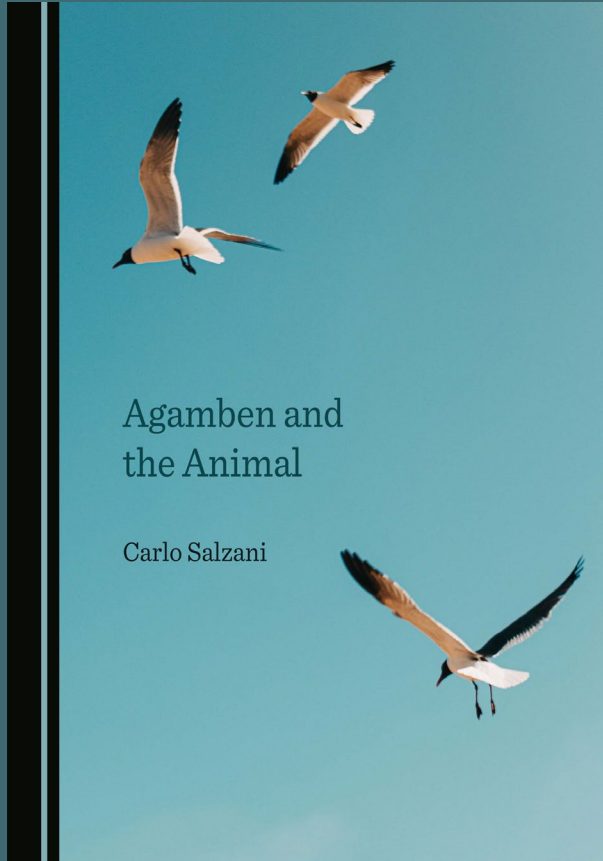


BOOK REVIEW

Agamben's *Entwicklungsfähigkeit*

Adam Kotsko



Review of:

Carlo Salzani, *Agamben and the Animal*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2022. xv + 133 pp. £62.99, hb.

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If you ask fans of Giorgio Agamben what their favorite book of his is, I wager that the majority will say *The Open: Man and Animal*. It feels almost like the archetypal Agamben book: erudite and wide-ranging yet accessible, high-stakes yet punctuated with unforgettable examples and set pieces (the poor tick!). And aside from *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, it is perhaps his most influential book, as it had a huge impact in animal studies and arguably raised the profile of the field among other humanities scholars. At the same time, though, it is a strange outlier in his body of work. Though produced during the same period that saw the development of the *Homo Sacer* series, the book is not officially enshrined as part of that project. More than that, the book's key theme, the relationship between human and animal, was seemingly abruptly left aside in his later writings. To the extent that Agamben does return to the question of the animal, he most often simply summarizes his basic position from *The Open*—it no longer seems to be a topic of active conceptual development for him. Nor, indeed, has it proven to be as agenda-setting for the field of animal studies as it initially appeared to be, as most thinkers find his approach sadly lacking.

What happened here? Answering that question is the task that Carlo Salzani sets himself in his short yet ambitious and incisive book, *Agamben and the Animal*. He is in many ways the best possible person for the job. The author of the first introduction to Agamben's work in Italian, *Introduzione a Giorgio Agamben* (il melangolo, 2013), he is intimately acquainted with the subtlest nuances and the most forgotten corners of the philosopher's *œuvre*. In addition to his definitive book-length treatment, he is the co-editor (with me) of *Agamben's Philosophical Lineage* (Edinburgh, 2017), an edited volume on the debt Agamben owes to his various sources, and author of a number of important essays on the Italian philosopher's work. He has also published several articles in the field of animal studies and displays a firm grasp of the field's primary debates and theoretical options, which he briefly yet elegantly summarizes at crucial points in his argument. The book can therefore serve as an introduction to Agamben's larger project for animal studies scholars, and an introduction to animal studies for Agamben acolytes.

