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The Profane Land of the Happy: On the Messianic Promise in the Work of Giorgio Agamben

Ype De Boer

Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies, Department of Metaphysics and Philosophical Anthropology, Radboud University Nijmegen, 6525 HT Nijmegen, The Netherlands; ype.deboer@ru.nl

Abstract: This paper provides an interpretation of the enigmatic concept of ‘happy life’ in the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben. It departs from a recognition of the ambivalence in Agamben’s use of sacred and profane terminology that informs this concept. In a decidedly Benjaminian frame, and with the help of esoteric religious images, happy life is described by Agamben as a messianic life and a blessed life, while he, at the same time, explicitly defines it as a perfectly profane life. Reading Agamben’s philosophy as aspiring to a radical transformation of our mode of being in the world, I argue that the consistency in his idiosyncratic attitude toward the sacred and profane can be shown, and new light can be shed on the nature of happy life. Beyond prevailing negative characterizations that describe what happy life is *not to be*, the interpretation developed in this paper argues that it positively entails an ethos of love and a practice of use. As such, the paper aims to contribute to recent attempts at analyzing the curative and promissory aspects of Agamben’s philosophy over and above its critical potential, and provide a basic outline of happy life that allows for comparative analysis with other contemporary authors on the notion of happiness.

Keywords: happy life; Agamben; profanation; messianism; Benjamin; justice; love; ethics; theology; sacred; happiness



Citation: De Boer, Ype. 2023. The Profane Land of the Happy: On the Messianic Promise in the Work of Giorgio Agamben. *Religions* 14: 808. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060808>

Academic Editor: Anné Hendrik Verhoef

Received: 14 May 2023

Revised: 15 June 2023

Accepted: 15 June 2023

Published: 19 June 2023



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1. Introduction

The definition of the concept of “happy life” remains one of the essential tasks of the coming thought (Agamben 2000, p. 113)

Although the promise of an alternate life, community and ethics has been part and parcel of the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben since its inception, it is only in the last decade that serious attention is being drawn to this promissory aspect of his thought. Due to his provocative and controversial critique of the western tradition of thought and praxis, Agamben had long been considered a pessimistic, even nihilistic thinker (Connolly 2007, p. 27; Laclau 2007, p. 21), valuable for the critique he offers but useless when it comes to formulating a viable alternative. Supposedly, Agamben’s apocalyptic thought contained a ‘refusal to think the morning after’, as Slavoj Žižek (2004, p. 27) put it. This image of Agamben as a dark prophet resurged in relation to his resolute and hyperbolic critique of the corona-measures (mainly the Italian ones, but also beyond Italy) (Christiaens 2020). Accordingly, emphasis in the literature on Agamben has been predominantly on the critical, diagnostic and negative aspects of his thought. However, unlike authors such as Theodor Adorno, Agamben himself never identified philosophy with critique or with its negative aspect.¹ As the above quote clearly shows, by Agamben’s own standards, contemporary philosophy in general and his own philosophy in particular should not be measured only in terms of their critical value, but also to what degree they live up to this ‘essential task’ of defining a concept of happy life. If we take into account the many variations of such a call to rethink the good life in the work of Agamben, whether ethical, political or philosophical, one would expect that the reception of Agamben’s work includes proper and detailed interpretations of his own idiosyncratic understanding of happy life—even if one ends

up critiquing or dismissing it. Yet, unlike the notion of *form-of-life*, in relation to which a growing body of literature is being dedicated since the publication of *The Use of Bodies* (Ferrarese 2015; Van der Heiden 2019; Stahl 2020), *vita felice* itself is still relatively evaded. This is perhaps due to the fact that Agamben nowhere seems to develop ‘happy life’ in a systematic and elaborate way, but always only indirectly via the works of other authors, or poetically in relation to artworks and mythical and esoteric images. Accordingly, ‘happy life’ is oftentimes considered elliptic, elusive and utopian (Prozorov 2014, p. 178). A second problem is that, when discussing the promissory aspect of Agamben’s work, the literature tends to focus solely on the liberating character of his philosophy. Yet, it is one thing to describe what ‘happy life’ frees us from and what it is thus *not to be*—a life *outside* the law, a life *beyond* biopolitics, a life *no longer* conceived in terms of guilt, duty and will—but something else to actually provide an account of what it consists of *positively*. Without such an account, one runs the risk of identifying the practice of critique or deactivation so central to Agamben’s work with happy life itself, which would then consist in a sort of subversive pleasure.² Although such an anarchic joy is undeniably present in Agamben’s oeuvre, in the following paper, I present an interpretation of happy life that takes a fundamental step beyond such description. In addition to an understanding of Agamben’s deactivating practice, I aim to provide an account of the ‘state of the world’ ensuing from the deactivating praxis and of the ethical attitude corresponding to this state.³

To guard against overextension, I limit my analysis here to what constitutes one of the main reasons for the scepticism and confusion concerning the viability of this notion, namely the unusual conflation of sacred and profane terminology that informs it.⁴ On the one hand, happy life is coterminous with what Agamben sometimes calls a messianic life, eternal life or the blessed life, and is poetically developed in relation to a whole array of theological tropes such as paradise and limbo, the resurrected body, a Paulinian type of conversion or *metanoia* and the advent of a new man or ‘creature’. On the other hand, happy life is explicitly and emphatically defined as an ‘absolutely *profane* life’ that functions within a theoretical complex that decidedly opts against anything ‘sacred’ and which aspires to immanence rather than transcendence. This ambivalence means that a clarification of happy life should involve an analysis of Agamben’s attitude to religious traditions, more specifically with regard to his understanding of the messianic and the relation between the sacred and the profane.

The interpretative strategy I adopt is one that, to the best of my knowledge, was first proposed by Thomas Khuruna in 2007 and which has sporadically resurfaced in other secondary literature,⁵ namely to read Agamben’s philosophy as revolving around an ‘*ethischer Modifikation*’ (Khuruna 2007, p. 35). The ethical modification at stake concerns not re-organizing the world order and not even primarily the way we behave, but rather a modification of the mode of thought and being through which we engage with the world. It is not about changing states of affairs, but about changing the way we relate to states of affairs. Agamben’s philosophy calls into question specific modes of understanding and being in the world in such a way as to induce a new one: happy life.

