Article

Existential Choice as Repressed Theism: Jean-Paul Sartre and Giorgio Agamben in Conversation

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Abstract: This article brings Sartre's notion of existential authenticity, or sovereign decisionism, into conversation with the work of contemporary political theorist Giorgio Agamben, who argues that sovereign decisionism is the repressed theological foundation of authoritarian governments. As such, the article seeks to accomplish two goals. The first is to show that Sartre's depiction of sovereign decisionism directly parallels how modern democratic governments conduct themselves during a state of emergency. The second is to show that Sartre's notion of existential authenticity models, what Agamben calls, secularized theism. Through an ontotheological critique of Sartre's professed atheism, the article concludes that an existential belief in sovereign decision represses, rather than profanes, the divine origins of authoritarian law. I frame the argument with a reading of Sartre's 1943 play *The Flies*, which models the repressed theological underpinnings of Sartre's theory.

Keywords: Jean-Paul Sartre; Giorgio Agamben; existentialism; contemporary continental philosophy; authenticity; sovereignty

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When Orestes, the protagonist of Jean-Paul Sartre's 1943 play *The Flies*, returns to the city of Argos to avenge his father Agamemnon, Zeus commands King Aegistheus, Agamemnon's murderer, to incarcerate Orestes before he acts. Fearing for his life, Aegistheus implores Zeus to kill Orestes with a thunderbolt, but Zeus no longer has the power to do so because Orestes discovers his own god-like ability to make self-originating choices. "Once freedom lights its beacon in a man's heart, the gods are powerless against him," Zeus laments; "It's a matter between man and man, and it is for other men, and for them only, to let him go his gait, or to throttle him" (Sartre 1989, p. 102). Orestes's newfound freedom disrupts the socio-political order of Argos by threatening the sovereign control that Zeus exerts over King Aegistheus and his people. If left to his own devices, Orestes will usurp the throne and reclaim his true identity as the ruler of Argos—or so believes his sister, Electra, who has long expected her brother's return to force out imposters like Aegistheus and restore the kingdom to its rightful state. But Orestes kills Aegistheus and their mother, Queen Clytemnestra, only to abandon Electra and the citizens of Argos to fend for themselves. "I shall not sit on my victim's throne or take the scepter in my blood-stained hands. A god offered it to me, and I said no. I wish to be a king without a kingdom, without subjects," Orestes declares, for true authenticity lies not in one's destiny or ontological essence, for Sartre, but in freedom, which makes humanity what it is—the sovereign (though, perhaps, unwitting) bearers of pure, unencumbered choice (Sartre 1989, p. 123). The people of Argos are liberated from the oppressive weight of divine authority, but, as I will attempt to show, they do not escape the deleterious effects of sovereignty, even as a kingdom without a king. For true authenticity, in Sartre's vocabulary, refers to the practice of a divine-like freedom that renders the gods "powerless" against Orestes and anyone else capable of conscious, self-originating choice.

This episode from Sartre's stage adaptation of the Electra myth highlights a problematic notion at the center of Sartre's philosophical enterprise that this paper attempts to unravel. As Electra would have it, Orestes rebuffs his ontic vocation as the king of Argos, but this essentialist depiction of

personhood, to which Electra is militantly committed, is seriously at odds with Sartre's own doctrine of authenticity. Sartre insists that there is no pre-given nature, or set of essential properties, that constitute human identity as such, meaning that there are no restrictions on the human will, and therefore no way to violate or act according to the contours of an essential self. Rather, human identity is radically free—where the potential to be (a negative ontology that Sartre calls "nothingness") actualizes through choice—so authentic behavior, as Sartre defines it, can only be accomplished through self-originating acts of volition that manifest identity *ex nihilo*, just as the Judeo-Christian God is believed to have created the cosmos *out of nothing.* For this reason, Sartre describes selfhood as "a lack of being" that, he asserts, "is not to be distinguished from choice," or the "desire" to be, a potentiality that is always in the process of actualizing (Sartre 1953, p. 725). Sartre derives from this logic his famous dictum that "existence precedes essence" and, in this formulation, we are given two models of personhood that structure the content of this article (Sartre 1953, p. 725). The first of these casts human nature as a pure essence, or a set of essential properties; the second, by contrast, sees human nature as paradoxically natureless, an absolute freedom that strives to become an essence through the power of sovereign, self-originating choices. Sartre attributes the latter to his exemplary model of existential authenticity, Orestes, who, in profaning the gods, defiantly states that "I *am* my freedom" (Sartre 1989, p. 117). But unlike the vast majority of people who strive, in Sartre's view, to become an essence, Orestes refuses the ontic vocation to which he is supposedly destined in order to retain his freedom.

