Giorgio Agamben

Toward an Ontology of Style

1.

Form-of-life is not something like a subject, which preexists living and gives it substance and reality. On the contrary, it is generated in living; it is "produced by the very one for which it is form" and for that reason does not have any priority, either substantial or transcendental, with respect to living. It is only a manner of being and living, which does not in any way determine the living thing, just as it is in no way determined by it and is nonetheless inseparable from it.[1]

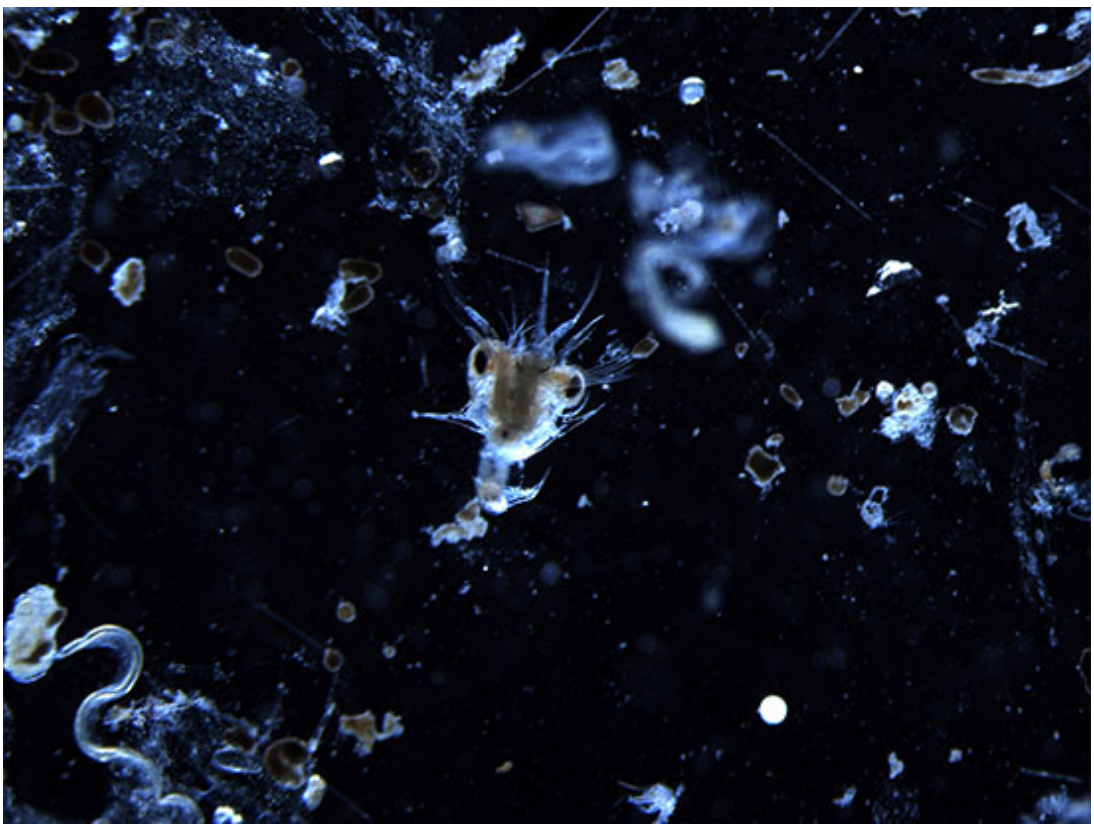
Medieval philosophers were familiar with a term, *maneries*, which they traced back to the verb *manere*, while modern philologists, identifying it with the modern "manner," have it derive from *manus*. A passage of the *Book of Muhammad's Ladder* instead suggests a different etymology. The author of this visionary work, which must have been familiar to Dante, at a certain point witnesses an apparition of a pen, from which "ink issued" (*manabat encaustum*). "And all these things," he writes, "were done in such a manner that they seemed to have been created in that very instant" (*et haec omnia tali manerie facta erant, quod simul videbantur creata fuisse*).[2] The etymological juxtaposition *manare*/*maneries* shows that *maneries* here means "mode of welling up": all these things emanate from the pen in such a way that they seem to have been created in that very instant.