One can conceptually distinguish three aspects to this ethico-ontological modification, which provide the general arrangement of my paper, namely deactivation (Sections 2 and 3), a resulting new state of the world (Section 4) and a concurring new mode of being of the subject or *ethos* (Section 5).

2. Profane Redemption

In the sparse pages that Agamben explicitly engages with the term ‘happy life’, it is almost always in relation to Walter Benjamin. In general, Benjamin’s writings form the intellectual background to the abovementioned intertwinement of sacred and profane in Agamben’s thought and, in particular, it is through a reading of Benjamin that he develops happy life as a type of profane life that is, paradoxically, not opposed to but rather dependent on a form of messianic redemption or restoration. Of special importance in this regard is the essay *Walter Benjamin and the Demon: Happiness and Historical Redemption*.

Here, Agamben establishes a link in the work of Benjamin between happiness, redemption, history and justice that will decidedly shape his own thoughts on happy life.

At issue in the text is the relation between the messianic order and a profane order that is to be based on the idea of happiness. For Benjamin, these orders stand in intimate, co-dependent relation to each other. Following a complex dialectic, one could say that the messianic event renders possible the profane order as based on the idea of happiness, but equally that the messianic order is achieved precisely through the establishment of this profane order. Moreover, and notwithstanding his narrative and metaphoric usage of the figure of the messiah, Benjamin's messianism does not revolve around a divine entity that might come or not, but denotes a peculiar potentiality of human beings themselves: we are all endowed with what Benjamin calls a 'weak messianic power' (*'eine schwache messianische Kraft'*) (Benjamin 2011, p. 956). According to the interpretation of Agamben, Benjamin tries to develop this messianic potential as a form of philosophical historiography that 'redeems' the past. In order for the profane order of happiness to arrive, a redemption of the past is required. What does 'to redeem' mean here? Agamben writes:

According to Benjamin . . . to redeem the past is not to restore its true dignity, to transmit it anew as an inheritance for future generations. He argues against this idea so clearly as to leave no doubts; "In authentic history writing" we read, "the destructive impulse is just as strong as the saving impulse. From what can something be redeemed? Not so much from the disrepute or discredit in which it is held as from a determined mode of its transmission. The way in which it is valued as 'heritage' is more insidious than its disappearance could ever be". (Agamben 1999, p. 153)

Here, the restorative power of messianism, its ability to purify and restore innocence, does not consist in a sort of 'washing away of sin' in the more common understanding of this phrase. It is not a form of forgiving that targets past sinners. Neither does it mean a correction of things having been misrepresented, neglected or oppressed—a sort of grand switch, substituting false accounts of history by true accounts. Surely, past events are to be liberated from (false) accounts, but not to be simply substituted by others. Instead of liberating the past events from *specific* ways of transmitting them, the messianic 'destructive impulse' liberates from the very force of transmission itself. Having 'destroyed' the heritage in which it was captured, the phenomenon in question can appear to us *anew*. It is in this fresh encounter that the phenomenon is 'saved', redeemed from the judgments of tradition and restored to innocence. The point is thus to allow for a wholly new way of relating to the past, that refrains from encapsulating it within determined traditions and modes of transmission. As Agamben writes: 'Benjamin . . . has in mind a relation to the past that would both shake off the past and bring it into the hands of humanity' (Agamben 1999, p. 153).

As an example of such historiographical redemption, Agamben refers to Benjamin's peculiar theory of quotation. As Benjamin writes in his essay on Karl Kraus, by quoting something, its meaning is not simply preserved. Quoting a phrase or passage, means 'ripping' it out its context and thus involves destruction. Yet, for Benjamin, such destruction at the same time implies restoring it to its true origin.⁶ The origin in question here, at least from an Agambenian standpoint, is its original *potentiality* for meaning. This potentiality comes to the fore precisely because by quoting a passage, it is taken up in a different text from a different time, written by a different author, and thus takes on new meaning. The point here is not that the 'new' meaning is more original than the earlier one, the point is that what is original is the very potentiality to take on a plurality of meanings. Similarly, and against all historiographical decorum, the messianic history writer does not have as its object the way things really—and in their own context—were, but endeavors precisely to break phenomena free from the context that prescribed their meaning. Messianic history aims not to restore the 'actuality' of something, what it was actually like, but its potentiality, what it could and can be. Whereas tradition 'mortifies' phenomena within a certain framework of meaning, messianic historiography re-animates or re-vitalizes phenomena so that

they may speak to us again, in new ways. Strikingly, this destructive force of historiography is characterized as ‘the power of justice’ (Agamben 1999, p. 157). Here, doing justice to phenomena, redeeming them, does not mean pronouncing the right judgment over them, but restoring their capacity to affect us. This is, Agamben writes, what constitutes for Benjamin at the same time humankind’s ‘most difficult historical task’ and ‘most perfect experience of happiness’ (Agamben 1999, p. 148).

With Agamben’s interpretation of the destructive/redemptive understanding of Benjaminian critical history in place, allow me now to elaborate on how Agamben develops these themes more in his own terms. First, I will argue that the ‘weak messianic power’ described above is developed by him through the notion of profanation. I then move on to an analysis of how profanation generates justice and happiness as both a state of the world and as the mode of the concurring subject.

3. Profane Magic

To grasp the technical meaning of the terms ‘profanation’ and ‘profane’ within Agamben’s oeuvre, one might start with their opposites: consecration and the sacred. Taking inspiration from ancient Roman jurist Trebatius, Agamben argues that religion can be ‘defined as that which removes things, places, animals, or people from common use and transfers them to a separate sphere’ (Agamben 2007, p. 74). To consecrate means to render a phenomenon sacred by endowing it with a certain meaning and place within a fixed context that prescribes a ‘use’ for it. Consider, for example, a sacred burial ground located within a forest. In and of itself the trees growing there, the mud, sand and vegetation making up the earth, the wind and animals passing through, do not communicate any specific use or value—one may find shelter there, grow vegetables, hunt for food, play hide and seek. It is only through a certain ritual of consecration that this area has been endowed with a sacred meaning, which sets clear bounds on who and under what circumstance may enter, which acts are allowed there and which are not. Another example is holy water. Taken in itself, it is simply water and can be drunk or used in a water-balloon fight. After consecration, however, it is endowed with a specific meaning and may only be used for specific rituals, such as baptism. Importantly, for Agamben, such acts of ‘capturing’ phenomena, things, events, places, people within contexts of meaning and protocols of use are not restricted to religion. In fact, as Agamben emphasizes, this practice constitutes the core of all institutions, laws, property rights, and in a less obvious but all the more effective way also of media and capitalist society. Think, for instance, of city-planning, where certain areas are transformed into roads with speed and vehicle protocols; of Hollywood romances captivating amorous experience within certain idealized ways of behavior. In the technical meaning Agamben provides to the term consecration, it thus denotes all acts that capture a phenomenon within a certain context of meaning and protocol of use, whether belonging to a specific religion or not.

