



Imagination and Potentiality: The Quest for the Real

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The Problem of Reality and Modal Ontology

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Abstract: The problem of the relation and difference between things and objects is one of the most decisive issues for the conception of the real. These words are usually used interchangeably – and not only in their everyday usage. There are some contemporary philosophical positions that consider almost “everything” as an object; on the other hand, there are proponents of a strict separation of objects and things. How did it happen that the concept of thing (*res*) and object (*obiectum*) not only began to theoretically “compete” with each other but also sometimes came to represent differently conceived realities, and even occasionally came to represent an identical conception of reality? This article, on the one hand, discusses the philosophical strategies that reveal the difference between objects and things and enable such a conception of reality which takes into account the Kantian distinction between *Realität* and *Wirklichkeit*. On the other, it reconstructs Giorgio Agamben’s project of modal ontology. Agamben’s take on the question *What is real?* is oriented toward the modus of being and could be traced back to the recognition of the difference between objects and things as well as the “restoration of the life of things themselves.”

Keywords: *res*, object, Real, *Realität*, *Wirklichkeit*, *modus*, modal ontology

1 Thing and object

Perhaps we would not be mistaken in noting that for quite some time now the different trends of “realism” have been the very *brand* of contemporary philosophy – in the guise of both Speculative Realism and its Italian double, New Realism. As superfluous as this reminder may appear, the central problem of both is the question of reality. In the past, I have often begun my analysis of a range of authors representing the aforementioned trends of realism by posing a simple question – what (kind of) reality is at issue here? Sometimes this question served a merely rhetorical purpose in order to emphasize that what is important is not solely the result, that is, a particular conception of “reality,” but the very premises of the question. Insofar as the premises are concerned, they can be twofold.

On the one hand, we could conspicuously ignore the distinction between *Realität* and *Wirklichkeit* that was introduced in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*.¹ And not necessarily to ignore it as a result, but as a problem, a problem of Aristotelian origin. On the other, we could push our analysis into an explicitly “Kantian” direction – attempting to “solve” the problem of reality by first of all inquiring into the knot of issues contained in this seemingly formal and yet incredibly powerful part of the table of categories: the distinction between *Realität*, as a category of quality, and *Wirklichkeit*, as a category of modality. Nevertheless, the appeal to these Kantian premises cannot be treated as a result available in advance. On the contrary, these premises not only enable but rather provoke further questions. One of them, important in the contemporary context, is the problem of the difference between a “thing” and an “object,” and

¹ See Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 164–75 or Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 210–25.

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(perhaps) even of their relation. After all, these words are usually used interchangeably, and not only in their everyday but also in their philosophical usage. There are some contemporary philosophical positions for which almost “everything” is considered as an object. Even if “objecthood” here is conceived quite distinctively, the things are, as it were, “swallowed up” by objects (Harman, Object-Oriented Ontology).² On the other hand, there are proponents of a strict separation between objects and things, and there are “legions” of them, with Martin Heidegger (*Das Ding*)³ undoubtedly standing in the forefront.

Thus, let us begin with a question: how did it happen that the concepts of thing (*res*) and object (*obiectum*) not only began to theoretically “compete” with each other but also sometimes came to represent differently conceived realities, and what is even more surprising – occasionally came to represent identical conceptions of reality?

If we take a look at the historical usage of *res* (thing) and *obiectum* (object), we will see that their origins and their philosophical usage are not that far apart – both terms were being employed in late Scholasticism. Nonetheless, the need for their philosophical emergence was not the same; indeed, it differed fundamentally.

As it is well known, in both Medieval and contemporary philosophical discourse, the term *res* was and still is used to designate reality. As noted by some dictionaries, such usage is related to the “classical” use of the word *res* in the expression *natura rerum* – “the nature of things.” Here the word “nature” is the Latin translation of the Greek φύσις. Hence, in the Scholastic tradition *res* begins to designate *external* reality, *being/the given outside thinking*. For the scholastic author Duns Scotus, the term *realitas* precisely signified *a reality existing beyond consciousness*. However, as Kristupas Sabolius notes, the reality of Duns Scotus’ thing (*res*), “acquires a twofold sense – the universal aspect of the thing is associated with its *thisness*. Differently put, *realitas* is thus disclosed as the dimension linking these two spheres – both the essence of reality and its actual and unique existence.”⁴ It is important to note that here, in the traditional usage of *res* and the related term *realitas* inherited from Scholasticism, it is not so much the external givenness of *res* as a thing to consciousness which is pivotal, but rather the twofold understanding of *res* as what is *real, really is, really exists*, on the one hand, and as something from which the *totality of things, reality* originates and relates to, on the other.