In this sense, form-of-life is a "manner of rising forth," not a being that has this or that property or quality but a being that is its mode of being, which is its welling up and is continually generated by its "manner" of being. (It is in this sense that one is to read the Stoic definition of *ethos* as *pegè biou*, "rising-forth of life.")

2.

It is in this way that we must understand the relationship between *bios* and *zoè* in form-of-life. At the end of *Homo Sacer I*, form of life was briefly evoked as a *bios* that is only its *zoè*. But what can "living (or be-ing) one's own *zoè*" mean? What can a mode of life be that has for its object only life, which our political tradition has always already separated into bare life? Certainly it will mean living it as something absolutely inseparable, causing *bios* and *zoè* to coincide at every point. But above all, what are we to understand by *zoè* if it cannot be a question of bare life? Our corporeal life, the physiological life that we tend to always already separate and isolate? Here one sees the limit and, at the same time, the abyss that Nietzsche had to have glimpsed when he speaks of "great poli-tics" as physiology. Here the risk is the same one that the biopolitics of modernity has fallen into: to make bare life as such the preeminent object of politics.

The above is one of ten India ink drawings made by illustrator Jim Leon after the book *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), a study of sexual perversions authored by Austrian psychiatrist Richard Krafft-Ebing.



An image of unknown origin shows plankton enlarged. Photo: Istimewa

Therefore it is necessary above all to neutralize the bipolar *zoè*/*bios* ap-paratus. Just as every time we find ourselves confronted with a two-sided machine, here one needs to guard against the temptation of playing one pole off against the other as well as that of simply contracting them onto one another in a new articulation. That is to say, it is a matter of render-ing both *bios* and *zoè* inoperative, so that form-of-life can appear as the *tertium* that will become thinkable only starting from this inoperativity, from this coinciding – which is to say, falling together – of *bios* and *zoè*.

3.

In ancient medicine there is a term – *diaita* – that designates the regime of life, the "diet" of an individual or a group, understood as the harmonic proportion between food (*sitos*) and physical exercise or labor (*ponos*). Thus, in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, "the human diet" (*diaite anthropine*) is something like the mode of life, variously articulated according to seasons and individuals, best adapted to good health (*pros hygeien orthos*). That is to say, it is a question of a *bios* whose object seems to be solely *zoè*.

Curiously, this medical term also has another technical meaning, which this time refers – as also happens, after all, with our term "diet" – to the political-juridical sphere: *diaita* is that arbitration that decides a suit not according to the letter of the law but according to circumstances and equity (hence, in medieval and modern vocabulary, it has developed the meaning of "a political assembly with decision-making power"). In this sense, the term is opposed to *dike*, which indicates not so much cus-tom or mode of life but imperative rule (Aristotle, *Rhetoric,* 1374b 19: "one must recur rather to *diaita* than to *dike*, because *diaitetes*, the will, looks to the convenient, while *dikastes*, judgment, to the law [*nomos*]").

As often happens, the gap between two meanings of the same term can give rise to instructive considerations. If politics, as we have seen, is founded on an articulation of life (living/living well; life/autarchic life), then it certainly cannot be surprising that the mode of life, the "diet" that secures the good health of human beings, can also assume a political meaning, which, however, concerns not the *nomos* but the governance and regime of life (and it is no accident that the Latin term that translates *diaita* – *regimen* – also preserves the same semantic duplicity: the title *de regimine* is common to both medical and political treatises). On the level of "regime," biological life and political life are indeterminate.

4.

Theologians distinguish between the life that we live (*vita quam vivimus*), namely, the sum of facts and events that constitute our biog-raphy, and the life by means of which we live (*vita qua vivimus*), that which renders life livable and gives to it a sense and a form (it is perhaps what Victorinus calls *vitalitas*). In every existence these two lives appear divided, and yet one can say that every existence is the attempt, often unsuccessful and nevertheless insistently repeated, to realize their coincidence. Indeed, only that life is happy in which the division disappears.