Profanation, conversely, is the act of returning consecrated phenomena to the ‘free use’ of humankind: ‘profane is the term for something that was once sacred or religious and is returned to the use . . . of men’. (Agamben 2007, p. 73). Reduced to its core, profanation already takes place by simply using something differently than prescribed. By touching the food consecrated to the gods, it is already profaned and no longer sacred. Most of the time, however, such misuse surely does not constitute enough to completely deactivate the consecration. However, even then, it brings to light that the context of meaning and protocol of use attributed to the phenomena do not inhere in these phenomena themselves, but only in our insistence on using them in this prescribed way. This is precisely what children exhibit when left on their own to play with adult possessions: a car is exposed to be usable as a castle, a towel might just as well be a cape. Poetry also forms an example of profanation in Agamben’s work, insofar as it exposes new uses of language, breaking through the rules of regular discourse. Philosophy itself, especially in the Agambenian sense of ‘philosophical archaeology’, can be considered a profane activity in that it is out to deactivate at the highest level of abstraction the prevalent modes or ‘usages’ of thought

and practice, while simultaneously experimenting with alternative modes. Here, again, the point of profanation is, for Agamben, not to replace one particular use for another, better or more true use. The point is to expose beings in their open usability or, as he preferred in his earlier writing, in their *potentiality*. It shifts attention from specific usages or activities to the human potentiality of discovering, forming and allowing for *different* usages, meanings and actualities. Such is ‘the gift that children and philosophers present to humanity’ (Agamben 2007, p. 76). Re-establishing the link between his philosophical archeology and Benjaminian historical redemption, this is the ‘almost soteriological’ character of philosophical archaeology (Agamben 2009b, p. 98).

To establish a first relation between profanation and happiness, allow me to briefly gloss over Agamben’s short text *Magic and Happiness*. This text again takes its cue from Benjamin, who, under the influence of mescaline, is supposed to have stated that the child’s first experience of the world is ‘not that adults are stronger but that he cannot make magic’ (Agamben 2007, p. 19). This statement leads Agamben to ponder the intimacy of happiness to magic and its opposition to merit:

Whatever we can achieve through merit and effort, cannot make us truly happy ... Magic means precisely that no one can be worthy of happiness. But if someone succeeds in influencing fortune through trickery, if happiness depends not on what one is but on a magic walnut or an “Open sesame!”—then and only then can one consider oneself to be truly and blessedly happy. (Agamben 2007, p. 20)

For Agamben, happiness is never the result of following a protocol or realizing pre-established goals and ideals. Such things might surely give us satisfaction, but the happiness that interests him is of another order. To explain the above ‘childlike wisdom’, Agamben considers two traditions of magic. The first is one ‘scrupulously followed by kabbalists and necromancers, according to which magic is essentially a science of secret names’ (Agamben 2007, p. 22). In this tradition, magic is a science of absolute mastery over existence. If one knows the archi-names of things, one can summon them at will and command them. But for Agamben, this would constitute simply a more powerful way of achieving goals and satisfying desires. However, there is also ‘another, more luminous tradition’, according to which the secret name does not subject the thing, element or living being to the will of the magus, but constitutes instead the ‘monogram that sanctions its liberation from language. ... When it is pronounced, every manifest name—the entire Babel of names—is shattered’ (Agamben 2007, p. 22). This is the tradition Agamben relates to happiness. This magic forms a sort of antidote to what he calls a childlike sadness, which comes from the child’s ‘inability to free himself from the name that has been imposed on him’, for ‘to have a name is to be guilty’ (Agamben 2007, p. 22). To have a name is to be guilty because having a name is the most general way in which something is captivated within protocols of use, within frameworks and ideals to which one has to ‘live up to’. Magic is an antidote to this sadness because it provides liberation from one’s name. And here, we have a clear indication of the importance of profanation: to liberate beings from their sacred names is precisely what profanation consists in. Magic is thus, in fact, always already within the child’s grasp. Profanation allows for the experience of the world and of ourselves as ‘pure, profane, liberated from sacred names’ (Agamben 2007, p. 73). Therein lies its magical potential for both justice and happiness: ‘Justice, like magic, is nameless. Happy, and without a name, the creature knocks at the gates of the land of the magi, who speak only in gestures’ (Agamben 2007, p. 22).

The above provides a clear testimony of the Agambenian anarchic happiness I referred to in my introduction: the liberatory happiness of restoring things and being restored oneself to a state of potentiality. Yet, profanation and happy life are not simply identical. If profanation reveals a path leading to the gates to the land of magi, then what life awaits us beyond these gates? Whereas many interpretations of Agambenian profanation (or of deactivation, rendering inoperative, *katargein*, destituent politics) exist, the resultant re-envisioning of the world—the perfectly profane order—and the affirmative attitude belonging to it are still to be charted.⁷ How should one conceive of such a profane world?

4. Into the Land of Magi, or, Justice as a State of the World

Agamben articulates a messianic vision of the world as fully profane in *The Coming Community*. In the fragment titled *Halos*, Agamben quotes the following phrase from Benjamin, who wrote of the messianic world that ‘Everything will be the same, just a little different’ (qtd. in [Agamben 2009a](#), p. 53). Both parts of the sentence, as well as their combination, are striking: for how can ‘everything be the same’ after the coming of the messiah? How can the new world be the same world as the one that calls for redemption? What constitutes the ‘little difference’? As will become clear near the end of my paper, the messianic world denotes an intimacy of subject and object that stands opposed to any substantial division of the two. However, at this stage of my argument, it is useful to approach the new understanding of existence from these two sides. I will address the transformation of the subject in the next paragraph; here, I start with the profaned ‘object’: how do beings appear in the messianic world?