Electra, however, remains committed to an essentialist model of personhood and gives up her freedom as a result, similar to the cafe waiter in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, who roots his identity in the vocation that he performs. "What I attempt to realize is a being-in-itself," the waiter reports, "as if it were not my free choice to get up each morning at five o'clock or to remain in bed . . . As if from the very fact that I sustain this role in existence I did not transcend it on every side . . . as one *beyond* my condition" (Sartre 1953, p. 103). Sartre contrasts this "being-in-itself", which he likens to an inkwell, a drinking glass, and other inanimate objects, with the conscious subject, or "being-for-itself," who strives to unify with the former to achieve autonomous self-presence. Kate Kirkpatrick argues in *Sartre and Theology* that the perfect union of consciousness and being is impossible, representing, in Sartre's study, an unrealizable goal to become God. She compares the self-identical subject of Sartre's analysis with the Jewish divinity of the Torah who identifies himself to Moses as "I am that I am" (Kirkpatrick 2017a, p. 90). Indeed, Sartre himself writes that "the best way to conceive of the fundamental project of human reality is to say that man is the being whose project is to be God. . . . To be man means to reach toward being God. Or if you prefer, man fundamentally is the desire to be God" (Sartre 1953, p. 724). But striving to become a self-identical essence similar to God is to live in bad faith, according to Sartre, who argues that all people should learn by virtue of their freedom to live authentically without God and without the impulse to deify themselves. Indeed, to embrace the absolute "nothingness" of one's identity is to profane divine authority for Sartre, who would otherwise locate God, in line with Judeo-Christian orthodoxy, as the ontological foundation of the universe.

It is therefore easy to read Orestes as analogous to Sartre, who, according to Noreen Khawaja, saw himself as "the primary representative" of a distinctly atheistic version of existentialism that "emphasized the total isolation of the human being and the total responsibility of each person for his own existence" (Khawaja 2016, p. 2). According to Khawaja, Sartre's idea of "nothingness" grew directly out of his atheism, so to consciously embrace freedom was to simultaneously profane God. It was to demonstrate, in other words, that God doesn't exist through the sovereign creation of one's identity and moral values. This is why Orestes, in contrast to his sister Electra, does not experience guilt after killing their mother. Electra feels herself bound by a transcendental moral law; Orestes does not. "I am doomed to have no other law but mine," Orestes states; "For I, Zeus, am a man, and every man must find out his own way" (Sartre 1989, p. 119). By first appearances, then, it would seem that Sartre advances a philosophical position that profanes the sovereign authority of God and political leaders alike, for every individual is sovereign over himself by virtue of the "little God which inhabits"

him, Sartre writes, the power that each of us possesses to freely decide on the meaning and value of our own life apart from the dictates of a divine or political authority (Sartre 1953, p. 81).

This article brings Sartre's notion of existential authenticity into conversation with the work of contemporary political theorist Giorgio Agamben, who argues by contrast that self-originating choice is the repressed theological foundation of authoritarian governments. In doing so, the article seeks to accomplish two goals. The first is to show that Sartre's depiction of sovereign decisionism directly parallels how modern democratic governments conduct themselves during a state of emergency. The second is to demonstrate that Sartre's notion of existential authenticity models what Agamben calls secularized theism, or the ontotheological foundation of law. It will be shown, in fact, that Sartre's atheistic critique of ontotheology—what he describes as an unconscious desire to be God—is itself ontotheological from Agamben's perspective, for Sartre replaces the essential nature of being-in-itself with a divine-like freedom to create moral values *ex nihilo*. So while the ontotheological desire to be God results in a loss of freedom, for Sartre, for Agamben, it results in the absolute freedom to dictate the metaphysical value of one's chosen behavior at will. This is the very definition of sovereign power for Agamben, who identifies God not with being, as Sartre does, but with nothingness, or a total lack of being, the negative ontology upon which Sartre builds his notion of existential authenticity. As I will show, both philosophers level a critique against ontotheology, but they begin their critiques with opposing notions of what constitutes the nature of God.

1. On Sartre and God

Jerome Gellman argues in a 2009 article that Sartre walks the line of mystical Christianity but fails to establish a relationship with God. "[W]hen Sartre asserts that a person has no *self*-substance," he writes, "Sartre is seeing through glass darkly what the Christian mystic has [already] discovered—that a person has no distinct self being, because he exists only in the encompassing being of God" (Gellman 2009, p. 131). According to Gellman, the believer of mystical Christianity experiences a complete breakdown of ontic distinctions and becomes aware of the single divine nature to which everything belongs. In the mystic tradition, as in the Augustinian tradition, a proper relationship with God results in the believer's ontological becoming, whereas the absence of God obversely results in the individual's ontological privation, or loss of being, which Sartre describes as the negative ontology of being-for-itself. For this reason, "Christian mystics exemplify bad faith at its worst," Gellman writes, for they "pretend[] to have discovered that they belong to the substance of God sufficiently so as to receive for themselves a substantive, in-itself form of being" (Gellman 2009, p. 129). Sartre's notion of the divine therefore embodies what Christina Howells calls "Absolute being," an essentialist view of ontology that precludes the subject's capacity for self-originating choice (Howells 1981, p. 550). As Howells writes, "the only plausible idea of God" for Sartre is "an impossible idea of God: a synthesis" of oppositional views that conceals the for-itself within a fixed ontological essence (Howells 1981, p. 550).