If one leaves to one side projects to reach this happiness on the col-lective level – from convent rules to phalansteries – the place where the study of the coincidence between the two lives has found its most sophisticated laboratory is the modern novel. Henry James's characters – but it holds for all characters – are in this sense only the experiment in which the life that we live is ceaselessly divided from the life by which we live and, at the same time, just as obstinately seeks to reunite itself with it. Thus, on the one hand, their existence is split into series of faces, perhaps accidental and in any case unassumable, object of the mundane *episteme* par excellence, gossip; on the other hand, it appears as the "beast in the jungle," something that is always waiting in ambush for them in the curves and cruxes of life and will one day inevitably pounce to show "the real truth" about them.

5.

Sexual life – which appears, for example, in the sexual biographies that Krafft-Ebing collects in his *Psychopathia sexualis* in the same years when James is writing his novels – seems to actualize a threshold that escapes the scission between the two lives. Here the beast in the jungle has always already pounced – or rather, has always already unveiled its phantasmatic nature. These biographies, which are by all appearances miserable and have been transcribed solely to bear witness to their patho-logical and infamous character, testify to an experience in which the life *that* has been lived is identified without remainder with the life *by which* it has been lived. In the life that the anonymous protagonists live what is at stake in every instant is the life by which they live: the latter has been wagered and forgotten without remainder from the beginning in the former, even at the cost of losing all dignity and respectability. The short-sighted summaries of medical taxonomy conceal a sort of archive of the blessed life, whose pathographic seals had each time been broken by desire. (The narcissistic withdrawal of libido into the Ego, by which Freud

defines perversion, is only the psychological transcription of the fact that for the subject what is in question in that determined and un-controllable passion is his life, that this life has been entirely put at stake in this certain gesture or in that certain perverse behavior.)

It is striking that to find examples and materials of a life inseparable from its form in our society, one has to rummage through pathographic registers – or, as happened to Foucault for his *Lives of Infamous Men* – in police archives. In this sense, form-of-life is something that does not yet exist in its fullness and can be attested only in places that, under present circumstances, necessarily appear unedifying. In any case, it is a matter of an application of the Benjaminian principle according to which the elements of the final state are hidden in the present, not in the tendencies that appear progressive but in the most insignificant and contemptible.

6.

There is, however, also a high tradition of inseparable life. In early Christian literature, the proximity between life and *logos* that is in ques-tion in the prologue to the Gospel of John was taken as the model of an inseparable life. "Life itself," one reads in Origen's commentary, "comes into existence after the Word [*epigignetai toi logoi*], being inseparable [*achoristos*] from it after it has come into existence."[3]

According to the messianic paradigm of "eternal life" (*zoè aionos*), the very relationship between *bios* and *zoè* is transformed in such a way that *zoè* can appear in Clement of Alexandria as the supreme end of *bios*: "Piety toward God is the only truly universal exhortation that clearly concerns *bios* in its entirety, stretched out in every instant toward the su-preme end, *zoè*."[4] The reversal of the relation between *bios* and *zoè* here allows for a formulation that simply would not have made sense in classical Greek thought and that seems to anticipate modern biopolitics: *zoè* as *telos* of *bios*.

In Victorinus the attempt to think the relationship between Father and Son produces an unheard-of ontology, according to which "every be-ing has an inseparable species [*omne esse inseparabilem speciem habet*], or rather, the species is the substance itself, not because the species is prior to being, but because the species defines being."[5] Like living and life, so also being and form here coincide without re-mainder.

7.