The examples Benjamin provides are of ordinary things:

Just as our room is now, so it will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too it will sleep in the other world. And the clothes we wear in this world, those too we will wear there. (qtd. in [Agamben 2009a](#), p. 52)

Apparently, the ‘little difference’ does not involve any concrete factual change in the world. The land of the happy is, qua factual content, no different than ours. Just as our room will be the same in the world to come as it is in this one, so too will we ourselves, with our attributes and characteristics, desires and complaints, joys and sufferings, be the same. In fact, this is precisely how Agamben utilizes the theological images of heaven and hell:

As a state of things, heaven is perfectly equivalent to hell even though it has the opposite sign. . . . The world of the happy and that of the unhappy, the world of the good and that of the evil contain the same state of things. . . . The just person does not reside in another world. The one who is saved and the one who is lost have the same arms and legs. ([Agamben 2009a](#), p. 90)

This does not mean, however, that nothing changes through messianic redemption. As Agamben writes, ‘the tiny displacement does not refer to the state of things, but to their *sense and their limits*’ ([Agamben 2009a](#), p. 53, my emphasis). To understand this type of transformation, profanation is again key. Profanation does not factually change a certain thing, event, position or location, but only its ‘sense’ and its ‘limits’, that is, the context of meaning and protocols of use determining them through consecration. Agamben expresses the effect of this ‘displacement’ of sense and limits through the image of an areole: the messianic world is inhabited by things around which glow a sort of halos, or empty spaces, a certain ‘ease’ that allows them to be otherwise. Messianic redemption, understood as profanation, bestows on things ‘as a gift’ a supplemental potentiality:

This imperceptible trembling of the finite that makes its limits indeterminate and allows it to blend, to make itself whatever, is the tiny displacement that everything must accomplish in the messianic world. Its beatitude is that of a potentiality that . . . surrounds it like a halo. ([Agamben 2009a](#), p. 56)

Importantly, Agamben calls this not only the world of the happy, but also that of the just. We already saw how Benjaminian historical redemption and Agambenian profanation can be considered as forces of justice insofar as they liberate from confining actualities. To fully grasp this aspect, one needs to consider that, in addition, the state to which things are restored is itself that of justice. Once more, Agamben takes inspiration from Benjamin. In his *Notes on the Category of Justice*, Benjamin tentatively develops a notion of justice as a ‘state of the world’. Although Agamben mentions this fragment only a few times (in *Homo sacer I*, in *The Use of Bodies* and in an essay in the volume *Creation and Anarchy*), I think its importance for an understanding of the promissory character of Agamben’s thought is not to be underestimated. His philosophy not only promises happiness, but also

justice. But what could justice as a state of the world mean here? The peculiarity of this Benjaminian phrase has to do with the fact that, as Andrew Benjamin emphasizes, it is not about establishing justice somewhere *in* the world—let us say, a court or a society—but concerns a form of justice that involves the very condition of the world itself (Benjamin 2017, p. 2). (Walter) Benjamin calls it an ‘ethical category of the existent’ (qtd. in Agamben 2019, p. 37). It does not involve, let us say, a (re-)distribution of goods, and neither does it refer to a certain act, will or intent of a subject. It thus does not concern morality and good deeds and does not depend on juridical systems or judgements. What Benjamin has in mind is a ‘condition of the good (as in goods, things, YdB) that is no longer a possession’ (qtd. in Agamben 2019, p. 37). Peculiar as such phrases at first glance may seem, they are completely consistent with the aim of historical redemption and profanation as described above. For is such an experience of the world not precisely what profanation ultimately achieves: the liberation of things, phenomena, the existent itself, from the frameworks in which we have caught them, from their status as ‘possessions’ of specific individuals or of the human race in general? What is at stake here is not an idea of justice as it depends on the arbitrary goals and desires of subjects, but rather a sort of justice of the *object*. Profanation thus not only responds to the desire of a subject to be free, but is also a response to a *demand* of objects and the world: to be perceived, understood, heard, sensed independently of or outside the meanings and practices to which humanity has confined them. As he will later write in his modal ontology, beings *demand* their own potentiality (Agamben 2015, p. 168).

How then, to conceptualize this ‘just’ state in which a thing is revealed in its profane potentiality? I want to mention two concepts Agamben reserves to characterize things in their messianic state: ‘whatever singularities’ and ‘irreparable’.

Dispelling general frameworks that present things as particulars belonging to general sets, Agamben writes that things are exposed as ‘quodlibet ens’, which is mostly translated as ‘whatever singularities’. Whatever beings are singular, in the sense that they do not receive their meaning from their belonging to a general set of which they would be a particular instance. Surely, beings as well as people can be denoted through their predicates, such as intelligent, athletic or clumsy. What makes them what they are is, however, not their belonging to the group of ‘intelligent’ beings, or clumsy people, etcetera, but their singular *way* of being intelligent and clumsy. This ‘way’ of being denotes their singularity, their idiosyncratic manner of being what they are. It is this ‘way’ of being *x*, *y*, *z* that, in the work of Agamben, takes precedence over the ‘being’ of the *x*, *y*, *z*. The way of being something denotes the potentiality animating, but also changing, varying and transforming the predicates through which we characterize ourselves, others and things. Developing an eye for the *way* things are what they are means, for Agamben, to become receptive of their ‘taking place’, of how and in what way they manifest certain characteristics without exhausting their potentiality to become otherwise. The example Agamben uses to illustrate this way of looking at things is that of love. When we love someone, we do not love someone because they are, say, cheerful, handsome and sensual, but we love *their specific way* of being these (or other) things. ‘Whatever’ here thus does not mean something like ‘it does not matter which or who’, but as Agamben argues, ‘such that it always matters’, a ‘being that is wanted’ emphasizing the ‘libet’ or ‘will’ lost in the English translation of ‘quodlibet’. Pushing the etymology of quodlibet even further, Agamben goes so far as to say that whatever beings are beings viewed in terms of their ‘lovability’.

