

Biopolitics or Biolinguistics? On language and human nature (With Some Glosses on Agamben and the “sovereign power”)

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Abstract The thesis of this paper is that “biopolitics” in fact means biolinguistics. More specifically, the thesis is that biopolitics – defined as the grip of political power on the human body and life – is but a consequence of the main biological character of *Homo sapiens*: language. Politics (economics) and religion are but consequences of the basic anthropological fact that human beings are primarily *speaking* beings, that is, the animals of language. Therefore, from an anthropological perspective the intrinsically biolinguistic nature of human animals is the ground of biopolitics. Every form of dualism (body on one side, psyche, Power, and God on the other) derives from the original dualistic structure of language. In the last part of this paper, an analysis of Agamben’s thought about language will argue in favor of this thesis.

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Our age does indeed stand in front of language just as the man from the country in the parable [of Kafka] stands in front of the door of the Law. What threatens thinking here is the possibility that thinking might find itself condemned to infinite negotiations with the doorkeeper or, even worse, that it might end by itself assuming the role of the doorkeeper who, without really blocking the entry, shelters the Nothing onto which the door opens (AGAMBEN, 1998: 54).

Here we see how first philosophy is always above all the thought of anthropogenesis, of becoming human (AGAMBEN, 2015: 182).

1. When did biopolitics begin?

What is biopolitics? Foucault's famous definition is as follows: «a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations» (FOUCAULT 1978: 137). A “bio-power” in this context – that is, a political power that exerts itself on human life; a power whose specific *raison d'être* is to control and exert influence over human bodies and, by extension, the human biology – is not a modern phenomenon. In modern Western culture, biopolitics has dramatically increased its efficacy and range of action. However, the inseparable connection between politics and the human body is neither a modern nor a Western phenomenon. Politics has controlled the human body from the beginning of human history, making humanity itself an example of such (self-) control. As such, biopolitics relates mainly to neither capitalism nor totalitarianism; rather, it relates to anthropology. Our thesis is that Foucault was not entirely right when he wrote that “*bio-power*” began with «what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life» (*ivi*: 143).

In particular, it is not anthropologically correct to say that «for millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence», while «modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question» (*ibidem*). In fact, the «capacity for a political existence» always signified a capacity to act on «his existence as a living being». There has never been a moment in human history where the body was not controlled by politics.

Paradoxically, what Foucault seems to neglect is the anthropological and constitutive role of language in human life and body/mind. Language, which significantly alters the internal constitution of humanity, is much more than a simple means of communication (CIMATTI 2015). Politics implies and embodies a separation between Power, on one side, and the body, which is ruled by such a Power, on the other. Indeed, this very distinction derives from the basic structure of language. Politics, like religion, is based on a separation: here there is *this* body, while *beyond* it there is a transcendent force – Power, State, God, Market, and so on – that governs it. What is at stake is exactly this separation, giving rise to the questions: How does such a dualism enter into human life? How does the unitary natural human life become internally divided? The thesis of this paper is that these forms of dualism are merely consequences of the original internal dualism of language. Transcendence enters into human life through language (CIMATTI 2013).

Language is by nature dualistic, and dualism hence penetrates human life via language. To speak of something is to separate that which is spoken of from the person doing the speaking. Such a separation thus cannot pre-exist language. Take the case of a non-human animal such as a cat. The cat is chasing a mouse. The mouse is the direct object of the cat's attention, and vice versa. However, there is no cognitive separation between them. That is, there is not a Subject on one side, and an Object on the other. It should be stressed that the physical separation between the cat and the mouse is not what is at stake here. The point is that the cat does not *think of* the mouse as an “object” in the world, just as it does not think of itself (even implicitly) as a “subject”. The cat and the mouse are part of a unitary vital action flow. In order to chase the mouse, the cat does not need to think about it in advance. When it sees a mouse, it immediately starts chasing it. The world of the cat is not made up of abstract “mental entities”; on the contrary, it is full of concrete perceptual objects that attract its attention – perceived objects which immediately transform themselves into

actions. In natural animal life, objects *are* actions (GIBSON 1966; RIZZOLATTI LUPPINO, 2001). As a non-human animal, the cat's mind is an "action mind", which simply means their mind is always in contact with the world. There is no cognitive separation between what a cat perceives and what it does; perception, thinking and action are strictly connected (STOFFREGEN 2010). In non-human animals, the mind is not separated from the body. There is no dualism in animal life. Non-human animal cognition does not imply that the mental "presence" of an object of thought involves a separation of the thought itself from the rest of the world. The cat does not think of itself as a "cat", nor does it think of the mouse as a "mouse". It is too busy acting in the world to spend time considering itself as something different and separated from the world. Language thus brings about a tremendous change to animal cognition by this definition. Take the case of the invention of "sex", according to Foucault himself:

By creating the imaginary element that is "sex", the deployment of sexuality established one of its most essential internal operating principle: the desire for sex—the desire to have it, to have access to it, to discover it, to liberate it, to articulate it in discourse, to formulate it in truth. It constituted "sex" itself as something desirable. And it is this desirability of sex that attaches each one of us to the injunction to know it, to reveal its law and its power; it is this desirability that makes us think we are affirming the rights of our sex against all power, when in fact we are fastened to the deployment of sexuality that has lifted up from deep within us a sort of mirage in which we think we see ourselves reflected—the dark shimmer of sex (FOUCAULT 1978: 156-157).

Initially, sex was not a separate "entity" in respect to Power and Politics. Rather, there was simply an animal body that – like the body of the cat – had no cause to think about itself at all. The "discourse" about "sex" constituted "sex" as a peculiar object of attention and desire. "Sex" as a specific and autonomous entity did not pre-exist discursive and knowledge practices. Clearly, the human body – *qua* mammal body – has always had a peculiar sexual anatomy. However, the point here is that this constitution was not an object of specific and explicit reflection. Just as the cat has a sexual life, so the "natural" human animal had a sexual life. However, this sexual life was not reflected upon as an activity concerning "sex". It is the ethical and scientific discourse about "sexuality" which invented the *object* "sex". The point is entirely clear to Foucault, for whom the very existence of "sex" depends upon «the centuries-long rise of a complex deployment for compelling sex to speak, for fastening our attention and concern upon sex, for getting us to believe in the sovereignty of its law when in fact we were moved by the power mechanisms of sexuality» (*ivi*: 158).

"Sexuality" discourses hence invented the object "sex" – and by "discourses" Foucault means language. While the human body *always* has been the object of discourse, it does not follow that a "natural" human body never existed, even if such a "natural" state ended in the moment *Homo sapiens* began to use language (YUSA 2016; XIMENES 2016). As that which makes *Homo sapiens* specifically *human* is strictly linked to language, we may say that if humanity began with language, then a "natural" human body ever existed. An «apparatus for producing an ever greater quantity of discourse about sex» (*ivi*: 27) has been at work since the moment human animals began to use language.

Therefore, the biopolitical device is in fact a biolinguistic device. At the origin of bio-power and biopolitics there is the original connection between human biology and language¹. Language is thus the very origin of the biopolitical nexus. The thesis of this paper is that when we speak of biopolitics, we are actually speaking of language and the cognitive effects of language on the human body/mind. This is not an original thesis²; however, it highlights an implicit assumption that is present in the main modern biopolitics theorists, specifically Foucault and Agamben. Consequently, when we speak of a “biopolitical device”, we are in fact speaking of a “biolinguistic device”. And it is this device that literally transforms a young mammal of the *Homo sapiens* species into a human being. That is to say that a specimen of *Homo sapiens* is not human from his/her birth. He/she *becomes* human only when the cultural system of language “enters” into him/her. The point that I want to stress here is that when language “enters” into a human being, politics and religion simultaneously do the same. Language acquisition is therefore much more than the simple acquisition of the capacity to communicate. Rather, acquiring a language involves a complete transformation of the “natural” body of the newborn. The key feature of this transformation is a radical dualism that will henceforth designate the human animal as a being dividing into “flesh” and “person” (ESPOSITO 2015); “body” and “mind” (CIMATTI 2007); and “profane” and “sacred” (CIMATTI 2009).