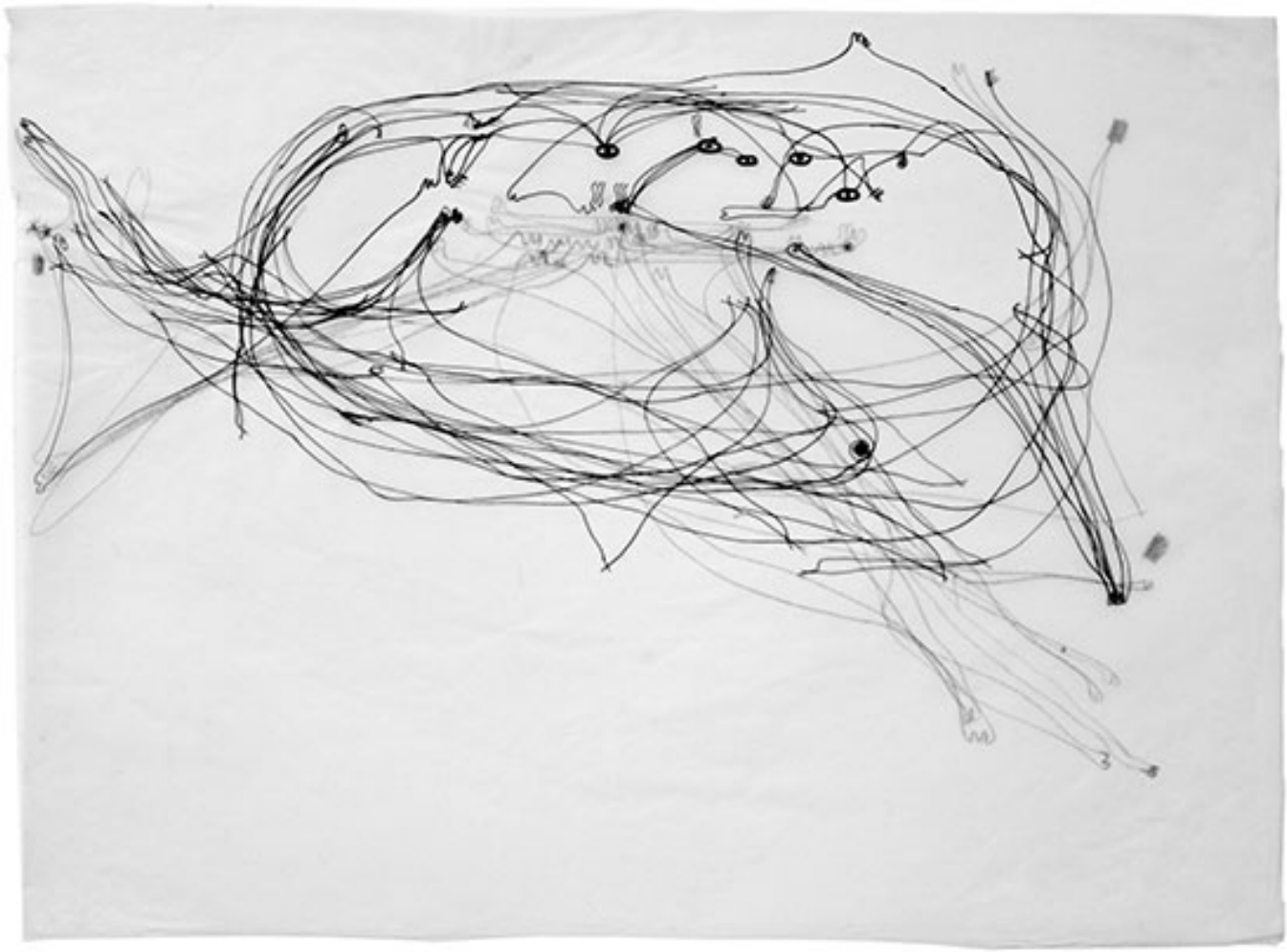
It is from this perspective that one can read the way in which Fran-ciscan theorists completely rethought the Aristotelian division of souls (or lives), to the point of radically calling into question both the very reality of the division and the hierarchy between vegetative, sensitive, and intellectual soul that Scholasticism had drawn from it. Intellectual life, writes Scotus, contains in itself vegetative and sensitive life not in the sense that the latter, being subordinated to the former, are to be abolished or formally destroyed but, on the contrary, only in the sense of their greater perfection (*Intellectiva continet perfecte et formaliter vegetativam et sensiti-vam per se et non sub ratione destruente rationem vegetativae et sensitivae, sed sub ratione perfectiori quam illae formae habeantur sine intellectiva*). Richard of Middleton can thus affirm that "the vegetative, sensitive, and intellective are not three forms, but one sole form [*non sunt tres formae, sed una forma*], by means of which there is in the human being a vegetative, sensitive, and intellective being." And beyond the Aristotelian division, the Franciscans elaborate the idea of a "form of corporeity" (*forma corporeitatis*), which is already found perfected in the embryo before the intellectual soul and later coexists with it. This means that there is never anything like a bare life, a life without form that functions as a negative foundation for a superior and more perfect life: corporeal life is always already formed, is always already inseparable from a form.