A second term Agamben introduces to articulate the messianic state of things is the concept of the ‘irreparable’.

Irreparable means that these things are consigned without remedy to their being—thus, that they are precisely and only their *thus*. . . . but irreparable also means that for them there is literally no shelter possible, that in their being—thus they are absolutely exposed, absolutely abandoned. (Agamben 2009a, p. 39)

No longer understood in relation to the general frameworks and protocols that prescribed their meaning and use, things are no longer viewed in terms of what they should be, but only for their idiosyncratic way of being what they are. In this sense, as fully profaned,

they are ‘abandoned’ to themselves, without the shelter of an overarching meaning or sacred protocol. The crucial step in Agamben’s profane messianism is to understand this abandonment not as a dire situation, but rather as *justice* and, moreover, as the prerequisite of *happiness*.

The transformation of the abandoned state from a deplorable one into a happy one, occurs in reference to another theological paradigm, namely that of limbo. According to the Aquinian image, limbo is a unique place in the afterlife where unbaptized children reside who have died with no other fault than original sin. They are not granted access to heaven because baptism or final judgment has not washed away the mark of this sin, yet neither do they join the damned in hell, for unlike them, they have never had the opportunity for redemption. Their punishment is therefore limited to a privation, which consists in ‘the perpetual lack of the vision of God’ and ‘in every other respect they fully enjoy their natural perfection’ (Agamben 2009a, p. 5). For Aquinas, with the presence of God being the foundation of happiness and meaning, limbo is still an awful place. However, in the profane hands of Agamben, this image allows for another possibility. As he emphasizes, because the children ‘have only natural and not supernatural knowledge, which is implanted in us at baptism, they do not know that they are deprived of the supreme good’ (Agamben 2009a, p. 5). This means that they actually cannot suffer from the privation that constitutes their punishment. Accordingly, Agamben transforms limbo from a place of punishment into one of joy:

The greatest punishment—the lack of the vision of God—thus turns into a natural joy: Irremediably lost, they persist without pain in divine abandon. God has not forgotten them, but rather they have always already forgotten God; and in the face of their forgetfulness, God’s forgetting is impotent . . . Neither blessed like the elected, nor hopeless like the damned, they are infused with a joy with no outlet. (Agamben 2009a, p. 6)

No longer living in reference to any type of *telos*, which is to redeem them or to give their lives meaning and not even suffering from the *absence* of such a telos, the realm of whatever singularities is a region happily beyond perdition and salvation. As Henrik Rungelrath has carefully charted, eschatological terms such as salvation and redemption are subtly reworked here by Agamben to fit a profane world, such that the latter can claim that indeed, salvation is possible, but that it consists precisely in perceiving beings in their ultimate ‘unsavability’ (cf. Rungelrath 2022, pp. 161–85). Profanation is here absolute because the world no longer stands in need of salvation—it is saved from the need or imperative to be saved. In more philosophical terms, the world is no longer understood teleologically, and this is precisely what constitutes its happiness. Similarly, ‘revelation’, for Agamben, ‘does not mean revelation of the sacredness of the world, but only revelation of its irreparably profane character’ (Agamben 2009a, p. 90). The justice of beings now no longer depends on their conforming to some abstract standard, but is the very state of the world perceived in its irreparability.

Emphasizing even further the undecidability between messianic and profane in this vision, Agamben calls this state of beings ‘divine’ and even goes so far as to equate it with God, albeit in a decidedly more pantheistic than transcendent sense:⁸

God or the good or the place does not take place, but is the taking-place of the entities . . . The being-worm of the worm, the being-stone of the stone, is divine. (Agamben 2009a, p. 15)

The messianic order is a perfectly profane order, wherein things are saved from any apparatus that prescribes their salvation and thus display themselves freely in the singular way in which they ‘take place’—as whatever singularities. Freed from teleological perspectives, irreparable humanity can now live its lives as ‘pure means’. In the following section, I elaborate on the mode of subjectivity corresponding to the lovability of objects and the practice of use corresponding to the exposition of things as pure means.

5. Happy Life as a Loving Use of Pure Means

In the above section, I have analyzed the mode of being of the ‘object’ and the ‘world’ as exposed through messianic redemption. Now, we need to understand how, in the same gesture, the subject is equally transformed.⁹ At stake here is thus not simply a different perception of existence or of objects, but an alternate way of living and engaging with them, an alternate way of ‘being-in-the-world’—to use the Heideggerian term. Modifying the world, the subject is itself modified. What mode of being corresponds to justice as a state of the world, to beings in their irreparability and lovability? In this paragraph, I present the mode of being of the subject rendered possible by this new understanding of existence as ‘happy life’. I will do so in two ways. First of all, in the sense of the attitude or *ethos* belonging to it and secondly, in terms of the *practice* it involves.

5.1. Love, Receptivity and Letting Be

In the previous section, I described how, in Agamben’s philosophical adaptation, messianic redemption means grasping beings in their profane *lovability*. Correspondingly, the messianic mode of being of the subject is *love*. To the lovability of the object corresponds a loving subject. But what does love mean here? It cannot be a form of appropriative love. To repeat the Benjaminian phrase that Agamben emphasizes, the intended mode of subjectivity reveals ‘a condition of the good that is no longer a possession’ (Benjamin 2011, my emphasis). Appropriating beings (whether they be things, one’s own body or others) or desiring to gain possession of them means subjecting them to your will. Such subjection implies that one is no longer attuned to how things take place, but instead shifts attention toward an image or ideal to which these things should conform. In doing so, one exits the state of the world as justice, seeking instead to capture phenomena within certain ideals, constraining the potentiality inhering in things in relation to to-be-achieved actualities. As Agamben writes in *The Coming Community*, from the messianic perspective, such an appropriative attitude constitutes evil, for ‘evil is only the inadequate response to potentiality’ (Agamben 2009a, p. 31). And through this inadequate response, we fail ‘our innermost possibility ... we fall away from the only thing that makes love possible’ (Agamben 2009a, p. 31).