In a two-part series published in *Sartre Studies International* between 2013 and 2014, John Gillespie argues that Sartre wanted to develop a truly atheistic philosophy, but Sartre remained preoccupied with religious questions throughout his life and constantly referred to God in his writings, as a result. This preoccupation began with Sartre's youthful rejection of religious belief, for in rejecting God, Sartre became obsessed with God, forging his most important philosophical ideas around the deity's ostensible disappearance. Gillespie writes that Sartre "rejects God and incorporates the concept of God into his thinking. God is paradoxically both absent and present" (Gillespie 2014, p. 46). As Sartre explains in his 1963 autobiography *The Words,* he exchanged his nominal Christianity very early in life for a deeply felt religion of letters. Pouring himself over the books in his grandfather's study, he came to regard the publications as religious artifacts that would nourish his spiritual life in the decades to come. "Christian belief provide[d] an interpretive structure" for Sartre that was "transposed by Charles [Schweitzer, Sartre's grandfather,] into a secular form and transmitted to his more radical grandson" (Gillespie 2005, p. 244). Because of this, Sartre remained partial to a Christian framework throughout his life, and, as Adrian van den Hoven writes, Sartre "struggle[d] to develop a theology on an atheistic basis," which is to say in other

words that Sartre struggled to develop a political philosophy bereft of moral absolutes (van den Hoven 2010, p. 81). Much later in his career, Sartre criticized his earlier work for being too individualistic, and though he remained an atheist to his death, Sartre became fascinated with Judaism toward the end of his life because of its "ethical concern for the other as the basis on which to fulfill revolutionary goals" (Gillespie 2014, p. 53). Gillespie concludes the study with the suggestion that, had Sartre lived longer, he might have adopted a theistic position and, with it, the possibility of a "metaphysically based universal morality" (Gillespie 2014, p. 55). But the death of God meant the end of moral absolutes, for Sartre, who tied the transcendental authority of "universal morality" to the metaphysical nature of God's ontological essence. Therefore, it is not the sheer notion of God that Sartre rejects, but, if Gillespie is right, the orthodox God of the scholastic tradition, the ontological foundation of being.

In fact, it would seem that the God of Sartre's atheism is thoroughly Augustinian, for, as Kate Kirkpatrick argues in her 2017 publication *Sartre on Sin: Between Being and Nothingness*, Sartre was influenced by French theological and literary figures who themselves fell under the pervasive influence of Pierre de Bérulle, the Catholic mystic of nothingness whose Augustinian view of sin profoundly shaped the intellectual topography of 17th century France. René Descartes, Blaise Pascal, and François Fénelon were among Sartre's philosophical predecessors in this regard, and they argued, similar to Bérulle, that sin was the absence of being. Under this theological paradigm, all being-in-itself, to borrow Sartre's terminology, is contingent upon God, who "perpetually wills being into being," so to violate God's will is to violate one's God-given nature and return quite literally to nothingness, or the negative ontology of being-for-itself (Kirkpatrick 2017b, p. 33). Sartre secularizes Augustine to fit his atheistic worldview, professing the death of God at the same time that he advances a traditional (though secularized) theological idea. In Kirkpatrick's view of Sartre, God is the positive ground of ontology, and the source from which all other essences derive their being. Emptying the Augustinian system of its divine center, Sartre deprives humanity of its essence, and thereby reveals the absolute freedom of the for-itself in a world without God. But there are other theological traditions through which to read Sartre's idea of nothingness, and, as I will show in the following sections, different theological readings for Sartre and Agamben result in opposing critiques of ontotheology.

2. Sartre's Critique of Ontotheology

The theoretical death of God resulted for Sartre, as it did for Friedrich Nietzsche a century before, in the transvaluation of society's most sacred and authoritative values. Without God, there are no eternal moral principles, no inherent meaning to life, and, most significantly for Sartre, no pre-given human nature to which our actions must remain faithful. Indeed, it is precisely because human beings lack the *imago Dei*, precisely because "there is no God to conceive" of their nature, that we possess sovereign control over our identities and levy the power of self-originating choice through volitional acts of signification (Sartre 2007, p. 22). The freedom upon which Sartre founds his notion of existential authenticity logically emerges in a world without God, so the philosopher is critical of secular positions that base their metaphysical theories on what he calls the desire to be God. "This exultant atheism demonstrates that Sartre's liberty is a freedom *without* God," Gillespie writes; "His theoretical writings seek to refute the idea of God, but they also, returning as they frequently do to the notion of the divine, both reject it and incorporate it" (Gillespie 2013, p. 85). To this end, Sartre describes human consciousness, or the for-itself, as a lack of being that naturally strives to become an ontological essence, or the in-itself, writing that:

> The for-itself is the being which is to itself its own lack of being. The being which the for-itself lacks is the in-itself. … Thus human reality is the desire of being-in-itself. …
> The fundamental value which presides over this project is exactly the in-itself-for-itself; that is, the ideal of a consciousness which would be the foundation of its own being-in-itself by the pure consciousness which it would have of itself. It is this ideal which can be called God. (Sartre 1953, pp. 723–24)

The nothingness, or lack of being, upon which human consciousness is founded strives to become a self-identical essence that Sartre identifies with the Judeo-Christian God, as Kirkpatrick had noted earlier. Sartre is critical of this metaphysical stance because it endows ontology with a divine-like authority which itself is derived from the theological presupposition that God is the foundation of being. Thus, for Sartre, to be "in-itself-for-itself" is to be like God, meaning that any philosophical stance that prioritizes the metaphysical authority of pure essence is, at its core, a sublimated theological belief. This ontotheology disguises the for-itself as the in-itself, concealing nothingness, or non-being, within an absolute essence. But, as Gellman writes, it "is not possible for anything to be both the in-itself and a for-itself," in Sartre's view, and Sartre concludes on this basis that "God does not exist" (Gellman 2009, p. 132).