2. Becoming human

In this section, I will analyze in detail an exemplar case of the above transformations. Specifically, the discovery that we are an autonomous center of action – a subject. My aim is to show how the acquisition of language causes the “original” human organism to bifurcate into the subject (the I) and the body. That is, how language introduces transcendence into the human world. First, the meaning of “transcendence” in this context requires examination. Taking the aforementioned example, the non-human animal (in this case a cat) identifies itself with the world it perceives and feels, in which its actions occur. There is neither another world where it would like to live, nor another world – in respect to the present existing world – it thinks about. The cat does not imagine or conceive the possibility of another world. There is simply one world – the world in which it was born and where it lives, without any conception of the meaning or existence of a “world”. The life of the cat is to the world in which it lives. There is no distinction between its own life and the world where such a life takes place. In this sense, there is absolutely no transcendence in the life of the cat, whose life does not extend beyond the here and now. We may say that the world of the cat is full, in the sense that there are no gaps. No desires or possibilities, for instance, that refer to something absent. There is only the world that “is”. This does not

¹ It is worth noting that the concept of “biolinguistics” used here is quite different from the usual definition, which simply refers to the genetics of language (JENKINS 2000). In this paper, however, “biolinguistics” means the inextricable connection between human nature and language – between biology and culture. Practically, this means that the faculty of language coincides with human nature (CIMATTI, 2000). For example, according to this definition of “biolinguistics”, both Chomsky and Foucault are wrong in their famous 1971 discussion about “human nature” (CHOMSKY, FOUCAULT 2006). The former, because he did not recognize the role of history and culture in the formation of “human nature”; the latter, because he did not acknowledge the relevance of the question of “human nature”.

² In fact, the connection between language and politics is at the core of Aristotle philosophy; see LO PIPARO (2004).

mean that a cat or other non-human animal cannot imagine something that is not present in its world. A hungry cat, for example, can imagine the food it does not currently have. The point, however, is that the cat can only imagine those things that relate to the world in which its life occurs (MITCHELL 2002). The cat might, for instance, be able to imagine a mouse or some milk; but it is difficult to think that it could imagine a world made only of mice and milk. Take the case of a little cat that plays with a ball of wool. It may well be that the cat is pretending the ball of wool is a mouse. Such pretense is not so detached from reality. There is a thing, which is being used as if it were another thing. However, the cat's imagination remains strictly attached to its present world. The distance between the real thing (the mouse) and the pretend thing (the wool) is negligible, from which we may conclude that there is no transcendence in the cat's world. The non-human world is self-sufficient, lacking nothing, and therefore without God. As such, a cat neither "believes" in God nor is an atheist. If a cat can be said to believe in anything, it would believe in its own world.

"Transcendence", however, relates to a present world that is somehow insufficient. Similarly, "imagination" simply means that the world as it appears does not contain all that there is. To imagine something signifies that what is being imagined is not immediately present. The object of the thought is something that the world does not (yet) contain. As such, there are more things in the mind – e.g. fantasies, feelings, memories – than there are in the world. "Transcendence" means that the one who is imagining does not fit into the existing world; that a separation exists between the one who thinks and the world being thought about. More simply, "transcendence" means not being a cat. All of which gives rise to certain questions: How did the human being become such a strange animal that it believes the world to be insufficient? This "poor" world for which we must imagine new objects in order to make the real world similar to the imagined one – how did it come about? To answer such a problem (and *Homo sapiens* is such a problem), we might begin with the question raised by Giorgio Agamben in *Homo sacer*: «What is the relation between politics and life, if life presents itself as what is included by means of an exclusion?» (AGAMBEN 1998: 7). Agamben seems to refer solely to politics; however, such an act of «inclusive exclusion» (*ivi*: 8) is the distinguishing feature of any act of language (SALZANI 2015). Within the same act, a double and seemingly contradictory movement takes place whereby something is simultaneously included and excluded. Agamben gives the example of human biological life: «man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion» (AGAMBEN 1998: 8).

Take the case of a child who is been taught her own name, Anna. In the course of time, she learns to turn her head when someone says the word "Anna". When someone asks her "What's your name?" she learns to say "Anna". Some years later, she can write "Anna" in her diary, in reference to herself. What did Anna really learn? The conventional answer is that she learned to name herself. Such an answer is too simple, however, as because it exactly presumes what should be explained. In order to assign something a name, we must previously know that the thing being named exists *as an object*. The same problem applies to the person naming the object: How can Anna learn to be the object people call "Anna"? The conventional explanation hence misses the point that to be an object is more complex than is usually assumed. To return to the case of the cat: from our point of view, the cat is an object. In fact, we have a name for it, "cat". Nevertheless, is the cat a "cat" from the *cat's* point of