Salzani's goals are not merely introductory and expository, however. His book essentially rewrites *The Open*, demonstrating its roots in Agamben's earlier thought and his most important influences (Heidegger above all) and bringing it into more direct dialogue with animal studies scholarship. His approach is critical in the full Kantian sense, pushing Agamben's account of the relationship between the human and the animal as far as it will go, and thereby revealing its often quite serious limitations while also pointing toward its moments of greatest promise. Fittingly enough, his model here is Agamben himself, whose "methodological principle [...] is to identify in every work its 'capacity for elaboration', which Feuerbach defined as *Entwicklungsfähigkeit*" (ix). In Agamben's understanding of this intimidating German term, the most important step is to find "what has been left 'unsaid' in the original work," which "marks the true 'idea' of a work" that "can be taken in unforeseen (and perhaps undesired) directions by others and thereby transformed into something no longer attributable to the original author" (ix).

Uncovering that precious kernel of potentiality initially requires uncovering what has been left unsaid in another sense: namely, the underlying presuppositions of the work, which are not argued for but instead simply taken for granted. In the case of *The Open*, those presuppositions are deeply anthropocentric. Again and again, Salzani shows how Agamben uncritically takes up the traditional Western dualism between human (or, in Agamben's traditionalist terminology, Man) and animal—leading "many other, more engaged, thinkers" to conclude that "he is ultimately of little use for the practical cause of animal liberation" (xii). Yet despite fully sharing this critique—and surely documenting it more thoroughly than any previous writer on Agamben—Salzani believes that "though still firmly rooted in the anthropocentrism of the Western tradition, Agamben's work points beyond the limits that he himself is unable or unwilling to cross," providing tools for "the questioning of a certain orthodoxy in animal ethics and animal studies and to the opening up of different possibilities of thought" (xiii).

Broadly speaking, the first three chapters focus more on mining Agamben's corpus for the underlying presuppositions of his approach

to animals in *The Open*, while the fourth and fifth are more constructive in the sense of elaborating Agamben's concepts in new directions. The first chapter, "Indistinction: Beyond Human and Animal", makes the case that the question of the animal — and his anthropocentric approach to it — is "pivotal to the comprehension of Agamben's entire philosophical project" (3). The second, "Outside of Being: Potentiality beyond Anthropocentrism", relates the question of the animal to "Agamben's central and distinguishing preoccupation, which is present throughout all of his works": namely, the concept of potentiality. Here again, we learn that the relation of human and animal is crucial to Agamben's approach, as humanity is defined as uniquely a being of potentiality, in contrast with animals that are supposedly locked into the realm of sheer necessity. In both chapters, Salzani returns to a moment of apparent contradiction in Agamben's work, centred on the concept of "neoteny". This term from evolutionary theory refers to the retention of youthful traits into adulthood, which allows for greater adaptability. Though Agamben repeatedly claims that "neoteny" defines human uniqueness, his central example is actually a species of salamander — in other words, an animal. The next chapter attempts to undermine Agamben's anthropocentrism from another direction, by pointing toward the historicity of the concept of "Man" that he takes for granted as an ahistorical essence.

All three of these chapters rely on the presupposition of a basic "continuity and consistency throughout the different phases of Agamben's work" (8n11), a position Salzani explicitly counterposes to my own insistence on development and change over the course of Agamben's decades-long career. Here I am distinctly in the minority among Agamben scholars, for whom the remarkable consistency of Agamben's project is often taken to be all but axiomatic. Yet these kinds of declarations aside — including a tendency to refer to Agamben's "political" or "biopolitical" turn in scornful scarequotes — Salzani's approach is more nuanced in practice. The claim of continuity seems to serve functionally to give him access to the earlier works as points of reference, which would not be as plausible if Agamben had radically revised his thought from the ground

up at some point. Where he actually finds Agamben's *Entwicklungsfähigkeit*, however, is in the moments of inconsistency and rupture, which point toward roads not taken.