8.

How to describe a form-of-life? At the beginning of his *Parallel Lives*, Plutarch evokes an *eidos*, a form that the biographer must know how to pick out beyond the muddle of events. What he seeks to grasp is not, however, a form-of-life but an exemplary trait, something that, in the sphere of action, allows him to unite one life to another in a single paradigm. In general, ancient biography – the lives of philosophers and poets that it has transmitted to us – does not seem interested in describ-ing the real events nor in composing them into a unitary form so much as instead choosing a paradigmatic fact – extravagant and significant – deduced from the work rather than the life. If this singular projection of work over life remains problematic, it is nonetheless possible that pre-cisely the attempt to define a life starting from a work constitutes some-thing like the logical place where ancient biography had a presentiment of a form-of-life.

9.

Fernand Deligny never sought to recount the life of the autistic children with whom he lived. Instead, he attempted to scrupulously tran-scribe on tracing paper the routes of their movements and encounters in the form of what he called "lines of drift" (*lignes d'erre*). Placed on top of one another, the tracing papers allow a



This illustration by educator Fernand Deligny shows the patterns autistic children trace in walking, from the book *Maps And Wander Lines,* (2013). Photo: Anaïs Masson, Archives Jacques Allaire and Marie-Dominique Guibal.

sort of circular or elliptical ring (*cerne*) to appear, beyond the tangle of lines, which include within them-selves not only lines of drift but also the points (*chevêtres*, from *enchevrê-ment*, "entanglement"), strikingly constant, at which the routes cross. "It is clear," he writes, "that the routes – the lines of drift – are transcribed and that the ring area each time appears as the *trace* of *something else* that was not *foreseen* or pre-thought by those doing the tracing nor by those being traced. It is clear that it is a question of the effect of *something* that is not due to language, nor does it refer to the Freudian unconscious."[6]

It is possible that this striking tangle, apparently indecipherable, ex-presses more than any account not only the mute children's form of life but any form of life. In this sense it is an instructive exercise to attempt to mark on the map of the cities where we have lived the itineraries of our movements, which prove to be stubbornly and almost obsessively constant. It is in the tracks of that in which we have lost our life that it is perhaps possible to find our form-of-life. In any case, Deligny seems to attribute to his *lignes d'erre* something like a political meaning that is prelinguistic and yet collective: "It is by observing this ring area that there came to us the project of persisting in transcribing the simple *vis-ible* waiting to see *appear* there a trace of what we write with a capital W, inscribed in us since our *species* had existence, a primordial We that insists on foreshadowing, beyond every will and every power, for *nothing*, immutable, just like, on the opposite pole, ideology."[7]

10.

I have in my hands the page of a French newspaper that pub-lishes personals ads for people who are seeking to meet a life companion. Curiously, the column is called "modes of life," and it includes, along-side a photo, a brief message that attempts to describe through small, laconic traits something like the form or, more precisely, the mode of life of the advertisement's author (and sometimes of the ideal addressee as well). Under the photograph of a woman seated at a café table, with her serious – indeed, decidedly melancholy – face resting on her left hand, one can read: "Parisian, tall, thin, blonde, and classy, in her fif-ties, lively, good family, sports: hunting, fishing, golf, horseback riding, skiing, would love to meet serious man, witty, sixty, the same profile, to live happy days together, Paris or country." The portrait of a young bru-nette who is fixated on a ball suspended in the air is accompanied by this

Giovanni di Paolo, *St. Thomas Aquinas Confounding Averroës*, 1445–50. Tempera and gold leaf on panel, collection Saint Louis Museum of Art.