view? We must say not. Which means that being a cat does not at all imply the knowledge of being a cat. On the contrary, nothing in the cat's life indicates that it *knows* it is a cat. It can live a long and happy life without any notion of its "cat-ness". The fact that we *say* that a cat is a "cat" does not prove that being a "cat" is quite so simple. The overlooked factor here is that we refer to objects using their names. Usually, we identify an object through the name by which we refer to it. Clearly, the object *qua* material thing does not need the name to exist. However, the object we experience is not the simple thing in itself; rather, it is the thing that we name. When a thing "receives" a name, it assumes a particular "visibility". It stands out from the rest of our perceptual field. Contrarily, a thing that has not yet received a name is easy to neglect. This is not to say that a thing whose name we do not know is invisible; rather that simply perceiving something is not enough to draw our attention to it – a point that is demonstrated by the existence of innate behaviors in animals (DEVANAND, MEISSNER, BAKER 2006). The evolutionary explanation for the existence of innate behaviors is that the simple perception of a stimulus does not at all imply that the perceiving animal pays attention to it. An innate behavior – e.g. a mating ritual – is an example of a biological device that "automatically" transforms things into objects. Therefore, a thing is not (yet) an object – a point that is frequently overlooked. In human animals, this type of transformation is mediated mainly by language (KNOEFERLE, CROCKER 2006; COVENTRY *et al.* 2010; MISHRA 2016). A process of naming focuses our attention on the named object. In this sense (and only in *this* sense), the very existence of objects *qua* "objects" is strictly connected to language.

Let us return to Anna. What is at stake here is "Anna", not Anna, whatever this may be. Important here is the way in which the biological thing that her parents call "Anna" transforms itself into the object calling *herself* "Anna". First, before Anna starts calling herself "Anna", she is a living being more or less like the cat. A special cat who is able to use sophisticated language (in comparison to cat language), perhaps; but nevertheless, not very different from a cat or any other non-human animal. She lives, but, like the cat, she does not know *who* she is and that she *is living*. The evolutionary and psychological problem is that Anna does not yet have an instrument at her disposal that allows her to pay attention specifically to herself. It is not sufficient to assert that Anna was born equipped with a complex mental apparatus (see, for example, TREVARTHEN 2011). A newborn is innately equipped with the capacity to tune its behavior to the adults that take care of it. For example, it can feel what it perceives in the adults' faces, and vice versa, which makes perfect sense from an evolutionary perspective. However, to stay emotionally in contact with another body does not at all imply that one can stay in contact with oneself. It is not empathy for other people that requires explanation, but rather the capacity to feel empathy for oneself. The problem – and human anthropology contains precisely such a problem – is how to pass from Anna to "Anna". That is, how to pass from being a mammal like the cat to a human version of the same.

According to Vygotsky, such a transition finally occurs when the child *internalizes* the external social signs of language. In the beginning the child learns to respond to the parental commands and requests. For instance, when parents say, "Don't touch, it is dangerous", or, "Do you want some water?" On the receptive side of language ac-

quisition, the first uses of propositional language³ the child experiences consist of warnings and imperatives. On the active side, the child soon learns to name objects in order to make the adults give it the object it wants. The child learns a new kind of activity mediated by language: «at the beginning of the child's formation of speech is not the discovery that each thing has its name, but a new method of dealing with things, specifically their names» (VYGOTSKY, LURIA 1987: 10). The name is an action on those objects that the child cannot directly grasp. From the very beginning, language implies distance and separation. Adults, through the directive language they use to catch the child's attention, implicitly teach it to pay attention to the objects in its world. In this sense, language is much more than a communication device; it is a powerful cognitive device, which literally transforms the child's body/mind. The most important cognitive discovery that language opens up is that the world is made of objects, and that each object has a name. An object *is* an "object" by the fact of it having a name. Prior to language acquisition, the child perceived the world as in the same way as the cat – a world made up of things-actions, the majority of which are useless and unattractive. Language, however, makes the world full of objects, each of which can potentially be very interesting. This is a radical change in the child's perceptual world by which it suddenly transforms itself into a set of objects:

When speech comes into play, [...] [the child's] perception is no longer connected with the direct impression of the whole; new centers fixed by words and connections of various points with these centers arise in the visual field; perception stops being "the slave of the visual field" and, independently of the degree of correctness and completeness of resolution, the child perceives and transfers an impression deformed by the word (*ivi*: 12).