The medieval scholastic origin of the term *objectum* shows that the authors using the Latin word “*obiectum*,” meaning “to throw in front,” “to put before,” were referring precisely to what Aristotle designated as ἀντικείμενον (“*anti-kèimenon*”) in Greek: the opposite of ὑποκείμενον (“*hypo-keimenon*”). The Greek term ὑποκείμενον meaning “that which is underneath,” the substrate, the essence, the essence of reality was translated into Latin as *subiectum*, as “subject.” Stated differently, the object, *objective reality*, is a

² Harman in “Seventy-Six Theses on Object-Oriented Philosophy” (2011) sees the difference between a “real object” or a “thing” and a “sensual object” or an “image.” But there is no difference between “real objects” and “things.” According to Harman, “The objects unexhausted by all contact are the ones we call real objects, or things.” Harman, *Bells and Whistles. More Speculative Realism*, 62.

³ According to Heidegger, “However, the thingly character of the thing does not consist in its being a represented object, nor can it be defined in any way in terms of the objectness, the over-againstness, of the object.” “But horn the objectness of the object, and from the product’s self-support, there is no way that leads to the thingness of the thing.” <...> “What in the thing is thingly? What is the thing in itself? We shall not reach the thing in itself until our dunking has first reached the thing as the thing.” Heidegger, “The Thing,” 165. And also: “The jug is a thing neither in the sense of the Roman *res*, nor in the sense of the medieval *ens*, let alone in the modern sense of object. The jug is a thing insofar as it things. The presence of something present such as the jug comes into its own, appropriatively manifests and determines itself, only from the thinging of the thing.” Heidegger, “The Thing,” 175. See also the same in Heidegger’s original language: “Das Dinghafte des Dinges beruht jedoch weder darin, dass es vorgestellter Gegenstand ist, noch lässt es sich überhaupt von der Gegenständlichkeit des Gegenstandes aus bestimmen.” “Doch von der Gegenständlichkeit des Gegenstandes und des Selbstandes führt kein Weg zum Dinghaften des Dinges. <...> Was ist das Dingliche am Ding? Was ist das Ding an sich? Wir gelangen erst dann zum Ding an sich, wenn unser Denken zuvor erst einmal das Ding erlangt hat.” Heidegger, “Das Ding,” 168–9. And also: “Der Krug ist ein Ding weder im Sinne der römisch gemeinten *res*, noch im Sinne des mittelalterlich vorgestellten *ens*, noch gar im Sinne des neuzeitlich vorgestellten Gegenstandes. Der Krug ist Ding, insofern er dingt. Aus dem Dingen des Dinges ereignet sich und bestimmt sich auch erst das Anwesen des Anwesenden von der Art des Kruges.” Heidegger, “Das Ding,” 179.

⁴ Sabolius, *Apie tikrovę* (forthcoming).

reality disclosed *for the subject*, as something *before him*. Even in this barely theoretically circumscribed context we can already note that the emphasis is placed not on the unity of reality, not on the certainty of a reality conceived in a particular manner, but on the being of what is real *before and against* the subject, on a certain givenness of object-like reality to the subject.