caption: “Young juggler, pretty, feminine, spiritual, seeks young woman 20–30, similar profile to be united in the G-spot!!!” At times, the photo-graph also tries to present the occupation of the one who is writing, like the one that shows a woman who is throwing a rag into a bucket to clean floors: “50, blonde, green eyes, 1m 60cm, porter, divorced (3 sons, 23, 25 and 29, independent). Physically and morally young, charming, desire to share the simple joys of life with lovable companion 45–55.” Other times, the decisive element for characterizing the form of life is the presence of an animal, who appears in the foreground in the photograph alongside its owner: “Gentle Labrador seeks for his mistress (36) a sweet master who is a lover of nature and animals, to swim in happiness in the countryside.” Finally, the close-up of a face on which a tear leaves a trace of mascara reads: “Young woman, 25, with a skin-deep sensibility, seeks a tender and spiritual young man, with whom to live a river-romance.”

The list could continue, but what is both irritating and moving each time is the attempt – a complete success and, at the same time, an ir-reparable failure – to communicate a form of life. How indeed can this certain face, this certain life coincide with that italicized list of hobbies and character traits? It is as if something decisive – and, so to speak, un-equivocally public and political – has collapsed to such a degree into the idiocy of the private that it is becoming forever unrecognizable.

11.

In the attempt to define oneself through one’s hobbies, there comes to light in all its problematicity the relation between singularity, its tastes, and its inclinations. The most idiosyncratic aspect of everyone, their tastes, the fact that they like coffee granita, the sea at summertime, this certain shape of lips, this certain smell, but also the paintings of the late Titian so much – all this seems to safeguard its secret in the most impenetrable and insignificant way. It is necessary to decisively subtract tastes from the aesthetic dimension and rediscover their ontological char-acter, in order to find in them something like a new ethical territory. It is not a matter of attributes or properties of a subject who judges but of the mode in which each person, in losing himself as subject, constitutes-himself as form-of-life. The secret of taste is what form-of-life must solve, has always already solved and displayed – just as gestures betray and, at the same time, absolve character.

Two theses published in *Tiqqun* 2 (*Introduction to Civil War*) figura-tively summarize the ontological meaning to “tastes” in their relation to a form-of-life:

> Every body is affected by its form-of-life as if by a clinamen, a leaning, an at-traction, a *taste*. A body leans toward whatever leans its way. (§3)

> “My” form-of-life relates not to *what* I am, but to *how* I am what I am. (§5)

If every body is affected by its form-of-life as by a clinamen or a taste, the ethical subject is that subject that constitutes-itself in relation to this clinamen, the subject who bears witness to its tastes, takes responsibility for the mode in which it is affected by its inclinations. Modal ontology, the ontology of the *how*, coincides with an ethics.

12.

In his letter to Milena of August 10, 1920, Kafka recounts his fleeting encounter with a girl in a hotel. During this encounter, the girl did “in perfect innocence” “something slightly disgusting” and “said something slightly obscene” – and yet Kafka realized in that precise in-stant that he would never forget it, as if precisely this small gesture and this small word had drawn him irresistibly into that hotel. Ever since then, adds Kafka, for years and years his body “was shaken almost un-bearably” by the memory and by the desire for that “very particular, triv-ial, disgusting thing.”[8]

The decisive element, what renders this trivial disgusting thing un-forgettable, is obviously not the thing in itself (Kafka says that it is “not worth mentioning”); it is not only the girl’s abjection but her particular mode of being abject, her bearing witness in some way to her abjection. It is this and only this that renders that abjection perfectly innocent, which is to say, ethical.

It is not justice or beauty that moves us but the mode that each one has of being just or beautiful, of being affected by her beauty or her justice. For this reason even abjection can be innocent, even “something slightly disgusting” can move us.

13.

A double tendency seems to be inherent to form-of-life. On the one hand, it is a life inseparable from its form, an indissoluble unity in itself, and on the other, it is separable from every thing and every context. This is evident in the classical conception of *theoria*, which is in itself united but separated and separable from every thing, in perpetual flight. This double tension is the risk inherent in form-of-life, which tends to separate itself ascetically into an autonomous sphere,

theory. It is neces-sary instead to think form-of-life as a living of its own mode of being, as inseparable from its context, precisely because it is not in relation but in contact with it.