The main change that language acquisition brings about in the child's body/mind is that it can now pay attention to what would otherwise not directly attract its attention. When Vygotsky and Luria wrote that «perception stops being 'the slave of the visual field'» they meant that it is now the child who "decides" where to address their attention. The child can take such a decision with the help of the word, which makes it look preferentially at the reference (the object) of the word being uttered in that moment. As such, the child's decision and the use of the word form a unitary pattern of action. The most important object that language leads the child to discover is the psyche itself. Just as the word can direct the child's attention to an external object, so can it direct its attention to its own actions:

with the help of speech, in the sphere of things available to the child for transformation, is his own behavior. Words directed toward solving a problem refer not only to the objects of the external world, but also to the child's own behavior, his actions and intentions. With speech, the child is, for the first time, able to control his own behavior, relating to himself as if from the sideline, considering himself as a certain object. Speech helps him master this object by preliminary organization and planning of his own actions and behavior. The objects that were outside the sphere of activity available for practical activity, owing to speech, now become accessible for the child's practical activity (*ivi*: 16).

³ So-called "baby talk" is not yet propositional language. Moreover, it is a human variant of mammalian communication behavior that adults use to establish contact with newborns (KAYE 1980; FALK 2004).

This is a crucial passage in the life of the child. Biopolitics begins right here. From this moment on, the child can control its own behavior. Such control is carried out by the child's actions; that is, on its own body. The very existence of this control implies that a separation now exists between the psyche and the body: the psyche is the *subject*, and the body is the *object*. As we have seen, this biopolitical dualism is also a biolinguistic dualism. Henceforth, following the introduction of a deep and insuperable dualism, the child's body will no longer coincide with its psyche. The psyche is transcendent in respect to the body. The language the child uses is the social language it takes from its parents and other adults. This means that the main human internal cognitive device is made up of social relations, and as such coincides with the «interiorization of social speech» (*ivi*: 23). Practically, the child's psyche is made up of social psychology. When the child thinks of itself, it does so in the same manner as the broader society, as it can only contemplate and think to itself by means of the social language that it has acquired: «speech, being at first an intermental process, now becomes an intramental function» (*ivi*: 25). Therefore, the installation of language into the child's organism produces a biopolitical separation between psyche and body. Nor can the political consequences⁴ of such an installation be neglected: the psyche is not at all the autonomous “owner” of the body; rather, the mind is the “spokesperson” of the implicit and explicit values and norms of society at large. Indeed,

every higher mental function was formerly a unique form of psychological cooperation and only later was converted into an individual method of behavior, transferring into the psychological systems of the child the structure that, even in the transfer, retains all the basic traits of symbolic structure, changing only its situation basically (*ivi*: 41).

The psyche of the child is made up of (that is, spoken of by) social discourses. In fact, when Agamben says that «the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power» (AGAMBEN 1998: 6), it should be stressed that language itself is one such “sovereign power”.

3. The “event of language”

According to Agamben, a “sovereign power” is a power able to establish what he terms the peculiar “relation of exception” that he defines as an «extreme form of relation by which something is included solely through its exclusion» (*ivi*: 18). Take the case of the development of Anna's psyche, which coincides with the capacity she acquired to use social language to speak *of* and *to* herself: «the sign initially acts as a means of social connection in the behavior of the child, as an intermental function; subsequently it becomes a means of controlling [...] [her] own behavior and [...] [she] just transfers the social relation to a subject inward into [...] [her] personality» (VYGOTSKY, LURIA 1987: 41). When Anna thinks of herself using the words of the social language, she is hence performing what Agamben describes as an act of “sovereign power”. On one hand, she pulls Anna – this mute and mysterious animal which exists outside of language – into the world of language. Consequently, “Anna” can now take part in the social and political life of her community. On the other hand, this “sovereign act” radically excludes what the proper name “Anna” does not

⁴ And the psychic ones (CIMATTI 2016).

include. “Anna” pushes away Anna. Each biolinguistic act can pull in something (language, politics) just as it pushes away the same concrete entity it has just named. The terrible price to pay to enter into language is to lose what gives each entity its singularity. “Anna” can enter into language and therefore into politics only because the real unnamable Anna has been thrown away. At the same time, Anna is now at the service of “Anna” – that is, “Anna” *qua* psyche – as «the soul is to the body as the master is to the slave» (AGAMBEN 2015: 4).