In a brief description of the *ancien régime*, Agamben observes that, prior to the French Revolution, the king's sovereignty was "divinely authorized" (Agamben 2017, p. 106). In this sense, the legal system enforced under the king of France was actually decreed by God, whose sole ability to establish transcendental moral laws placed him, rather than the king, at the top of a political hierarchy. Theoretically speaking, then, God was the origin of power; the king was his political representative. The distinction that Agamben draws here between legislative power and executive power broadens in scope and utility as the study progresses, but, for now, readers should note how the king's executive powers merely enforced transcendental laws that under a theocratic monarchy were thought to originate with God, who retained the sole capacity to create or abolish laws. Agamben describes the executive power of the king as a "force of law without law," which is to say, in other words, that the king enforces not his own will but the will of a sovereign God, from whom the king's authority is derived (Agamben 2017, p. 199).

This distinction between executive power and legislative power—between the power to enforce laws and the power to create them—is similarly depicted by Sartre in *The Flies*. As Zeus says to King Aegistheus, "You may hate me, but we are akin; I made you in my image" (Sartre 1989, p. 100). Unlike Orestes, who shirks the ontic responsibilities of a king, Aegistheus lacks sovereign control over his identity and enforces not his own will but the will of the deity who made him. In other words, the actions of Aegistheus are, to quote Agamben, "divinely authorized," while the free choices of Orestes derive their authority from Orestes alone. For Sartre, these contrasting models of personhood represent, as before, the sovereign subject, who as the paragon of authenticity takes full responsibility for his freedom, as well as by contrast the essential subject, who, expressing an unconscious desire to become like God, acts according to the nature of his ontic vocation. This is why freedom for Sartre is thought to profane divine authority. Aegistheus performs his identity as one exercising the executive powers of a king, while Orestes, fully equipped with both executive and legislative capabilities, exercises sovereign control over his identity though volitional acts of free will. He states, "I am doomed to have no other law but mine" (Sartre 1989, p. 119). This freedom to create laws that run counter to and exert authority over the eternal laws of God represents, for Sartre, a profane challenge to ontotheology. But it also models how authoritarian governments conduct themselves during a state of emergency, as I will demonstrate shortly.

It is therefore important at this juncture to make explicit where Sartre and Agamben are in agreement, as it will help to clarify, in the coming pages, where exactly their theories diverge. To begin, both Agamben and Sartre share the distinction between executive power and legislative power, but Sartre uses a different terminology to communicate these ideas. For Sartre, executing a law is the same as performing by acting in accordance with the laws of nature, just as a theocratic king, in both his and Agamben's accounts, acts according to nature by enforcing the divine laws handed down to him from above. Likewise, both Agamben and Sartre share an understanding of legislative power, though Sartre describes this law-making capacity as a negative ontology that gives humanity the power to make sovereign, self-originating choices. However, as the previous analysis has shown, many human beings utilize this power in bad faith and conceal the freedom of the for-itself within the absolute essence of a fixed, ontological identity. For Sartre, this represents the sublimated desire to become a pure essence similar to God. Though Agamben will give a very different account of the

divine nature, he agrees with Sartre that theological beliefs are sometimes sublimated, or repressed, in ontotheological form. He gives an account of the political implications of theological repression in his 2007 book *Profanations*:

> Secularization is a form of repression. It leaves intact the forces it deals with by simply moving them from one place to another. Thus the political secularization of theological concepts (the transcendence of God as a paradigm of sovereign power) does nothing but displace the heavenly monarchy into an earthly monarchy, leaving its power intact. Profanation, however, neutralizes what it profanes. Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use. Both are political operations: the first guarantees the exercise of power by carrying it back to a sacred model; the second deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized. (Agamben 2007, p. 77)

Sartre's atheistic stance would appear to profane, rather than merely secularize, the sovereign authority of God. He describes the subject's attempt to become a pure essence as an ontotheological tendency in human beings who, in the very manner described above by Agamben, sublimate their desire to become God by concealing within their feigned ontological essence a capacity for sovereign, self-originating choice. But it is precisely his legislative powers as a free subject that makes the authentic individual most like God for Agamben, whose account of sovereign decisionism also comprises his political theory of the state.

Therefore, Sartre's atheism does not profane the metaphysical authority of God but redirects it from the deity to mankind (Gillespie 2013, p. 82). For this reason, I agree with Agamben scholar Colby Dickinson that modern atheistic thought "has not removed God from the scene," but has rather "intensified theology's hold on humanity" by turning, as it has, "to a repressed form of secularity" (Dickinson and Kotsko 2015, p. 130). In the following section, I examine Agamben's account of nothingness to show how self-originating choice models the repressed theological foundation of Sartre's theory. In doing so, I work toward the conclusion that Sartre's atheistic critique of ontotheology is itself the result of sublimated theological views, for "[t]he key consequence of not believing in God," Gillespie writes, is tantamount, in Sartre's philosophy, to "be[coming a] God for oneself;" it is assuming the power, in the aftermath of God's disappearance, to create moral laws in much the same way that a sovereign political leader creates new laws during a state of emergency (Gillespie 2013, p. 82).