In the very first international conference of the Society for Italian Philosophy,⁵ which I had the pleasure of attending, the well-known Italian philosopher Remo Bodei – who recently passed away – asked about the concept of “concreteness” characteristic of Italian philosophy and its relation to the Hegelian concept of concreteness. He recalled a historical fact: it was already Machiavelli who translated Aristotle’s *energeia* into Italian as *effettualità della cosa*. In Bodei’s view, we must not only take into account the Italian equivalent of *Wirklichkeit* – *effettualità* – appearing here for the first time, but also the phrase as a whole. The concept of *cosa* is not incidental here – the words *causa (cosa)*, *res*, and *retor* are of the same root. *Retor* is that which “concentrates to make a decision.” In an identical manner, the English *Thing* or the German *Ding*, according to Bodei, first and foremost refer to what can be expressed in the following phrase: “to come to an agreement through speaking.” Thus, when we speak of *energeia*, of *Wirklichkeit*, we have the cosmos of *res* in mind, a *reality* to be acted within, where “effects,” “consequences” are produced. And this is due to human “decision.” We note two things here. In light of these remarks and references of Bodei, what becomes visible is not only how the theoretical distinction of *Realität* and *Wirklichkeit* came to pass, but also how the concepts of *res* and reality penetrated or were inscribed into the conceptual content of the two terms – *Realität* and *Wirklichkeit*, designating and signifying different senses of reality.⁶

Notwithstanding the philosophical nobility of *res*, which allows it, as the concept marking the *thing* (*res*, *Ding*, *cosa*), to be related to reality as *energeia*, the dimension of *Wirklichkeit*, the historical development of the philosophical and the ordinary usage of these concepts suggests something else – the thing becomes synonymous with the object and is conceived not only as the *realitas* found beyond consciousness, but even as the empirical, sensibly graspable thingliness, a reality “assembled” from sensuous things. The philosophically noble *res*, we could say, mutates in the direction of “objectness,” thereby obfuscating the fundamental perspective – consolidated in the disputes of Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus and finally Suárez – which not only argued for the need to introduce the concepts of *res* and *realitas*, but also stressed their ambiguity.

It might be helpful to recall that for Scholasticism, both *res* and *realitas* emerge of the problem of individuation, the solution to the dispute regarding the relation of essence and existence. As Suárez argued, attempting to solve this dispute which originated with Thomas Aquinas and was further developed by Duns Scotus, the difference between essence and existence is not the same as that between one thing and another (*ut res a re*). But what is that which is real? One Scholastic position rejected the *real* difference between essence and existence; another, on the contrary, claimed that, as far as material creation is concerned, essence and existence, nature and *suppositum* differ *realiter*.

Thus, it is crucial to note that by “resolving” this dispute in such a way that reality is ascribed to (concrete) existence without strictly separating/delimiting existence from essence as one thing from another thing (*ut res a re*), Suárez paradoxically provides as the philosophical basis for the twofold sense of *res*, its ambiguity. After all, existence, especially from the standpoint of its relation with essence, consolidates *res* as *energeia*, as *effettualità della cose*, as *Wirklichkeit*. Whereas the expression that results from the deliberations of Thomas Aquinas, “as one thing distinct from another thing” (*ut res a re*), points to a usage of *res* in which the thing is treated as fundamentally object-like and which corresponds to Kantian *Realität*. We would thus risk the claim that the roots of the confusion and the overlapping of thing and object are philosophical.

⁵ Accessed May 3, 2020, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5847141bf7e0ab230f552a6f/t/59409d5c414fb5787b30d639/1497406814807/Ontario+Conference.pdf>.

⁶ See more: Šerpytytė, *Tikrovės spektrai*, 265.

It was not without good reason that Bodei felt the need to once again raise this question. The recently published issue of *Fata Morgana* (28) – dedicated to this renowned thinker – entitled *Cosa*, opens with an earlier interview with Bodei, “Scardinare l’ovvietà dei oggetti” (“Unhinging the obviousness of objects”), in which he explicitly defines his goal: to reveal the difference between the thing and the object in order to restore the very “life of things.”⁷

He begins this work of the “restoration of the life of things,” which is simultaneously the “unhinging of the obviousness of objects” by way of an etymological remark regarding the concept of the “object.” *Objectum*, he claims, is a term of late Scholasticism and is in fact a translation of the Greek word “problema.” However, Bodei also draws our attention to the fact that here the word “problem” means something different from our contemporary understanding. The Greek “problema” essentially meant “obstacle” (*ostacolo*).