Instead of an appropriative type of love, Agamben is aiming for a notion of *receptive* love. One that does not constrict beings to their present actuality or a to-be-achieved future actuality, but is attuned to the way things take place. Ultimately, love comes down to a:

So be it. In everything affirm simply the *thus, sic*, beyond good and evil (here in the standard sense of moral judgments, YdB). But *thus* does not simply mean in this or that mode, with those certain properties. “So be it” means “let the thus be.” In other words, it means ‘yes’. (Agamben 2009a, p. 102)

Because for Agamben, perceiving beings such as they are means attuning oneself to the *potentiality* inhering in them, this ‘so be it’ is not to be confused with fatalism. Instead, as the quote articulates, it means ‘letting the thus be’. In a text written in the same period and taken up in the volume *Potentialities*, Agamben elaborates on the relation between love and letting be through a reading of Heidegger. Love is there explained as ‘bestowing the gift’ of potentiality on things, thus enabling them to grow, develop, change, etcetera (Agamben 1999, p. 200). It is the attitude that, having suspended established meaning and protocols, creates the space for beings to take place. ‘Letting the thus be’, love is ‘the ethical mode of hospitality’ (Agamben 2009a, p. 24). If evil consists in negating the potentiality inhering in things, and the good—as described above—is the very taking place of beings, then love, as the only adequate response to the potentiality inhering in things, resonates with the good. If we take the quote on the taking place of beings as divine seriously, in his own way, Agamben thus subscribes to a mystical trope common to many esoteric traditions, wherein loving things means attuning oneself to the divine.

To be clear, at stake here is not a general or universal love that stands opposed to personal desire, but one that is attentive precisely of the singularity of things and the

everyday, banal and profane existence—including one's own body. It is a way of dwelling *within* the profane, not a way of escaping it. Consider, for instance, amorous love. As Agamben writes:

Lovers go to the limit of the improper in a mad and demonic promiscuity; they dwell in carnality and amorous discourse, in forever-new regions of impropriety and facticity, to the point of revealing their essential abyss. (Agamben 1999, p. 204)

However, such dwelling in carnality is always with an eye to what escapes our attempts at grasping or mastering existence. It is the desire as it arises from attentiveness to the inexhaustible potentiality inhering in the other and the situation, not some to-be-achieved actuality. As Agamben writes in a short piece entitled *Idea of Love*, loving someone entails 'the intimacy of living with a stranger' (Agamben 1995, p. 61; cf. also Dickinson 2011, p. 157). That is to say, a dwelling in the banality of one's amorous situation in such a way as to let love to find its own shape. This can only happen through a deep understanding and acceptance of the inappropriability of the other and of existence in general.

Another example is parental love. Surely, it consists in materially taking care, providing shelter and all kinds of particular acts, but all such acts can also be done 'without love', which means that parental love is not reducible to these specific acts themselves. The supplementarity that love consists in with regard to these acts may best be described as a form of attention and trust, which in and of itself creates a space for the child to develop, figure out, take shape and grow. Such a creation of space stands not opposed to concrete parenting acts, but rather accompanies them, animates them. Conversely, parents can perform concrete parenting acts, provide housing, food and clothes, while still not enabling the child to feel the 'free room' to grow and develop—for instance, through constantly monitoring, judging and regulating what the child does. Such would be an example of the 'inadequate response' to the potentiality inhering in things and one's child. And although we might not be inclined to call this a form of 'evil' parenting per se, it does stand opposed to good parenting as a form of 'bad' parenting.

Following these examples, it is clear that Agamben's hospitable love and 'letting the thus be' cannot simply be understood as a form of passivity: by creating a loving space and allowing potentiality to be, one effects change in the world—'letting be' means making things happen. At stake is a deep form of engagement. To further understand this new engagement, we need to move on to the theory of use developed in later writings, on the basis of which, the themes of love and letting be can be further elaborated.

5.2. The Subject of Use

Profanation, messianic redemption and love, 'give back' or 'restore' things, as I have been arguing, to free and common 'use'. From my discussion of *Profanations*, we know that this free use stands opposed to consecrated forms of usage. Conceptually, it is a use that becomes possible by liberating things from their relation to ends, and exposes them as 'pure means'. But what does using things as pure means consist in? Again, negatively, this use *does not* mean a complete passivity or inertia. Pure means, or 'means without ends' do not exist through a *renunciation* of ends. What beings and human life are released from is not the possibility to establish and invent ends to pursue but only the *necessary* relation to certain established ends. In line with my description of love as opposed to appropriative attitudes, in later texts on Saint Paul and the Franciscans, Agamben further specifies that it is to be a non-possessive form of use. Profane, ateleological, non-possessive—but what then does this use consist in *positively*?

Agamben's most sustained attempt at providing a positive theory of use can be found in *The Use of Bodies*. The importance of this theory cannot be overestimated as 'use' here concerns not simply one way of engaging with things among others, but describes the primordial mode of being in the world of the human being. Use 'expresses the relation that one has with oneself, the affection that one receives *insofar* as it is in relation with a

determinate being (UB, 28)'. I limit my discussion of this theory to two points which I deem necessary for a basic understanding of the type of praxis Agamben has in mind with happy life.

First of all, through the use of something, humankind is always at the same time active and passive with regard to that which it is engaged in.

Human being and world are, in use, in a relationship of absolute and reciprocal immanence; in the using of something, it is the very being of the one using that is first of all at stake . . . To the affection that the agent receives from his action there corresponds the affection that the patient receives from his passion. (Agamben 2015, p. 30)

Contrary to common understandings of use, for Agamben, it does not describe an activity that commences from an autonomous subject deciding over an object. For a subject to actively use something, it needs, first of all, to be 'activated' or affected by the object in question. There is thus not first a supposedly sovereign subject that in and of itself decides to use an object, but the using subject is co-original with the used object and the using activity itself. In fact, only insofar as the living human being is affected by its surroundings can it experience itself *as* a subject making use of these surroundings. In this technical sense, use thus indicates the very way in which the human being is always intimately entwined with what affects her. Dusting off the stoic notion of *oikeiosis*, Agamben argues that human life consists first and foremost in a form of 'familiarization'. Whatever happens to us, whatever we do, learn, become, fail to do, lose—all of this affects us in such a way as to shape us, form our lives, identities and communities. In the terms of *The Coming Community*, it is what determines our 'way of being', our very taking place. Use, understood as familiarization, is 'the very mode of being of the living being' (Agamben 2015, p. 199). As such, for Agamben, the subject is not primarily a *willing* subject, deciding over existence as though transcendent with regard to it, but a *using* subject, that comes to be and to know itself only in and through the affection it receives in relation to its surroundings. Fundamental is its irreducible *intimacy* with the world as something that is always already taking place before and beyond every attempt to grasp ourselves or will something to be the case. This is so precisely because it is only in and through being affected by things that a human being can will or not will anything. Instead of subjecting things to our will, confining them within prefixed contexts of meanings and protocols, happy life consists in the commemoration of this primordial use of things that in and of itself gives rise to transient subjects, customs and meanings.