3. Agamben's Critique of Ontotheology

To understand Agamben's critique of ontotheology, I turn to his 1991 publication *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, where he develops a theory of language that profoundly informs his political analyses in the decades to come. It is also here that Agamben begins building a critique of sovereign decisionism that, in the following sections, will help me draw out the violent political consequences of Sartre's philosophy. Agamben traces the key existential concept of *nothingness* back to the scholarship of ancient Greek grammarians, who significantly informed the theological perspectives of St. Thomas Aquinas, St. John of Damascus, and Alain de Lille, in Agamben's view. Noting the influence of the grammarians on medieval theology, Agamben proposes a linguistic understanding of God's nature, writing that:

> *The link between grammar and theology is so strong in medieval thought that the treatment of the problem of the Supreme Being cannot be understood without reference to grammatical categories. In this sense, despite the occasional polemics of theologians opposed to the application of grammatical methods to sacred scripture (*Donatum non sequimur*), theological thought is also grammatical thought, and the God of the theologians is also the God of the grammarians.* (Agamben 1991, p. 27)

The origin of grammar, according to Agamben, was attributed by the ancient grammarians to Plato and Aristotle, who believed that language was inseparable from the categories of being. "A decisive event in this context came," he writes, "with the connection of the pronoun to the sphere of the first substance (*prote ousia*), made by Apollonius Disculus, an Alexandrian grammarian from the second century A.D." (Agamben 1991, p. 20). The connection took on an even greater currency with grammarians in the second half of the fifth century who identified the pronoun with "pure being in itself, before and beyond any qualitative determination" (Agamben 1991, p. 20). The basic idea was that pronouns remained indeterminate until entering discourse, where they could be attributed to a particular identity, or determinate meaning, in context.

This "privileged status of the pronoun" would reemerge in modern linguistic theories by Roman Jakobson and Émile Benveniste, who described the pronoun as an empty signifier that pointed to the very event of language itself, which is to say, the mere fact of existence before any determinate meaning is given to it (Agamben 1991, p. 20). Pronouns "become 'full' as soon as the speaker assumes them in an instance of discourse. Their scope," Agamben writes, "is to enact 'the conversion of language into discourse' and to permit the passage from *langue* to *parole*" (Agamben 1991, p. 24). According to Agamben, the grammatical distinction between entities and the mere fact of existence, between signification and language as an abstract system of potential meanings also plays a role in the history of Christian thought. It is here that the ontological category of nothingness takes on ontotheological significance.

To better understand the theological underpinnings of Sartre's theory, I shift the focus to ancient Hebrew and medieval Christian theologians who saw the divine nature, according to Agamben, as a kind of *nothingness*, an originary potential that passes into actuality through divisive, signifying acts of creation. As Agamben explains, the capacity to create *ex nihilo* cuts to the heart of the divine nature which, as the "*negative foundation of human discourse,*" is paradoxically natureless—a realm prior to signification and the representational divisions that bring intelligibility to our world (Agamben 1991, p. 30). Agamben traces this belief back to the secret and unspeakable name of God, the Tetragrammaton, which St. Thomas Aquinas, St. John of Damascus, and Alain de Lille all identified with God's pre-linguistic nature, the originary potential from which all determinate entities would finally emerge. "[A]*t this extreme fringe of ontological thought,*" Agamben writes, "*where the taking-place of being is grasped as shadow, Christian theological reflection incorporates Hebrew mystical notions of the* nomen tetragrammaton, *the secret and unpronounceable name of God*" (Agamben 1991, p. 30). On this basis, the ancient Hebrews would conclude that God was "*no longer an experience of language but language itself, that is, its taking place in the removal of the voice*" (Agamben 1991, p. 30).

In other words, God, or "the taking place of language", as Agamben refers to him, "appears thus as the negative ground on which all ontology rests, the originary negativity sustaining every negation. For this reason, the disclosure of the dimension of being is always already threatened by nullity," which is to say, in other words, that nothingness, or the unbound potential at the heart of existence, lies within and thus renders contingent every ontic reality, or positive instance of being (Agamben 1991, p. 36). As Agamben writes in *Potentialities*, "To be potential means: to be one's own lack, *to be in relation to one's own incapacity*. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality *are capable of their own impotentiality*; and only in this way do they become potential. They *can be* because they are in relation to their own non-Being" (Agamben 1999, p. 182). God, then, for these theologians and religious believers, was not an essence, as Sartre imagined him, but the nothingness that precedes our ontological becoming.

One can certainly see, then, striking parallels in how Sartre and Agamben formulate their conceptions of freedom, which is to say, the negative ground of ontology that both refer to as nothingness. This nothingness is ontologically prior to essence and therefore holds the capacity, as an indeterminate consciousness, to construct the world *ex nihilo* through the power of decision, just as the Judeo-Christian God is believed to have created the cosmos *out of nothing*, and just as the sovereign leader of the state is thought by Agamben to dictate the boundaries of legal behavior during

a state of emergency. Articulating these parallels more explicitly, we have the for-itself and what Agamben calls a divine potentiality under the heading of *existence*, whereas, under the heading of *essence*, we have what Sartre calls the in-itself and what Agamben calls the actualization of ontological entities. Existence precedes essence as a potentiality that precedes actuality. The parallels between their theories bear a striking resemblance.