And therefore *objectum* – whose meaning is still found in the Italian verb *obiettare* – is what is opposed to the subject, what is an obstacle to it, and even in our contemporary conception, the same as in modern philosophy, the subject must swallow the object, it has to annul it in a certain way.⁸

When discussing the thing, however, Remo Bodei emphasizes – thus confirming in print what he was getting at in the conference debate recalled previously – that:

we must not understand the Latin term *res* as something like the commonsensically grasped thing or object, since it has the same root as *retor*, and has something in common with what interests us; there is a splendid dictum by Cicero, which later entered common usage, *rem tene verba sequentur*: grasp the thing (*cosa*), the words will follow. Similarly, with the term *res* which is included in the compound *res publica* one is not speaking of a public object, rather what is being spoken about is a thing/matter/cause (*causa*), which needs to be discussed, about which there is a conflict.⁹

Bodei is clear about the non-identity of objects and things. By relating the German *Ding* and the Anglo-Saxon *Thing* to the Greek *pragma*, he affirms the relation between the Greek *Auto to pragma* and *Die Sache selbst* of Hegel and Husserl.

Therefore, Bodei’s conclusion is categorical:

Auto to pragma, the thing itself (*la cosa stessa*), is that which expresses the thing in the aspect of its non-objectiveness [...]. Thus, to disclose that which is beyond the object means not only to disclose its natural history, it is not merely that which emerges from the elements such as stone, wood, metal, but also their meaning and stratifications, their coincidence with the history of a certain civilization.¹⁰

As handy as Remo Bodei’s Heideggerian position may be – the rigorous separation of things and objects – it is merely, to put it in Ricoeurian terms, the “short way” to undermine objects and elevate things. In contrast, I would like to suggest that a version of the “long way” – a version that projects the non-identity of objects and things into the problematic core of the concept of reality – can be discerned in the modal ontology proposed by Giorgio Agamben. Agamben’s search for a new ontology is the most perspicuous demonstration that the very orientation toward the *modus* of being, the separation of *Wirklichkeit/energeia* from *Realität*, is also the path toward the separation of the reality of “things” from that of “objects.”

⁷ Accessed April 19, 2020, <https://www.fatamorganaweb.unical.it/index.php/2019/11/08/conversazione-con-remo-bodei/?fbclid=IwAR0sJvuy7E0KV7teJleSo%20jp%20k%20N7knfKs>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

2 The modal ontology of Giorgio Agamben and the problem of reality

The question *What is real?* can first and foremost be related to the original problem of Agamben's philosophy: impotentiality. This problem is the very kernel of his thought. It emerges from his reconsideration of Aristotle's ontological claims in the *Metaphysics* and elsewhere, and structures the whole of Agamben's philosophy, putting his novel project *Homo Sacer* to the forefront and connecting a series of his most important works. And yet the question of reality, in both the terminological and conceptual sense, is rarely thematized by Agamben and thus requires careful reconstruction. In my opinion, this theoretical reconstruction can and should be carried out by scrutinizing the fundamental points of Agamben's theoretical itinerary, from his novel reading of Aristotle's ontology to his own ontology of impotentiality.

Agamben's own focus on reality/what is real, I claim, is most evidently expressed and gains the most universal sense in one of the chapters of his *The Use of Bodies*, "Towards a Modal Ontology."¹¹ Stated differently, the problems raised in the context of modal ontology could be understood as a peculiar and novel introduction to the specific question *What is Real?*¹²

However, what most catches the eye in this text and what allows one to conceptualize Agamben's undertaking in a specific way are not its theoretical conclusions. Against the metaphysical substantialist ontology that raises the question of being, and by extension that of reality, as "*what is,*" Agamben here is explicitly opting for a Heideggerian (fundamental) post-metaphysical ontology, attentive to the "*that it is.*" Nevertheless, the chapter of *The Use of Bodies* dedicated to what Agamben calls modal ontology is not merely an expression of his preference for and attachment to Heidegger's ontology.

This chapter should rather be understood as a consistent archaeological reading of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* via the most important arguments of the authors of Scholasticism, the early modern period and even German Idealism, by getting involved in the debates they sparked and uncovering consequences partly neglected by these very thinkers. It is in precisely this manner that Agamben's ontological itinerary can be brought into view: not as an accidental but as an archaeologically motivated path leading toward his own ontology of impotentiality, which follows the disclosure of classical ontological thinking as the becoming of modal ontology.

What, then, are the most important moments of this theoretical path?