The same thing happens in sexual life: the more it becomes a form-of-life, the more it seems separable from its context and indifferent to it. Far from being a principle of community, it separates itself to constitute a special community of its own (the castle of Silling in Sade or the Califor-nia bathhouses for Foucault). The more form-of-life becomes monadic, the more it isolates itself from the other monads. But the monad always already communicates with the others, insofar as it represents them in itself, as in a living mirror.

14.

The arcanum of politics is in our form-of-life, and yet precisely for this reason we cannot manage to penetrate it. It is so intimate and close that if we seek to grasp it, it leaves us holding only the ungraspable, tedious everyday. It is like the form of the cities or houses where we have lived, which coincide perfectly with the life we have frittered away in them, and perhaps precisely for this reason, it seems suddenly impenetrable to us, while other times, at a stroke, as in revolutionary moments according to Jesi, it is collectively innervated and seems to unveil to us its secret.

15.

In Western thought, the problem of form-of-life has emerged as an ethical problem (*ethos*, the mode of life of an individual or group) or as an aesthetic problem (the style by which the author leaves his mark on the work). Only if we restore it to the ontological dimension will the problem of style and mode of life be able to find its just formulation. And this can happen only in the form of something like an "ontology of style" or a doctrine that is in a position to respond to the question: "What does it mean that multiple modes modify or express the one substance?"

In the history of philosophy, the place where this problem has been posed is Averroism, as a problem of the conjunction (*copulatio*) between the singular individual and the one intellect. According to Averroës, the mean term that allows this union is the imagination: the singular is joined to the possible or material intellect through the phantasms of its imagination. The conjunction can happen, however, only if the intellect strips the phantasms of their material elements, to the point of produc-ing, in the act of thought, a perfectly bare image, something like an ab-solute *imago*. This means that the phantasm is what the singular sensible body marks on the intellect to the same extent to which the inverse is true, namely, that it is what the one intellect works and marks in the singular. In the contemplated image, the singular sensible body and the one intellect coincide, which is to say, fall together. The questions "who contemplates the image?" and "what is united to what?" do not have a univocal response. (Averroistic poets, like Cavalcanti and Dante, made love the place of this experience, in which the phantasm contemplated is at once subject and object of love and the intellect knows and loves itself in the image.)

What we call form-of-life corresponds to this ontology of style; it names the mode in which a singularity bears witness to itself in being and being expresses itself in the singular body.

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This is the fifth chapter of the third part of The Use of Bodies, *the ninth and final volume of Agamben's Homo Sacer series. The excerpt is published courtesy of Stanford University Press.*

Giorgio Agamben is a prominent Italian philosopher and radical political theorist.

1
Agamben's Homo Sacer series has previously traced as characteristic of the modern period the forcible separation of *bios* – or bare, physical, animal life – from *zoè* – the social-historical, transindividual capacity that Aristotle thought defined the human species. Anyone who has ever interacted with immigration enforcement will understand *bios* as what remains of someone once their arbitrary and indefinite detention as a "foreigner" of whatever kind has subtracted their *zoè* from them. Such prisons are instances of "the camp" – in the sense of "internment camp" – which Agamben argues is the exemplary apparatus for removing the body from political life to produce it again as mere *bios*. Now, the problem is considered in reverse as *bios* and *zoè* are reconciled in a theory of their original unity, the concept "form-of-life," which develops towards an ontology of style.

2
The Prophet of Islam in Old French: The Romance of Muhammad *(1258) and* The Book of Muhammad's Ladder *(1264)*, ed. and trans. Reginal Hyatte (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1997), 126.

3
Origen of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John, Books 1–10*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), II, 129.

4
Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, trans. William Wilson, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1885), XI.

5
Marius Victorinus, *Theological Treatise on the Trinity*, trans. Mary T. Clark (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 116.

6
Fernand Deligny, *Les enfant et le silence* (Paris: Galilée, 1980), 40.

7
Ibid.

8
Franz Kafka, *Letter to Milena*, trans. Philip Boehm (New York: Schocken, 1990), 147.