The crux of their disagreement, on which my own argument depends, concerns what both philosophers describe as a sublimated desire to become God. As we have already seen, Sartre argues that the for-itself strives to become a fixed entity in order to mimic the self-identical nature of God. As a result, the for-itself is concealed within the in-itself, and the free subject goes on to behave, in bad faith, as if he lacked the freedom to act in violation of the purportedly fixed boundaries of his ontic vocation. In a direct reversal of this order, Agamben casts the divine nature as a pure potentiality, not as a fixed ontological essence. So, humanity's desire to become God does not result in the vanishing of the for-itself for Agamben, but by contrast in the reformulation of the in-itself, which takes on a drastically different mold. For, in Agamben's depiction of ontotheology, the in-itself is made contingent upon the for-itself, which dictates the boundaries of a mutable but no less authoritative ontic reality through the power of self-originating choice. Thus, "pure potentiality and pure actuality are [made] indistinguishable" from each other, Agamben writes, giving way to a "zone of indistinction" that founds the sovereign subject in addition to the sovereign authority of the state (Agamben 2017, p. 42).

This is why free choice, for Agamben, like the divine nothingness at the heart of language, "is that through which Being founds itself *sovereignly*, which is to say, without anything preceding or determining it (*superiorem non recognoscens*) other than its own ability not to be" (Agamben 2017, p. 42). Self-origination is thus the highest expression of ontotheology for Agamben, who argues that sovereign leadership operates under this metaphysical paradigm during a state of emergency to justify its violation of constitutional law. Executive powers and legislative powers—actuality and potentiality—combine as a single force in this "zone of indistinction" to police the laws that it alone has the ability to create. Thus, while Aegistheus performs his identity as one exercising the executive powers of a king, Orestes exercises the sovereign control of a divinity as one fully equipped with both executive and legislative capabilities. From Agamben's perspective, then, it is Orestes, rather than Aegistheus, who models a sublimated desire to be like God. Agamben's take on secularized theism can be more widely applied to Sartre's philosophy as a whole, as I will demonstrate in the following section. Of particular importance to this analysis is the role that language plays in Agamben's study, for human decision-making activates the transition from *langue* to *parole*, from potential meaning to articulated meaning, and gives birth to juridical divisions that dehumanize the non-citizen members of society in accordance with the sovereign structures of signification.

4. Sovereign Decisionism and the Death of God

Sartre famously states that "man is condemned to be free" (Sartre 2007, p. 29). As we have already seen, he believes that people lack an immutable human nature that would otherwise condition their actions, but there is another element to this claim that seems to go unnoticed—namely, Sartre's insistence that choice must by necessity take place, that potentiality *must* pass into actuality through its constant activation of the will. "[W]hat is impossible is not to choose," Sartre writes; "I can always choose, but I must also realize that, if I decide not to choose, that still constitutes a choice" (Sartre 2007, p. 44). As he states elsewhere: "No limits to my freedom can be found except [for] freedom itself, . . . to be is to choose oneself; nothing comes to it either from the outside or from within . . . it is entirely abandoned to the intolerable necessity of making itself be" (Sartre 1953, pp. 567–68). Sartre's formulation is peculiar in that it rules out the possibility of indecision, or *non-being*, the defining aspect of potentiality for Agamben, who writes that the "potential to be or to do something is always also [the] potential not to be or not to do" something; otherwise "potentiality would always already have passed into actuality and would be indistinguishable from it" (Agamben 1999, p. 245). But potentiality is precisely that which exists prior to choice and, for that reason, it always contains its opposites, or

the potential to choose differently. In fact, it is only after a decision takes place—eliminating, as a natural consequence, all other possible choices—that potentiality passes into actuality and assumes the form of an ontological entity. Before that moment takes place, however, potentiality as such remains undecidable, caught between the potential to be and the potential not to be. This, as we have already seen, marks the presence of *langue* before its conversion into *parole*, the sheer fact of existence before its differential signification as an ontic reality.

Therefore, what Sartre describes as the necessary passing of potentiality into actuality directly mirrors what Agamben identifies as the zone of indistinction in his critique of ontotheology. The desire to be God, you will no doubt remember, does not result in the vanishing of *langue*, or the for-itself, for Agamben, but rather in the transformation of the in-itself from an unchanging essence into a mutable ontic substance. Actuality—which we could extend, in this context, to include the laws of nature and, by that same right, the normative laws of the state—is rendered contingent upon self-originating choice in the zone of indistinction during a state of emergency. As Agamben explains it, a sovereign political leader will suspend normal constitutional procedures—which are based on the *fixed* laws that protect its citizens' *essential* human rights—if the nation faces a hardship or unique international threat. President Barack Obama's use of the "War on Terror" to legitimize the assassination of U.S. citizens suspected of terrorism is a recent, more shocking example of this in the modern democratic West. Since the United States government was facing a "unique" threat to national security, its Commander in Chief granted himself the freedom to act outside of constitutional laws that otherwise protect the rights of American citizens. In doing so, he assumed both executive and legislative responsibilities, enforcing new laws that he alone has the ability to create. In this zone of indistinction, *langue* becomes identical with *parole*, because *parole*, as the taking place of differential signification, summons *langue* into being. At the same time, however, *parole* always implies its opposites, or the potential to choose differently, so every ontic expression of *parole* in the zone of indistinction is inherently unstable. Thus, the necessary passing of potentiality into actuality during a state of emergency ensures that every decision the sovereign makes automatically turns into law. "That the sovereign is a living law can only mean that he is not bound by" any previous laws, Agamben writes, "that in him the life of the law coincides with a total anomie," or lawlessness, the freedom to create, at will, the legal path of his choosing. For there is no transcendental law to which the sovereign is bound; there is only the nothingness of *langue*—which is to say, the living law of the sovereign exception—that, in the zone of indistinction, takes on the metaphysical authority of *parole*, or ontological essence (Agamben 2017, p. 225).