This brings me to my second point, namely that use is here considered as *generative* of transient subjects, norms, values, forms and meanings. Profanation already made clear that in and of itself, things do not prescribe static and/or universalizable forms of use. This does not mean, however, that forms, norms and values do not or should not exist and neither that the existing ones are simply meaningless. Instead, by always already using, human life in its very 'taking place' itself generates a *plenitude* of usages, forms of life and habits that never exhaust the potentiality, allowing for this plenitude. What counts for Agamben is appreciating these forms and norms in the right way, that is, always with an eye to the generative potentiality at their source, never allowing them to become 'set in stone'. Here, Agamben takes inspiration from Lucretius, who argued that even the biological functions that we have—which the western tradition had, at least up till evolutionary theory, always considered to be somehow ahistorical and unchanging—are themselves only the result of life using itself, developing various usages and functions (cf. Agamben 2015, p. 33). In fact, it is such an 'auto-constitutive' character of being that Agamben in the same book sketches also under the guise of a modal ontology and a theory of forms-of-life. Although Agamben is thus indeed an *anarchic* thinker in the sense that he denies and critiques all attempts at capturing human existence by use of an *arche* or principle from which meaning and protocol can be deduced, he is not *anarchic* in the sense that he celebrates destruction and chaos: if anything, he is a sort of ontological optimist in that he puts his faith in the auto-constitutive potentiality of life itself. Human life, in being primordially receptive

toward whatever it encounters, habitually generates its own communal forms and norms. These norms stabilize into forms of life, but never completely and always allow for different usage.

According to Agamben, it is precisely this dimension of use and human receptivity to oneself, others, one's surroundings, life and being to which our access has become blocked in our attempts at institutionalizing usages, consecrating the world in fixed meanings and protocols. Fearing potentiality, curtailing it to become fixed and controllable, we have become estranged from ourselves. This fear and inadequate response to potentiality constitute evil and generate unhappiness. Happy life, by consequence, first and foremost depends on a renewed access to this sphere. It is through the intimacy with the generative force of potentiality inhering in things that one feels alive, that one can experience the delight of being affected, taking shape and making use. Happiness, for Agamben, thus does not consist of attaining a certain state, in attaining what you want or in living up to any specific idea or ideal. Neither does it depend on fortune nor divine favor. Happiness consists of the alignment with the generative, formative potentiality of life and being itself, with one's own receptivity and the loving use it could generate. Only in this sense, in this alignment with life and participation in the perfectly profane, forever self-modulating movement of being, can one speak of happy life in Agamben as 'blessed life' and perhaps even 'eternal life'. For what is eternal, as De la Durantaye emphasized in his exemplary discussion of the role of profanation and the relation between Benjamin and Agamben, is never the actual state of things, but precisely the transience of existence ([De la Durantaye 2008](#), p. 34). In the words of Benjamin, which Agamben has quoted on more than one occasion:

[T]he rhythm of this eternally transient worldly existence, transient in its totality, in its spatial but also in its temporal totality, the rhythm of messianic nature, is happiness. (qtd. in [Agamben 1999](#), p. 145)

Using life, one takes part in this rhythm, attunes oneself to it, and then life becomes happy life.

6. Conclusions

In the introduction, I proposed to interrogate Agamben's notion of happy life in terms of the ethico-ontological modification that is to give rise to it. Approaching this modification from the point of view of Agamben's complex relation to theology and his ambiguous use of sacred and profane imagery, one can summarize it along the following lines. Happy life is achieved through a fundamental profanation of consecrated contexts of meanings and protocols of use, through which the world and everything in it is restored to its innermost potentiality, which Agamben phrases as innocence and justice. Happy life consists of the attunement of one's mode of being, one's *ethos* to this profane, just and transient state of the world, which can be explicated as an ethos of love involving a practice of use.

With regard to Agamben's complicated relation to theological and religious traditions, we have seen how deeply it is inspired by Walter Benjamin. Based on my exposition, one can distinguish the following features of Agamben's attitude toward religious thought:

- (1) Insofar as religious traditions involve the institutionalization of meaning and of praxis, or any type of protocolization and demarcation of existence as captured for Agamben in the technical term 'consecration', then his attitude is one of critique and full-fledged deactivation.
- (2) Insofar as religious and esoteric traditions have themselves recognized the limits of such consecration and conceptualized the possibility of bringing such apparatuses to an end, as expressed most explicitly in what Agamben understands 'messianism' to mean, then his attitude is one of affirmation and conspiracy (in the sense of being of the same spirit).
- (3) Finally, in his own 'profane' manner, in describing happy life in its positivity, Agamben makes 'new' and 'free' use of religious and esoteric tropes. It fundamentally concerns

the advent of a ‘new creature’, born through a form of *conversio* that changes one’s mode of being in the world. The concurring ‘state of the world’, characterized as limbo, as redeemed in its unsavability, allows one to perceive a ‘halo’ surrounding beings as they are exposed in their potentiality, lovability and usability. Finally, happy life consists of the alignment with this world, which he sometimes frames as divine.

