can only be shown by and as the opening of a space for entities and predicates, including evil. By showing evil as taking place, the good thus reveals itself as the condition of this taking place, as place itself.

In this spatial configuration of linguistic reality, there is simply no room for a positive, space-occupying pseudo-conception of the good (which is place and space itself, not a taking place). Thus Agamben argues that, when the good, the condition for the taking-place of predicates is mistaken for a predicate in itself, the good can only open a space for itself, can only *take place*, by excluding its negation. That is, to depart from Agamben’s terminology momentarily, when a community mistakes its own positive conception of the good for a naturally given linguistic category, it can only do so by excluding its others from the constitution of reality that, due to the superfluous presence of the community’s pseudo-good, has no room for them, relegating them to a category of absolute evil that absolves it of accountability to them. For Agamben, then, true evil is “the reduction of the taking place of things to a fact like others, the forgetting of the transcendence inherent in the very taking-place of things” (CC, p. 15). Agambenian evil in this sense closely resembles *ressentiment*, insofar as it corresponds to a community’s non-irony regarding its own pragmatically motivated, positively articulated conception of the good, and the constitutive exclusion this positive conception entails.

III. Agency and Exclusion in Karen Barad’s Philosophy-Physics

In *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, the philosopher-physicist Karen Barad situates an understanding of exclusion within an elaboration of Niels Bohr’s interpretation of quantum mechanics. Barad argues that, contrary to the pre-quantum understanding of Western representationalism, the demarcation of self-enclosed subjects and objects and their inclusion in or exclusion from mattering, are not inherent in a material constitution

of the world that human beings represent as knowing subjects. Rather, these ways of ordering reality emerge through what Barad calls “agential intra-actions” between ontologically entangled “parts” of the universe which become differentiable only in making themselves manifest to each other. (Hence the term “intra-actions,” rather than “interactions.” Barad avoids the latter term because it would seem to suggest that “objects” have a determinate existence as such prior to their non-final differentiations in particular *intra*-actions). For Barad, agency is not a quality reserved for willful human subjects; it is not a quality at all. Rather, in a sense similar to Agamben’s conception of the good, agency is the condition for our delineating subjects and objects as distinct entities and assigning qualities to them, as well as our making certain objects and qualities matter rather than others.

For Barad, the fundamental ontological unit is not the atom or the atomized, liberal human subject, but the phenomenon. She borrows this term from Bohr, for whom it designates the co-occurrence and co-relationality in a scientific experiment of the observer, the “agencies of observation” (experimental apparatuses), and the observed object. For Bohr and Barad, the delineation of these units within the phenomenon is agentially enacted in particular experimental configurations and cannot be thought separately from these configurations. Quantum physicists have shown, for instance, that light’s dual nature as particle and wave is *ontologically*, not just epistemologically, indeterminate prior to experimental configurations that allow it to be observed as one or the other. When a beam of light is projected through a diaphragm with two slits onto a surface that marks the points where the projected particles (or waves) make contact with it, the result is a diffraction pattern that could only have been produced by the disturbance of a wave passing through the two slits. Yet when an additional apparatus is attached to the diaphragm to measure the momentum of the would-be particle that passes through it (only particles have momentum), the marks on the surface are directly opposite the slits, a pattern that only a particle, not a wave, could have produced. These experimental results validate Bohr’s epistemologico-ontological interpretation of quantum mechanics (as opposed to Einstein’s narrower, strictly epistemic interpretation): light *is* determinately a wave or particle only in conjunction with agential intra-actions that allow it to be *observed* as one or the other.

For Barad, a crucial element of agential practices (including not just experimental configurations but also social and political structures and human/non-human entanglements more broadly) is their relationality to the possible ontological contingencies they exclude—as one version of the two-slit experiment excludes the possibility of light’s acting as a particle and the other excludes its acting as a wave. She writes: “Agency is the space of possibilities opened up by the indeterminacies entailed in exclusions” (p. 182). As for Agamben, though admittedly in a different sense, confrontation with the inexperiencible within a particular configuration of possibilities provides the basis for “discontinuous changes in the topology of the world’s becoming” (MUM, p. 182). Barad finds evidence for the fundamental role of discontinuity in the unfolding of reality at a subatomic level, in the phenomenon of the quantum leap, in which an electron suddenly “leaps” from one orbital to another. As Barad explains, there is a complete spatio-temporal discontinuity between the electron’s occurrence in one orbital and its sudden appearance in another: “Quantum leaps aren’t jumps (large or small) through space and time. An electron that ‘leaps’ from one orbital to another does

not travel along some continuous trajectory from here-now to there-then. Indeed, at no time does the electron occupy any spatial point in between the two orbitals” (MUM, p. 182). Remarkably, Barad’s account suggests that the various moments of rupture posited by thinkers attempting to challenge representationalism’s understanding of time as a continuous succession of instants—the Stoics’ *cairos*, Benjamin’s messianic cessation of history, and Kierkegaard’s moment, to name just a few—are confirmed at a subatomic level as essential elements in the universe’s becoming.

Importantly, though, Barad sees continuity and discontinuity as equally primordial in this regard. She notes: “Not everything is possible at every moment. Interior and exterior, past, present, and future, are iteratively enfolded and reworked, but never eliminated (and never fixed). Intra-actions reconfigure the possibilities for change. In fact, intra-actions not only reconfigure spacetime-matter but reconfigure what is possible” (p. 182). Barad thus refuses to take a stand on the circumscriptive problematic of determinism vs. freedom, as she sees both as untruthful to the real place of agency (human and non-human) in the worlding of the world. We are not entirely responsible for the historical determinations that limit the field of possibilities open to us at a given moment, but we are *accountable* for the agential cuts we help produce, for the contribution we make to expanding the field of the possible through our brushing up against its boundaries.

For Barad, the basis of our accountability for our agential contributions to the world lies not in our constitution as atomistic, willful, individual subjects. It lies, rather, in our material inseparability from the others (human and non-human) with whom we engage. To illustrate this point, Barad points out that individuals who are born blind or lose their vision at an early age and regain it through reparative surgery in later life do not always gain or regain the capacity for full-fledged, able-bodied *sight*. For instance, they don’t distinguish between discrete objects in their vision by identifying the shading of one visual texture into another as a “boundary” between objects. Importantly, Barad does not draw the conclusion from these cases that objecthood and difference don’t matter. On the contrary, she argues that, because these agential cuts are always cuts in a primordial connectivity in which “we” are inseparable from our “others,” we are *responsible for the cuts we enact*—for the differentiations we produce in making certain other “parts” of the world meaningful to ourselves.

Relate this last point to Agamben on Infancy

Agamben on pleasure—embodied connectivity in infancy, being-in-one’s-skin,
having-the-other-in-one’s skin