First of all, one must draw attention to the fact that in Agamben's thinking the so-called *modal ontology* – its genesis, status, and perspectives – is rooted in Leibniz's problem of the substantial unity of bodies, that is, its conceptualization is partially based on it.

For Leibniz, as is known, there exists something *real* over and above monads. Leibniz calls this absolute principle (*absolutum aliquid*) that confers its "unitive reality" on monads, without which bodies would be mere semblances and only monads could be said to be real, the "substantial bond" (*vinculum substantiale*). Agamben translates this *vinculum substantiale* to Italian as "vincolo sostanziale."

I would argue that the origins and the pivotal axis of Agamben's modal ontology is to be found in this key Leibnizian concept.

In his attempt to describe and in a certain sense elucidate what he had in mind with the term *vinculum substantiale*, Leibniz first of all defines the bond (*vinculum*) as "a more perfect relationship" that transforms the multiplicity of simple substances—monads—into a new substance. This is what Agamben finds important, and it is precisely from this Leibnizian standpoint that the concept of reality "appears" and operates for him.¹³

¹¹ Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 146–75.

¹² Agamben, *What is Real?* 1–88.

¹³ Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 146.

As Leibniz writes:

God not only considers single monads and the modifications of any monad whatsoever, but he also sees their relations, and the reality of relations and truths consists in this[...]. But over and above these real relations [of monads], a more perfect relation can be conceived through which a single new substance arises from many substances. And this will not be a simple result, it will add some new substantiality, or substantial bond [*aliquam novam substantialitatem seu vinculum substantiale*], and this will be an effect not only of the divine intellect but also of the divine will.¹⁴

Thus, for a distinct corporeal being – this “horse,” this “dog,” this or that human body – to be real, or as Leibniz himself puts it, for any “machine of nature” to be “one sole substance,” the substantial reality of monads is in Leibniz’s view insufficient. Now what acts as the principle of “unitive reality” is, of course, the principle that Leibniz calls *vinculum substantiale*.

On the other hand, one should not forget that these considerations of Leibniz that are so important for Agamben emerge from a theological context – in the epistolary polemic with Des Bosses on the question of the Eucharistic transubstantiation of the body of Christ. As Agamben notes, Leibniz proposes an “elegant solution of the problem,” in opposition to the Jesuit theologian, precisely by introducing *vinculum substantiale*.

Thus, the phrase “this is my body” (*hoc est corpus meum*) does not designate the monads but rather the bond that actualizes their unity.¹⁵ The most important insight of Agamben, however, is that it is not by accident that Leibniz invokes the term “bond” in his attempt to express what the ontological vocabulary referred to as the unity of substance.¹⁶

Without attempting to properly reconstruct the origins of Leibniz’s arguments, so crucial for Agamben (rooted in the disputes of late Scholastic authors), it is my view that it is nevertheless very important to survey the most fundamental moments of these original sources and Agamben’s debate with them, since their significance was not accidental but rather influential for the formulation of Agamben’s own ontology and his conception of reality. Here, I will only mention a few moments of these debates and their ontological consequences.

First of all, it is important to note that one can trace a question throughout the Scholastic discussions, one that could later be considered as a dispute, which is helpful in explicating the already mentioned concept of Leibniz: is *vinculum substantiale* (“vincolo sostanziale”) a *modus* (“modo”)? Can the “substantial bond” be conceived as a “mode”?

This question underlies the very pursuit of modal ontology.

It is precisely in order to uncover the non-coincidental interpretation of *vinculum substantiale* not as a substantiality of a higher order, but rather as a form of substantiality whose existence is founded upon a certain bond (*vinculum, vincolo*) as a mode of existence (*modus, modo*) that Agamben engages with both Scholastic and later philosophers.

Agamben begins by discussing Suárez, according to whom: “[I]t is to define this peculiar status of singular existence that the concepts of “mode” and “modal difference” arise.”¹⁷ This point will also be important in relating the conception of *vinculum* as *modus* to the problem of individuation, i.e., the rethinking of the relation between essence and existence.