Agamben shows us that language embodies a crystalline force, which is beyond human control. Nothing seems more obvious than the fact that language is at our own disposal. In *Homo sacer*, however, Agamben illustrates the autonomous and invisible force of language. When it comes to language, we only see the apparent relation of inclusion – the referential character of language – without noticing the correlative relation of exclusion. The point is that one cannot have inclusion without exclusion. Both actions are necessary. Taking into account this “extreme form of relation” – i.e. exclusion – means that the original connection between Language and Right becomes apparent, and «the sphere of law shows its essential proximity to that of language» (AGAMBEN 1998: 20). Consequently:

language is the sovereign who, in a permanent state of exception, declares that there is nothing outside language and that language is always beyond itself. The particular structure of law has its foundation in this presuppositional structure of human language. It expresses the bond of inclusive exclusion to which a thing is subject because of the fact of being in language, of being named. To speak [*dire*] is, in this sense, always to “speak the law”, *ius dicere* (*ivi*: 21).

That there is “nothing outside language” means that the world of language, which is also the world of Right and Politics, only picks up “objects” by discarding unnamable things. At the same time, “language is always beyond itself”, as without things there would be no “objects”, either. In this sense, language is the “sovereign [...] in a permanent state of exception”. Language is one such “state of exception”, as the “naming rule” it applies to everything does not apply to itself. Indeed, when language names a thing, it makes an “object” of it. However, language disposes of such a “sovereign” power only because *another* power, which might rule over it, does not exist⁵. It is language, and language alone, which establishes what remains inside (is included) and what is left aside (is excluded). As such, language is always a presumption that does not presume anything (SALZANI 2015). For this reason: «the sovereign exception (as zone of indistinction between nature and right) is the presupposition of the juridical [linguistic] reference in the form of its suspension» (AGAMBEN 1998: 21). Language pulls out (suspends) itself from the possible entities to which it applies its own power, and as such is never a thing (neither is it an “object”: language is precisely the power by which to posit this distinction). For this reason, we take language to be a “sovereign power”. Equally, this is the logic by which language coincides with biopolitics: «the original political relation is the ban (the state of exception as a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion)» *ivi*: 181). This “ban” is a linguistic act that establishes that someone is included in the Law by means of her/his own exclusion by the very same Law. The bandit, for instance, is paradoxically someone who stays within the Law

⁵ The impossible existence of an absolute meta-language is another formulation of such a “sovereign power” (CIMATTI 2015a).

because he is expelled by the space of that same Law. The bandit stays simultaneously *inside* and *outside* the Law. This is precisely the function of language, which pulls something in *qua* “object” by means of the contemporaneous expulsion of the very thing just named. To stay within language means also to be expelled by language. For this reason, «negativity is the human means of *having* language» (AGAMBEN 1991: 85). In respect to language, we human animals may be considered a type of bandit.

Language is a power that places itself in a transcendent position in respect to both the speakers and the world. The very fact of language in each linguistic act can be set apart as the unnamable presupposition of any other utterance: «the very structure of transcendence, which constitutes the decisive character of philosophical reflection on being, is grounded in this scission. Only because the event of language always transcends what is said in this event, can something like a transcendence in the ontological sense be demonstrated» (*ivi*: 85-86). Therefore, transcendence enters into human life with language. This is also the original point at which biopolitics appears in human life. Underlying the insertion of language into humanity, is the original nucleus of language, the oath, which is «defined by the verification [*inverarsi*] of words in facts (*an eipēi ginetai*, precise correspondence between words and reality)» (AGAMBEN 2011: 21). An oath is a word that is *immediately* something real. The English translation here does not capture the full meaning, as “verification” seems to imply a comparison between a word and its referent. That is, “verification” still presumes an initial difference between word and object, while the Italian “*inverarsi*” highlights the indistinction between them. There is not a word that is confronted with a referent; instead, there is a word that in the very moment of its utterance *is* the fact of it being uttered: «the oath is, in fact, that language that is always realized in facts» (*ibidem*). Such a perfect coincidence between saying and being is comparable to the word of God; indeed, «the words of God are oaths» (*ibidem*). That God “talks” by means of oaths shows the constitutive and original connection between language and transcendence. With God, there is no difference between the word and the thing, purpose and action, the possible and the real. If God is language, this means that biopolitics has been at work from the very birth of humanity, as there is no *Homo sapiens* without language (and therefore, by extension, without God).