Let me, by way of conclusion, speculate a little further on the nature of happy life and ask, once again: what does happy life consist in? What is ‘new’ about this ‘new creature’? The striking answer is, in fact, nothing concrete. Yet, everything concrete shines in a new light. This new light, which exposes everything as irreparable and unsavable, at the same time implies an understanding of (one’s own) human existence as fundamentally inoperative or ‘without-work’. Because, fundamentally, nothing is there to be saved or changed; there are also no tasks to be done and no ideals to be achieved. This is precisely why there exists a plenitude of activities, forms, cultures and histories. What is most essentially human is *not* having to do this or become that. Happy life is achieved precisely through a liberation from any such imperatives to change the world. This fundamental insight allows conscious access to the dimension of use and of pure means that in any case were already present albeit covered over by consecrated usage and meaning. Happiness here thus does not simply mean ‘feeling happy’ and does not depend on factually changing one’s situation from an unpleasant into a pleasant one. As is the case in many spiritual and esoteric thought, happiness as opposed to satisfaction, is achievable only by way of a fundamental reconnection with or rooting oneself back in the generative potentiality of life itself. Such an intimacy with the source of life is the antidote to any form of existential claustrophobia, of being bound to and captivated by what is, no matter what the content of this ‘is’. Agamben systematically theorizes this generative potentiality as the primordial sphere of use and familiarization, but he does not shy away from calling it God or the good. And although at first glance leaving the world intact, deactivation and re-engagement with the generative potentiality of life simultaneously allows for free use. Ultimately, according to Agamben, it is precisely this new mode of being that, far from rendering us passive, allows for all kinds of changes to take place through the use and love it enables.

With this outline, I hope to have established a clear starting point for evaluating Agambenian happy life beyond its negative characterization. This position can and should be assessed critically and extensively. Among the things to be addressed in such further research is, for instance, whether this notion escapes the dangers of moral and political nihilism. Moreover, a more careful analysis is needed of the type of normativity that use allows and also a more thorough understanding of Agamben’s critique of notions such as responsibility, duty and will. Such pending evaluation notwithstanding, the above exposition at the very least makes clear that, within Agamben’s philosophy, ‘happy life’ is to be understood as a systematically achieved and coherent position in its own right. As such, this basic outline should also allow for comparative analyses with other contemporary theories of happiness and with more militant understandings of justice that stress action over reception and duty over potentiality.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ In *Why Still Philosophy?*, for instance, Adorno clearly attempts to isolate the negative aspect of philosophy from its more affirmative or reconciliatory efforts (cf. [Adorno 1998](#), pp. 5–19).

² The postponement of Agamben’s more systematic elaborations of his alternative to the two final installments of the *Homo sacer* -series in 2011 and 2014, has resulted in evaluations of Agamben’s messianism, which argue that the disenchanting power of his thought is overshadowed by the inability to present an alternate, ‘new life’ in an affirmative manner. In a careful comparison of Agambenian messianism with that of Walter Benjamin, Vivan Liska identifies Agamben with a Don Quixote-type savior, who knows fully well that ‘the world will not love him [for it]. Instead he will be crucified for revealing the bare, unveiled truth, the wooden structure behind the shining screen’ ([Liska 2010](#), p. 174). In an equally impressive analysis, Agata Bielik-Robson has

argued that instead of ‘more life’, Agamben’s (misuse) of the messianic tradition can only give us a more dignified and free death (Bielik-Robson 2010, p. 125). With the exploration of justice and happiness as both a state of the world and of the concurring subject, elaborated as an ethos of love and practice of use, this article proposes a reading that does account for the ‘more life’ and happy nature of the life beyond disillusionment which Agamben aims at.

- 3 This article builds on my dissertation, of which a revised version is expected to be published at Bloomsbury in 2024 under the title *Agamben’s Ethics of the Happy Life. The Move Beyond Nihilism and Morality*. The specific focus on the ambivalence of sacred and profane terminology in the work of Agamben, the analysis of Agamben’s texts that explicitly deal with Walter Benjamin and my conclusions regarding Agamben’s relation to theology, belong solely to this article.
- 4 In my forthcoming book on this topic, I provide a more comprehensive reading of happy life, as it develops from Agamben’s reflections on language and potentiality toward his critique of the western ethico-political and ontological tradition, finding more systematic elaboration in his later attempts at formulating an alternative ontology, ethics and politics.
- 5 Steven DeCaroli, for instance, emphasizes in different articles that what is at stake for Agamben is ‘a type of awareness ... of the largely hidden attitudes that sustain that existence and determine the scope of what is valid within it’ (DeCaroli 2017, p. 125). Another example is Ian Hunter, who has argued that Agamben’s philosophy centers around a ‘conversion of looking’ achieved through the initiation into a Heideggerian type of ontology (Hunter 2017, p. 139). Although I do not know whether they have read the article by Khuruna, these authors seem to share a basic understanding of the specific type of philosophy of Agamben, which I would summarize as a philosophy that aims at a transformation of one’s *ethos* or mode of being.
- 6 (Cf. Benjamin 2011, p. 240): ‘Im rettenden und strafenden Zitat erweist die Sprache sich als die Mater der Gerechtigkeit. Es ruft das Wort beim Namen auf, bricht es zerstörend aus dem Zusammenhang, eben damit aber ruft es dasselbe auch zurück an seinen Ursprung.’ (In the saving and destroying quotation, language exposes itself as the mother of justice. It calls the word by its name, rips it destroyingly out of its context, all the while calling it back to its origin) (my translation).
- 7 For an illuminating analysis of profanation, see the 2008 article by Leland De la Durantaye (2008, pp. 27–62). De la Durantaye carefully and elaborately charts the function of profanation in Agamben’s oeuvre and its relation to the thought of Walter Benjamin. While touching upon similar aspects of this topic, my paper aims to provide a more concrete and systematic elaboration of what a perfectly profane order consists of.
- 8 For a discussion on the possible pantheistic character of Agamben’s ontology, see Colby Dickinson’s reflection on the influence of Spinoza on Agamben in *Agamben and Theology* (cf. Dickinson 2011, pp. 168–75).
- 9 This was already the intent in Benjamin’s phrase, ‘justice as a state of the world’. As Andrew Benjamin explains, this phrase implies a ‘repositioning of the subject/world relation ... a different philosophical anthropology ... with another subject, one which possesses a different sense of worldliness. Hence, there is a different demand: what is the subject and what is its world when justice pertains not to a subject’s will but to the world itself?’ (Benjamin 2017, p. 2).

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