The introduction of Giles of Viterbo (also known as: Giles Antonioni, Egidio da Viterbo) not only confirms Suárez’s formulation but also discloses the fundamental intention of Agamben’s inquiry. As noted by Agamben, according to Giles of Viterbo, “‘being for itself’ (*per se esse*) and ‘inheriting’ (*inesse*) do not express the essence of substance and accident but only a certain mode of their being.” Differently put, “‘Inhering’ does not mean the very being of the accident but a certain *mode* of its being (*modus essendi eius*).”¹⁸

¹⁴ Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften*, 438–9.

¹⁵ Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 147.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁸ Trapp, *Aegidii Romani de doctrina modorum*, 18. Cit. from Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 153.

Thus Agamben, following the idea of Trapp, who in his interpretation describes Giles's doctrine as *doctrina modorum*, and furthermore, invoking Aristotle's philosophy in relation to Spinoza's concept of substance, claims:

“Being for itself” and “being for another” (*esse in alio*), these two fundamental terms of Aristotelian ontology, differ modally (*modaliter*) and not essentially. The Spinozan definition of substance as “what is in itself” (*quod in se est*) and of mode as “what is in another” (*quod in alio est*) becomes more comprehensible if one places it against the background of Giles's conception of modal difference.¹⁹

Nevertheless, it becomes clear that the ambiguity, which will come to mark the concept of mode, will also indicate the difficulties concerning the very status of a mode. To cut a long story short, its status was understood as both logical and ontological. The ambiguity indicated reveals that this is precisely the status of a mode – something both logical and ontological. In Agamben's view, there is nothing more instructive in regard to this standpoint than the “tenacious polemic” concerning Giles's conception of mode that went on between Godfrey of Fontaines and Thomas of Argentina. According to the former's position, “that something really differs from another and is nonetheless not another thing is logically contradictory.”²⁰

Whereas the answer of Thomas of Argentina, according to Agamben, comprises perhaps the most subtle attempt to define the distinct locus of mode between being and nothing, between the logical and the ontological:

The mode is nothing, but it is something that expresses the nature itself: and thus a thing, which is to say a nature. And moreover, mode and nature do not mean the nature **AND** something [*natura et aliquid*] but the nature itself diversified **BY MEANS OF** something [*per aliquid*], which is a real mode, because it really follows on a variation made in the nature itself.²¹

Agamben concludes: the concept of mode in Scholasticism emerged in a consistent manner. He claims that following this tradition—from Giles of Viterbo to Cajetan – it was Suárez who conceived of the above discussed difference precisely as a *modal* difference, and building upon it, constructed a proper theory of modes.

I maintain that there is, in created things, a distinction – which is actual and corresponds to the nature of things before any operation of the mind – that is not as great as that which intervenes between two things or completely distinct essences. It can be called real, because it derives from things and not from an extrinsic intellectual denomination; yet to better distinguish it from the real distinction, we can call it[...] more properly a modal distinction, because it always runs between a thing and its mode.²²

According to Agamben, the idea of mode was “invented” (I would rather say – resurrected, summoned anew) for no other reason than to render thinkable the relation between essence and existence. For as we all know, philosophy treats essence and existence as distinct yet inseparable.²³ In this manner, Agamben conceives of the question of *modus* as the basis for the solution to a classical ontological problem – the problem of essence and existence, and their relation.

Thus, he acknowledges the essential role of Suárez in the rethinking of this relation as the problem of individuation. Agamben sees this rethinking as an almost simultaneous effort of both Scotus and Suárez, which, for the most part, is in fact executed by Agamben himself.

The elegance with which Scotus resolves the problem of individuation found its legendary form in the concept of haecceity. Scotus conceives of individuation as the addition to common nature or form not of

¹⁹ Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 153.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.

²¹ Trapp, *Aegidii Romani de doctrina modorum*, 36., cited in Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 154.

²² Suárez, *Francisci Suárez e Societate Jesu Opera omnia*, 255. Cited in Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 154–5.

²³ Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 155.

another form or essence, but of an *ultima realitas*, an ultimacy of the form itself. Singular existence does not, that is to say, add anything to the common form other than a haecceity (or *ecceity* [It., *eccoità*])—as, thinking of the Christological *ecce homo*, one could translate Scotus’s ingenious term *haecceitas*).