The state of emergency therefore results for Agamben in much the same way that God's death results for Sartre: in the suspension of laws authorized by humanity's essential, *God-given* rights, for with God's "disappearance," Sartre writes, "goes the possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven. There could no longer be any *a priori* good, since there would be no infinite and perfect consciousness to conceive of it" (Sartre 2007, p. 28). As in Plato's famous account of Euthyphro's dilemma, the question is raised by Sartre as to whether moral laws are independent of God (as they are thought to be in modern democratic societies that base their constitutional laws on essential human rights) or determined to be morally valuable by the fact of God's choosing them (just as the "divinely authorized" laws of the *ancien regime* were thought to be handed down to the French monarchy from above). Sartre concludes, contrary to Euthyphro, that morality is legitimizable only in relation to God, such that God's death must result in the de-authorization of morality as such. But Sartre's logic takes an unexpected turn at this juncture, and he appears to adopt a contradictory stance. Sovereign free choice, he argues, ratifies its own goodness, such that the object of choice *becomes* valuable by there mere fact of its being chosen. "Choosing to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose," he writes, "because we can never choose evil. We always choose the good" (Sartre 2007, p. 24). Just as moral laws are thought by Sartre to derive their authority from the deity who chooses them, the good, in Sartre's account, derives its authority from the freely made choices of the sovereign subject. So, while ethical decisions lack final authorization in a world without God, they are also at the same time inherently good in Sartre's view, despite his claim to the contrary. "[I]f I have eliminated God the

Father, there has to be someone to invent values," he writes, but in replacing God with the sovereign subject, Sartre secularizes a theological idea, "moving" divine authority, as Agamben had charged, "from one place to another" (Sartre 2007, p. 51; Agamben 2007, p. 77). Sartre's stage adaptation of the Electra myth suggests this reading, for Orestes does not profane the gods but becomes their equal—an act that models, for Sartre, the core idea of existential authenticity: sovereign power begins with self-originating choice.

Sartre draws our attention to the subject's *lawmaking* capacity and, with it, the universalizing tendencies of differential signification. Every person, he writes, is a "legislator" whose decisions standardize what it means to be human (Sartre 2007, p. 25). Sartre asserts that individuals should preserve their authenticity by rejecting the definitional categories imposed on them by other people, but then he claims—in almost the same breath, in fact—that every individual is responsible for defining human nature and projecting that definition onto the rest of mankind. The first task of existentialism, he writes, "is to make every man . . . solely responsible for his own existence" (Sartre 2007, p. 23). Immediately after, though, he appears to contradict himself: "when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men. . . . In choosing myself," Sartre writes, "I choose [all of] man[kind]" (Sartre 2007, pp. 23–25). This paradoxical change of heart would be inexplicable if not for the unconscious assumption in Sartre's philosophy that non-being is always in the process of actualizing through choice. For in this process, the for-itself is made indistinguishable from the in-itself, such that free decision, as a signifying apparatus, takes on the metaphysical authority of universal truth, despite its fundamental instability and capacity for change. The sovereign subject creates human nature *ex nihilo* by speaking it into being, just like the divine nothingness in Agamben's critique of ontotheology, so the desire to be God does not result in a loss of freedom, as Sartre had argued, but, by contrast, in the absolute freedom to dictate, *at will*, the ontic nature of human identity. It would appear then that Sartre's critique of ontotheology is itself ontotheological in Agamben's view, for, in the wake of God's death, and against Sartre's better judgment, the for-itself, as the *living law*, would seem to take on the metaphysical authority of the divine.

5. Sovereign Choice as Political Violence

Like Sartre, Agamben recognizes the representational nature of sovereign decision, which marries *langue* to *parole*, and potentiality to actuality through divisive significations of human identity. The problem for Agamben, which Sartre fails to address, is that representational acts of this kind humanize those under the ban of normativity at the same time that they animalize the culturally aberrant in the form of a political sacrifice, for "*that which is excluded from the community*," Agamben writes, "*is, in reality, that on which the entire life of the community is founded*" (Agamben 1991, p. 105). Every sovereign decision, as a signifying act, divides the human from the non-human because language, in its articulation as *parole*, operates according to a differential logic. Thus, there will always be members of society who are not granted the rights of a citizen because they lack human identity in the eyes of the state, just as the *muselmann* lacked a human identity in Nazi Germany, and just as the African slave lacked a human identity in the antebellum South. The more a person deviates from sovereign determinations of the *imago Dei*, the less valuable and, indeed, the less human that person becomes. Agamben identifies this individual with the *homo sacer*, an ancient figure of Roman law who, by virtue of the sovereign decision, was stripped of his citizenship and deprived of legal protection, animalized and forced outside of the law, where he was subject to be killed with impunity.

