

Review of The use of bodies by Giorgio Agamben, translated by Adam Kotsko

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Reviews

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The Use of Bodies by Giorgio Agamben,
translated by Adam Kotsko
Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015.

The Use of Bodies is the ninth instalment in Giorgio Agamben's multi-part work *Homo Sacer*, a series of texts which seek to address concepts of 'bare life' through the perspective of political philosophy. In this series Agamben ties arguments from other philosophers together with his own, drawing on Aristotle, Arendt, and Foucault as a response to biopolitics. *The Use of Bodies*, translated into English by Adam Kotsko, weaves together threads of philosophical thought to build a narrative around slavery and labour, habit and instrumentalism, life and living. Agamben draws on the foundations of Western philosophy to present a case for rethinking ontology and perceptions of 'self' in political thought.

In the second part of the book, Agamben explores the concept of a ‘modal ontology’, developing a case for reframing ontology through the perspective of ‘mode’. Through an examination of writers since the First Century BC, Agamben outlines the ways in which the Christian ontology which has proliferated in the West since Aristotle is essentially insufficient, having failed to effectively explain the relationship between essence and existence within ‘forms-of-life’ and beings as the use of bodies. Agamben suggests that dominant modal ontology has not clarified how the use of bodies relates to essence (meaning the past created by humans as they live), or to existence (meaning the reality of being in the here and now). He explains:

Precisely with respect to the substance/modes relationship, one could say that Spinoza did not manage to resolve the ambiguity between ontological and logical that the Aristotelian apparatus had left as a legacy to Western philosophy (pp.160–161).

Agamben sets out to resolve this ambiguity by proposing a new model of ontology. Via an examination of texts by Leibniz and Suarez, Agamben suggests that the ‘idea of mode was invented to render thinkable the relation between essence and existence’ (p.155). For Agamben, the mode sits in the interface between being and nothingness, between the logical and the ontological—a positioning which recalls the seminal works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Agamben examines the difference between Being and beings through a critique of works including Spinoza and Herrera. He argues that ‘[w]e are accustomed to think in a *substantial* mode, while mode has a constitutively *adverbial* nature, it expresses not “what” but “how” being is’ (p.164, emphasis in original). Agamben goes on to explain that ‘[i]n a modal ontology, being uses-itself, that is to say, it constitutes, expresses, and loves itself in the affection that it receives from its own modifications’ (p.165). This is a development on his earlier work in the *Homo Sacer* series, *The Signature of All Things* (2008), in which it is ‘the ontology of knowledge as an archaeology of knowledge as basis for the operativity of every being that is the main purpose of this text and Agamben’s work as a whole’ (Watkin, 2013, p.21). As such, *The Use of Bodies* provides a constructive conclusion to the *Homo Sacer* series of texts.

In his questioning of the relationship between essence and existence, and of ‘how being is’ (p.164), Agamben echoes Sartre’s 1943 text *Being and Nothingness*, in which Sartre identifies two distinctly different ontological levels of being: Being-for-itself and Being-for-others. Sartre’s examination of these two ontological perceptions of being

can be seen to explore the ‘use of bodies’ in a way which shares many similarities with Agamben. Sartre states that

If in fact I start with the Other’s body, I apprehend it as an instrument and in so far as I myself make use of it as an instrument. I can *utilize* it in order to arrive at ends which I could not attain alone; I *command* its acts through orders or supplications; I can also provoke its acts by my own acts (1943, pp.344–345, emphasis in original).

Taking such points of similarity into account, it is perhaps surprising that Agamben does not make direct reference to Sartre or the Existentialist school of philosophical thought in *The Use of Bodies*.

Although primarily regarded as a political philosopher, in *The Use of Bodies* Agamben speaks to Existentialist philosophy by addressing issues of ‘the self’ and form-of-life, and questioning the relationship between essence and existence. For example, he discusses the work of Heidegger at length in his examination of the use of the non-conscious world through the concept of ‘Dasein’, and of the body’s relationship with care and instrumentalism. In doing so, Agamben deepens his philosophical analysis of ‘the self’, ‘being’, and embodiment, situating it within a wider school of thought than that of political philosophy. By arguing for a reworking of ontology, Agamben invokes the works other philosophers, including, perhaps, those to whom he does not make direct reference, including Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. As such, this text will be of value to various philosophical disciplines, as well as those who are more concerned with questions of identity and ‘the self’, including psychologists and psychoanalysts.

Agamben’s *The Use of Bodies* provides a case of the multiple conceptions of the ways that a body, or bodies, may be used, or useful. Yet, while doing so, the text does not present the concepts of ‘being’, ‘the self’, and ‘existence’ through an embodied perspective. As such, Agamben gives an external perspective in providing an overview of prominent discourses on selfhood. This may be where a reading of this text differs most from the more embodied work of Merleau-Ponty, whose 1945 work *Phenomenology of Perception* finds that ‘[a]ttention to life is the consciousness we gain of “nascent movements” in our body’ (1945, p.81) as a mode of Being-in-the-world. Agamben does not refer to the body as a ‘we’ or ‘our’, and thus engages the reader from an external viewpoint. *The Use of Bodies*, therefore, provides a rich analysis of the body and of being, providing depth to and expanding on works of others, while seemingly

using Agamben's own body for labour as Being-for-others rather than in Being-for-itself.

In *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben successfully guides the reader through forms of use to a modal ontology, in which he finds that '[w]hat we call form-of-life corresponds to this ontology of style; it names the mode in which a singularity bears witness to itself in being and being expresses itself in the singular body' (p.233). The philosophical evolution of thought throughout the text will no doubt provide a basis for future examination of the body and being.

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