The oath represents the metaphysical model of language that reveals the full scope of its power. That is, a word, which coincides with reality – a word that *is* reality. A word that is no longer a word but rather the identity of language and the world. The “event of language” is an original and founding act «in which words and things are indissolubly linked. Every naming, every act of speech is, in this sense, an oath, in which the logos (the speaker in the logos) pledges to fulfill his word, swears on its truthfulness, on the correspondence between words and things that is realized in it» (*ivi*: 46). In the “event of language”, the peculiar character of language is clearly shown. On one side, there is the word, which includes the thing being named in the world of language; on the other, there is the world that the word does not include in itself – i.e. the world which is excluded by the word. Language does this to create *its own* reality: in the “event of language”, «naming and denotation ([...] the assertorial and veridictional aspect of language) are originally inseparable» (*ivi*: 46-47). In the very act of asserting something, the thing being asserted becomes immediately real. There is no distance between language and world, as «the verbal act brings being into truth» (*ivi*: 55). As the “event of language” is immediately true – inside it, word and world are one thing and the same – language does not refer to anything external: «what is essential here, certainly, is the self-referential character of the performative

expression» (*Ibidem*). In such a «metaphysical ‘performance’» (*ivi*: 56), the very nature of language is revealed.

Let us now return to *Homo sacer*, to «the original political relation [that] is the ban (the state of exception as a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion)» (AGAMBEN 1998: 181). Indeed, such an “original political relation” is a biolinguistic relation; it is hence no coincidence that it is deemed a “ban”. The oath is precisely one such “state of exception”. Take the case of someone who swears, in respect to a certain situation in the past, that things happened *just so*. By means of such an oath, two events occur contemporaneously: the fact of *saying* something; and the assertion that the reported fact is precisely what happened. The oath establishes the nature of the fact. It draws it into a space of “truth” (language is one such space), and at the same time excludes all the infinite features of the reported fact that the oath does not take into account. The same may be said of the relationship between Anna and “Anna”. The proper name “Anna” refers to features of Anna that are only pertinent for language (and politics). However, there is much more to Anna’s life than can be found in “Anna” or in “her” psyche. Thus, “Anna” expels all Anna’s infinite unnamable vital characters. For this reason, the “event of language” is a “state of exception”, as it attributes to itself a “sovereign power” as a means to establish what is to be saved and what is to be damned – i.e. what there *is* and what there *is not*. There would be no biopolitics if there were no language. At least, this is true of a language that finds its own metaphysical origin in the oath. Biopolitics is hence more a question of language and ontology than of ethics or politics:

legein, ‘to say’, means in Greek ‘to gather and articulate *beings* by means of words’: onto-logy. But in this way, the distinction between *saying* and *being* remains uninterrogated, and it is the opacity of their relation that will be transmitted by Aristotle to Western philosophy, which will take it in without the benefit of an inventory (AGAMBEN 2015: 117).

4. Final remarks

Homo sapiens is an animal «whose language places his life in question» (AGAMBEN 2011: 69). The seemingly simple fact that human animals “have” language completely changes their own lives. The function of language is far broader than merely allowing for mutual communication; its main object of action is the human world itself. The «metaphysical ‘performance’ of language is to establish a radical and unhealable separation between immanence and transcendence, psyche and flesh, power and ‘bare life’» (AGAMBEN 1998: 181). The double “inclusive exclusion” action, which marks any “event of language”, produces biopolitics and religion, economics and ethics, science and poetry. This long list of dualisms began when *Homo sapiens* began using language not to communicate, as all others living animals do, but to speak to itself, that is, to consider itself a “thing” that can be named (VYGOTSKY, LURIA 1987; CIMATTI 2000). In that moment, language stopped being a “simple” means of communication and began taking shape as a biopolitical device. Since language is still of a type founded on oath, «this means that [...] the event of anthropogenesis – the becoming human of the human being – is still happening» (AGAMBEN 2015: 208). Therefore, the consequence of such a continual and indefinite process of anthropogenesis is that «the fracture between life and language, between the living being and the speaking being» (*ibidem*) continues to occur; and *Homo sapiens* is but one such separation.