Agamben directs our attention here to the problematical nature of law and, with it, the problematical nature of justice, traditionally conceived. For it is only by concretizing human identity in the zone of indistinction, and thereby attributing to all people an identical set of inherent rights, that one may standardize what it means to be treated equally and, by these means, administer a system of legal, compensatory justice. Our analysis has shown, however, that no choice can be made, or system of justice administered, without bastardizing alternate accounts of human rights and morally just

behavior. As Agamben's interlocutor Jacques Derrida observes, "[n]o justice is exercised, no justice is rendered, no justice becomes effective nor does it determine itself in the form of law, without a decision that cuts and divides" the human from the non-human, the lawfully protected citizen from the condemned outlaw (Derrida 2002, p. 252). Since there is no God in Sartre's world to conceive of human nature, and, consequently, no essential human rights upon which to ground constitutional laws, self-originating choice can only ever be just, in Sartre's eyes. This is why "politics would seem to be an almost religious ritual of sorts, a continuous reenacting of the exclusive inclusion performed upon the self in order to constitute some sense of sovereign being in relation to," what Dickinson calls, the sacrificial other (Dickinson 2011, p. 72). In Sartre's profane universe, the sovereign can do no evil, which is why his every bloody action is already justified under the law.

6. Orestes and the State of Emergency

Returning by way of conclusion to *The Flies*, let us recall the state of emergency with which the play begins: King Agamemnon, the ruler of Argos, is betrayed by Queen Clytemnestra and murdered by her lover Aegistheus, who usurps the throne. Similar to the sovereign leader of the *ancien regime*, Aegistheus is divinely authorized by God; so, when Orestes returns to avenge his father, he challenges the authority of both a king and a deity. Zeus says to Orestes: "in the fullness of time a man was to come, to announce my decline. And you're that man" (Sartre 1989, pp. 119–20). Much like the suspension of normative laws in a state of emergency, the death of God transfers authority, as Agamben will charge, "from one place to another." Thus, unlike Aegistheus, who executes the divine laws handed down to him from above, Orestes assumes both executive and legislative responsibilities. He acts "[o]utside [of] nature," Sartre writes, and is "doomed to have no other law" but his own (Sartre 1989, p. 119). This is why, as the true king of Argos and sovereign leader of the state, Orestes does not feel remorse after committing murder. "I am no criminal," he says to Zeus, "and you have no power to make me atone for an act I don't regard as a crime" (Sartre 1989, p. 113).

However, the reason that Zeus lacks moral authority over Orestes is not because Orestes stops believing in the gods. On the contrary, it is because Orestes, as a truly authentic individual, believes himself to be their equal. "Your whole universe is not enough to prove me wrong," he says to Zeus; "You are the king of gods, king of stones and stars, king of the waves of the sea. But you are not the king of man. . . . you blundered; you should not have made me free" (Sartre 1989, p. 117). Orestes lacks remorse because, like the gods, he determines his own morality. He therefore models what Agamben calls a secularized theological belief, for, in proclaiming himself to be commensurate with the gods, Orestes seeks to deify the rest of humanity. As Sartre writes: "a man . . . who realizes that he is not only the individual that he chooses to be, but also a legislator choosing at the same time what humanity as a whole should be, cannot help but be aware of his own full and profound responsibility" (Sartre 2007, p. 25). Leaving the city of Argos, Orestes abandons his people in a veritable war zone, where every individual, newly awakened to his freedom, must bid for sovereignty over the rest of mankind as a god unto himself (Sartre 1989, p. 123). Orestes grows indifferent to the gods because, like them, he possesses the divine capacity for sovereign, self-originating choice. But "[t]here is no God," in Sartre's view, and, likewise, "no moral values, but, even if God existed," as he clearly does for Orestes, "nothing would change," for Sartre's "key doctrine [is] man's radical freedom," Gillespie writes, and this is the one true source of metaphysical authority for Sartre (Gillespie 2013, p. 82). The sovereign subject, similar to God, creates human nature *ex nihilo*; he is the living law in Sartre's universe and the primary target of Agamben's ontotheological critique.

But one need not accept the particularities of this argument wholesale to discover the value of reading Sartre in light of Agamben, whose critique of the grammarian God illuminates the violent political consequences of existential authenticity. After all, Sartre advances his own critique of unconscious theism, which he bases on the in-itself-for-itself of the orthodox Augustinian tradition, so if Sartre were, in fact, repressing any unconscious theological views of his own, they would most likely show themselves, as multiple Sartre scholars have already noted, in the form of humanity's fixed

ontological essence. What readers *should* take away from the article is the extent to which Agamben's ontotheological critique mediates the philosophical inconsistencies of Sartre's thought. For Orestes appears to deify himself at the same time that he profanes divine authority, just as Sartre declares the end of morality while defending the metaphysical value of sovereign, self-originating choice. These philosophical inconsistencies are unexplainable outside of what Agamben calls the zone of indistinction, where ontic reality is made contingent upon choice, and legislation is made contingent upon its execution by the metaphysical presupposition that potentiality is always in the process of actualizing. Agamben's critique of ontotheology would appear to illuminate otherwise murky paths in Sartre's philosophical universe, whether by sheer coincidence or by virtue of an unacknowledged theological element in Sartre's work—what he refers to, ironically, as the "little God which inhabits" him and "possesses [his] freedom as a metaphysical virtue" (Sartre 1953, p. 81). Beyond this, I hope that readers appreciate the rich parallels I have drawn between two thinkers who, before now, have not been compared in an official capacity, for there is no doubt much more to be learned from an extended comparison of Sartre and Agamben.

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