“Ecceity” is not something other than the essence but only its ultimate reality, in which it can be offered up for display (for this reason Suárez will see in it a mode). In form or mode there is not a principle *by virtue* of which it is individuated: here one has only an ultimacy *of* form, the extreme modification that allows one to say: behold the man, or else: this is my body. But for this reason it is necessary, according to Scotus, that the common form or nature be in itself indifferent to any singularity whatsoever or, as Scholastics will repeat after him, that “it is not repugnant to it to be supposed with any singularity.”²⁴

But despite this position, circumscribed by Agamben’s reading of medieval thinkers, the question remains problematic, because what is problematic is individuation itself. Agamben admits that if the relation between essence and singular existence is grounded on the Aristotelian relation between potential and act, between the possible and the actual, the question of individuation remains insoluble. After all, it remains unclear what prompts the possible to produce itself as *eccoità*, to realize itself in act in some particular singularity.

That is perhaps the greatest difficulty encountered by Agamben in the archaeological development of his modal ontology.

This peculiar position of Aristotle, which is very important to Agamben – being recalled, cited, and uniquely interpreted in many of his texts – is also central to his modal ontology, as something emerging from the rethinking of Aristotelean ontology:

In a famous passage from Book Theta of the *Metaphysics* (1047a 24–25), Aristotle laid out (but not resolved) the problem in the enigmatic formulation according to which: “That is potential for which, if the act of which it is said to have potential is verified, nothing will be potential not to be.” If essence and existence have been divided like potential and act, nothing is more problematic than their relation.²⁵

Perhaps searching for a better basis to explain the problem of individuation and likewise to emphasize its relation to the problem of the mode, after discussing Aristotle, Agamben once again takes recourse to Leibniz, to his “borrowed” thesis, according to which “every individual is individualized by means of the totality of its essence.” Leibniz, who made his debut in 1663 with the dissertation *On the Principle of Individuation*, according to Agamben made the abovementioned thesis his own to explain the individuality of composite substances, which he presents as being more substantial than a mode or a difference of reason. He calls this individuation *vinculum substantiale* – the substantial bond. Here, however, the question raised by Agamben is not so much whether the principle of individuation is a mode or a substantial bond, but rather the question of the transformation of the fundamental concepts of ontology themselves. In this perspective, the concept of “demand” plays a decisive role for Agamben, a concept already developed by Leibniz at the end of 1680s in *De veritatis primis*. What is the most important idea of this development? The most important ontological message signaled by Leibniz here is that the bond (*vinculum*) is an active principle, which “demands the monads,” similarly as in the text on first truths, where existence is defined as “a demand of essence.”²⁶

Thus, Agamben’s conclusion is that it was precisely Scotus’ concept of “non-repugnance” (“non-ripugnanza”) and Suárez’s concept of “aptitude” (“attitudine”) that were turned into a demand. “Existence is not a mode of essence or a difference of reason alone: it is a demand.”²⁷

It is precisely this transformation of ontology that Agamben, to put in his own words, “seeks to follow” and develop from a new perspective. Nevertheless, in seeking “to couple” the principle of individuation

²⁴ Ibid., 156.

²⁵ Ibid., 157.

²⁶ Leibniz, *Philosophische Schriften*, 176.

²⁷ Agamben, *Use of Bodies*, 159.

and *vinculum* as *modus* – in contrast to the classical interpretation of substantiality – it becomes impossible to settle scores with Spinoza. The ontological thesis of Spinoza – radical in Agamben’s view – is commonly known: “Nothing exists except substance and modes” (*praeter substantia et modos nihil existit*).²⁸ Agamben cannot accept the manner in which Spinoza was adopted by classical philosophical thinking. Notwithstanding that the originality of Spinoza was maintained to lie not in his definition of substance, but rather in his definition of modes, and even though in the *Cogitata* (I, I) Spinoza had differentiated modes from accidents, his definition of the modes, Agamben argues, nevertheless closely follows nothing other than the traditional definition of accidents: the modes are affections (“*affezioni*”) of substance, “*or that which is in another and through which it is also conceived*” (*in alio est, per quod etiam concipitur*).²⁹

Agamben links this interpretation of Spinoza, which, as we have observed, reveals a certain limitation of Spinoza on the path toward modal ontology, to the contemporary confusion in trying to answer not only the question whether the mode is a reality constituting principle, but above all – and these are in fact related – the question of regarding the very status of the mode: is it logical or ontological?