The biopolitical grip on human life resolves itself in the biolinguistic nature of *Homo sapiens*. The problem of too many dualisms within the human world is rooted in the «pre-supposing relation» (*ivi*: 119), which characterizes language thus:

as soon as there is language, the thing named is presupposed as the non-linguistic or non-relational with which language has established its relation. This presuppositional power is so strong that we imagine the non-linguistic as something unsayable and non-relational that we seek in some way to grasp as such, without noticing that what we seek to grasp in this way is only the shadow of language (*ibidem*).

Any “event of language” simultaneously poses what it says and, conversely, what cannot be said. Within the single act, something is pulled in and something is pushed out. The so-called non-linguistic world is merely the hidden face of what is being said. An identical «onto-logical relation runs between the beings presupposed by language and their being in language» (*ibidem*). As language establishes that something deserves a name, so the same language pushes another thing into a condition of dark silence. The entire human ontology is constituted by language. This does not mean that reality is not real; rather, it means that the possibility to think of the world as a collection of “objects” is a by-product of language. The very existence of language produces an ontology – that is, a world made of nameable entities. In this sense, language embodies the perfect and prototypical example of a “sovereign power”:

It is in the structure of presupposition that the interweaving of being and language, ontology and logic that constitutes Western metaphysics is articulated. Called into question from the point of view of language, being is from the very beginning divided into an existitive being (existence, the primary *ousia*) and a predicative being (the secondary *ousia*, what is said of it): the task of thought will then be that of reassembling into a unity what thought – language – has presupposed and divided (*ibidem*).

If biopolitics presupposes a more original biolinguistic ground, a solution to the “modern” biopolitical problem cannot be sought within the very same categories, which still depend on and presuppose such an origin. A political or ethical solution to biopolitical power appears illusory, since both politics and ethics imply exactly that which they might seek to overcome. In particular, a form of politics that is not marked by the original aporia of the separation between power and “bare life” does not exist, since such an aporia underlies all human anthropology. *Homo sapiens, qua loquens*, is such an aporia. Nowhere does Agamben seem to explore the possibility of a different human life – that is, a way of being human that does not presuppose a relationship with language and may appear more similar to non-human ways of life (CIMATTI 2013; 2014) than to the way we generally approach humanity (AGAMBEN 2015a):

It is perhaps time to call into question the prestige that language has enjoyed and continues to enjoy in our culture, as a tool of incomparable potency, efficacy, and beauty. And yet, considered in itself, it is no more beautiful than birdsong, no more efficacious than the signals insects exchange, no more powerful than the roar with which the lion asserts his dominion. The decisive element that confers on human language its peculiar virtue is not in the tool itself

but in the place it leaves to the speaker, in the fact that it prepares within itself a hollowed-out form that the speaker must always assume in order to speak—that is to say, in the ethical relation that is established between the speaker and his language. *The human being is that living being that, in order to speak, must say “I”, must “take the word”, assume it and make it his own* (AGAMBEN 2011: 71).

What could humanity be if it was not necessary to “take the word” – that is, to assert its own autonomy as a subject, as an individuated psyche (CIMATTI 2000)? If it could *use* language without being *used* by language? The «coming politics» (AGAMBEN 2015: 213) will be a politics that no longer separates power from “bare life”, and therefore language from life. Agamben defines such non-human political “form-of-life” as «a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate and keep distinct something like a bare life» (*ivi*: 207). It is still a human life, as it presupposes some “form” (humanity cannot be without some kind of transcendence), but mainly it is a “life”, albeit one that no longer divides itself into psyche and flesh. In the hypothesis of a “form-of-life” lies the extreme possibility of “reassembling into a unity what thought—language—has presupposed and divided”. Finally, the question arises as to what language might become in a life characterized by such a “unity”? The answer – poetry – may also be found in Agamben: «what, in fact, is poetry, if not an operation of language, which deactivates and makes inactive [inoperose] its own communicative and informative functions, to unclose them to a new, possible use?» (AGAMBEN 2014: 59; author’s translation).

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