Agamben is at his most interesting, in other words, precisely where he is not consistent and continuous, and Salzani's book is at its most interesting in its second half, when it is most focused on those moments. Chapter Four, "Beyond Species and Person: Towards a New Ethology", shows how Agamben's critique of the concept of personhood "can be easily reoriented towards non-anthropocentric goals" (66). Sheerly as a work of Agamben scholarship, it is perhaps the most impressive of the chapters, even arguably a *tour de force*, using a short essay from *Profanations* as a lens for rereading his entire body of work. The most exciting and fruitful chapter by far, however, is the last one in the main body of the book, "Beyond the Open: Boredom and Shame". Here Salzani brings together an analysis of *The Open*'s title concept with a critique of one of Agamben's central claims — namely that "Dasein is simply an animal that has learned to become bored" (qtd. on 79) — showing how Agamben's appropriation of both remains as anthropocentric as the Heideggerian sources he relies upon, while still pointing beyond the human–animal dualism. As Salzani points out in connection with the line just quoted, "This thesis — and in particular its incipit: 'Dasein is *simply* an animal. . . ' — could not be less Heideggerian" (79). If Agamben could have held onto this claim that the human just *is* an animal, which he made seemingly without recognizing its radicality, he would have realized that the real key to the human–animal relationship is not boredom, but shame.

Here Salzani is making an unexpected connection back to the book that preceded *The Open*, namely *Remnants of Auschwitz*, where Agamben uses Primo Levi's account of the shame prompted in others (both the concentration camp inmates and their rescuers) by the Germans' horrific crimes to argue that shame is constitutive of human subjectivity. Here again, Agamben is limited by the influence of Heidegger, which causes him to analyse shame as a purely individualistic and self-referential mood, even though Levi's example is

centred on feeling shame on behalf of others (in this case the Nazis themselves, who are incapable of shame). Here Salzani shows himself to be both a scholar's scholar and a creative reader, digging up an interview in which Levi discussed the experience of translating Kafka's *The Trial* into Italian and declares, "The famous, much analyzed phrase that seals the book like a tombstone ('...it was as if the shame of it should outlive him') does not seem at all enigmatic to me" (qtd. on 96). As Salzani points out, "Joseph K.'s last words are however preceded by the equally famous exclamation 'like a dog!'" (97), and this connection to the animal world prompts Salzani to claim that a sense of shame at the crimes committed by Man against animals "can overcome the presuppositional dualisms of the Open and ferry the human over the abyss of ontological and essential differences towards an interspecific being-with-and-for-others, towards another kind of opening that humans themselves urgently need" (99). In other words, by embracing shame as foundational for our relationship with animals, we would be able to thread the needle of acknowledging our unique responsibility for preserving life on earth without setting ourselves apart as ontologically disconnected from animals.

This stirring final line fully vindicates Salzani's claim to detect an important *Entwicklungsfähigkeit* in Agamben's thought, pushing it beyond its limits to make a claim that, while contrary to Agamben's own deep presuppositions, he would not have made without his close reading of Agamben. Along the way to the analysis of shame, Salzani also undercuts Agamben's claim that boredom is uniquely human with a meditation on the obvious boredom of animals in a zoo, which ends with this memorable and amusing line: "Rather than an animal that has learned to become bored, the human is therefore the animal that has transformed the world (her own and that of other species) into a zoo, and an especially boring one at that" (88). Here again, we see him pushing beyond Agamben, *through* Agamben — making this chapter a fitting conclusion to the project of the book.

And yet, for some reason, it is not the conclusion. Instead, Salzani opted to append a critique of Agamben's disastrous interventions into the debate around pandemic prevention measures. These writings are richly deserving of critique, yet this "conclusion" is puzzling and distracting. Its connection to the argument of the book is tenuous, and it arguably makes the book feel less complete than it really is. What one expects from a conclusion is of course an attempt to tie together the main threads of the book's argument and open it toward future research. Salzani's failure to do that is a real missed opportunity, which risks obscuring how much "constructive" work he has already done in the main body of the text and especially in the final main chapter. Salzani does make the case that Agamben's pandemic writings are grounded in the same anthropocentrism that mars his account of the human–animal relationship, and I can understand why he might feel obligated to address the elephant in the room in a book that is making the case for Agamben's usefulness to the progressive cause of animal liberation. But Salzani had already arguably done enough in the occasional asides addressing Agamben's COVID interventions throughout the main body of the book.

In any case, it is clear that *Agamben and the Animal* is not Salzani's last word on the topic. In the meantime, he has given us a rigorous and informative work that will serve as an indispensable point of reference for Agamben readers and animal studies scholars alike.