Hence, the most important conclusion drawn by Agamben on the path toward modal ontology is this:

The concept of mode – insofar as it seeks to think the coincidence or indifference of essence and existence, potential and act – carries with it an ambiguity, so that in the history of philosophy, it is presented now as a logical concept (one prefers to speak then of “modality” or modal logic), now as an ontological concept. The ambiguity is still evident in Kant, according to whom the categories of modality express the relation of an object with our faculty of knowing and yet “do not have only a logical meaning[...] but are to pertain to things and their possibility, actuality, or necessity” (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A219, B627). It is possible to see in this dual nature of modalities something more than an echo of the peculiar nature of the formal distinction according to Scotus (which is more than a distinction of reason and yet less than a real distinction) and of mode according to Suárez, which is real, but not like a thing (the modes *nonsunt formaliter entia*). The undecidability of logic and ontology is, in this sense, consubstantial with the concept of mode and must be brought back to the constitutive undecidability of Aristotelian ontology, inasmuch as the latter thinks being insofar as it is said. This means that the ambiguity of the concept of mode cannot be simply eliminated but must rather be thought as such.³⁰

It could perhaps be argued that the conflict between philosophy inaccurately designated as continental and analytical philosophy is rooted in this ambiguity and could therefore be decided only by a thorough rethinking of the theory of modes and the categories of modality.³¹

There is a Heideggerian tone to Agamben’s insistence that presently the issue is one of finding concepts that would allow us to think modality concretely. We are accustomed to think in the form of *substantives*, while a mode is constitutively *adverbial*, it conveys not “what” but rather “how” a being is.

Therefore, in his search for the origins of modal ontology, Agamben argues that the problem of *vinculum substantiale* has to be thought radically anew. By claiming in a Heideggerian manner that the “existence” of a being does not precede the mode, but is constituted in being modified, that “existence” is nothing but its modifications, he aims not so much at Heidegger as at Leibniz. Keeping in mind the whole context explicated here, one can begin to understand why Leibniz could have claimed that the bond is something akin to an echo, a bond, “which once posited demands the monads.” This proposition, Agamben insists, is intelligible only on condition that the full ontological meaning of the concept of demand is restored:

If demand and not substance is the central concept of ontology, one can then say that being is a demand of the modes just as the modes are a demand of being, on condition that we specify that demand here is neither a logical entailment nor a moral imperative. And this is also the only sense of the doctrine of the transcendentals: the being that is always already its modifications; it demands to be *unum, verum, bonum seu perfectum*, demands truth, justice, and perfection in the same sense in which Benjamin affirmed that justice is not a virtue but a state of the world.³²

²⁸ Spinoza, *Opera*, I. P15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 409. I. D5.

³⁰ Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 161.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 170–1.

Agamben's reflections on modal ontology undoubtedly lead us to contemporary attempts to consider the problem of the relation between *Realität* and *Wirklichkeit/Reality* and *Actuality* (with all its implications for the problem of things/objects). Additionally, however, the interpretations of mode (*modo*) together with the logical and ontological senses of mode, and their relation, open up the very question of the ontological designation of reality. What term of *Reality* could ontologically designate that *what is real* really exists? Could we put some orthographic sign in the consideration of this issue?

And what sort of sign could it be? The period? An ellipsis? A question mark? In any case, we can trace a consistent line of development in Agamben's position regarding the question of reality. Agamben's take on the question *What is real?* oriented toward the modus of being could be traced back to the recognition of the difference between objects and things as well as the "restoration of the life of things themselves."

Thus, Agamben in his recourse to the Aristotelian origins of ontology was constantly tackling the problem of reality. Even though he doesn't analyze the question of ontological reality in the sources he quotes, by invoking the Kantian *Realität/Wirklichkeit* distinction, by considering the Aristotelian concepts of *dynamis* and *energeia* through the lenses of Hegel and Heidegger, Agamben in truth offers an ontological reading of reality as *Wirklichkeit*—an alternative to the reading of reality as *Realität*—and moreover, proposes a certain version of modal ontology of his own – the ontology of impotentiality, which allows us to redraw the lines between *Objects* and *Things*, between *Reality* and *Actuality*, and reconsider the point of their relation, overlapping, and convergence.

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