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# A parody of action: Politics and pantomime in Agamben's critique of Arendt

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Hannah Arendt's thought has been a major influence on Giorgio Agamben's political theory. Agamben's appreciation of Arendt dates back at least to 1970 when he sent her a note expressing his admiration and gratitude (De la Durantaye, 2009, p. 41). It clearly persists in the first volume of *Homo Sacer*, where Arendt is presented as the first author to address the entry of biological life to the forefront of Western politics. And yet, this appreciation has also been accompanied by a certain distancing, since Arendt's line of reasoning in *The Human Condition* and other works appears not merely incomplete from Agamben's perspective, for example, in the lack of biopolitical perspective to her study of totalitarianism (Arendt, 1968; see Agamben, 1998, p. 4), but also complicit in the very process of the inclusive exclusion of bare life into the political domain. After all, Arendt's retracing of the victory of *animal laborans* and the eclipse of action in *The Human Condition* presupposes both the possibility and the desirability of the foundation of the political space through the exclusion of bare life from the polis (see Lechte & Newman, 2012). Arendt did not merely trace the way bare life enters politics in modernity but also argues that its exit alone could revive politics in the modern period.

While Agamben certainly shares Arendt's diagnosis, he entirely disagrees with her solutions, claiming that the "restoration of classical political categories proposed by Leo Strauss and, in a different sense, by Hannah Arendt, can have only a critical sense" (Agamben, 1998, p. 187). There is, for Agamben, no return from the contemporary indistinction between life and politics to a politics rigorously distinguished from the needs of life. While Agamben never returned to Arendt's work in the subsequent volumes of the series, the affirmative biopolitics outlined therein, culminating in *The Use of Bodies* (Agamben, 2016), may be read as an attempt to develop an alternative to sovereign biopolitics that would not be merely "restorative," like Arendt's.

It is in this context that we should address Agamben's most detailed critical engagement with Arendt's thought in his 2018 book *Karman: A Brief Treatise on Action, Guilt and Gesture*. While Agamben's criticism of Arendt is largely presented in technical terms, focusing in detail on her reading of Aristotle, what is at stake in it is more than merely philological or exegetical differences. Agamben's critique of Arendt's theory of action seeks nothing less than a transformation in our very understanding of what it means to act politically and whether politics is about acting at all. Agamben's intention in *Karman* is to advance beyond the two paradigms that have defined Western thought:

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In the tradition of Western ethical and political thought there are two paradigms, which intersect and incessantly keep separating from one another in the course of its history. The first situates the essence of the human and the proper place of politics and ethics in action and praxis; the second situates it instead in knowledge and contemplation (in *theoria*). (Agamben, 2019, p. 35)

In *Karman*, Agamben focuses his critique primarily on the first paradigm, yet he does not subscribe to the second one, but rather ventures to “open the space for the *tertium*” or the third paradigm, whose exemplary activity would be a *mysterion* or theatrical performance.

In Agamben's view, the main problem with the paradigm of action consists in its constitutively juridical character that he traces to the etymological sense of *actio* as a trial or religious ritual (Agamben, 2019, p. 70). What defines action for Agamben is its imputability to a subject, who thereby becomes responsible for it. Action is thus linked to the Latin term *crimen* (Agamben, 2019, p. 24), which refers both to the accusation and the crime. “[Crimen] is the form that human action assumes when it is imputed and called into question in the order of responsibility and law” (Agamben, 2019, p. 25). Agamben traces this Latin term to the Sanskrit term *karman*, which refers to work in general, good or bad. *Karman* implies a connection between an action and its consequences, which makes it possible to assess the consequences of one's actions and impute responsibility for them to the actor, who could thus be accused of a crime. This logic of imputation permits Agamben to claim that the “concept of *crimen*, of action that is sanctioned, which is to say, imputable and productive of consequences, stands at the foundation not only of law but also of the ethics and religious morality of the West” (Agamben, 2019, p. 29).

The question of imputation and responsibility first leads Agamben to a critique of the notion of will that he developed at length in earlier writings. Yet, the theme of the will is ultimately secondary to Agamben's argument in *Karman*, especially with regard to his engagement with Arendt's thought. Of course, Agamben recognizes that the concept of the will was not developed in Greek thought, which is the main site for Arendt's interpretation of action. Moreover, Arendt herself did not focus on the will in *The Human Condition* but only turned to it in the second volume of her final work *The Life of the Mind* (Arendt, 1978), which deals with contemplative rather than active life. Thus, Agamben identifies as the main problem with action not its willed character but rather its imputability to the subject as such: “if by imputing the act to the agent and assigning a fault to him for this reason, one makes of action the ultimate criterion of ethics and of humanity, then one introduces into the latter a split that can no longer be resolved” (Agamben, 2019, pp. 33–34).

It is this split that Agamben first ventures to identify in Arendt's concept and, second, ventures to overcome in his own paradigm of *mysterion*, performance, and gesture. Agamben ventures to demonstrate that for all her attempts to define action as having no end outside itself and therefore constitutive of a space of freedom (Arendt, 1977, pp. 21–23; 1998, pp. 30–31), Arendt's concept remains tied to the quasi-judicial logic that imputes action to the subject, rendering it responsible and at least potentially guilty. The participatory-democratic politics advocated and inspired by Arendt is thus rendered suspect, and its faults correctable only by Agamben's alternative vision of an inoperative politics of pure means.

In this article, we shall retrace the three steps in Agamben's critique in order to question its validity. First, we shall address Agamben's criticism of the idea of the “end in itself,” which Arendt, following Aristotle, understands as the constitutive feature of action. We shall argue that in his insistence on *eudaimonia* as the “ultimate end” of action in Aristotle, Agamben ignores Arendt's own understanding of the end in itself as *eupraxia*, which could not possibly be a final or ultimate end but does indeed remain “in itself” in the action and not outside it. Second, we shall analyze Agamben's alternative notion of pure means and argue that, Agamben's critique notwithstanding, pure means and the pure end (in itself) that characterizes Arendt's action end up indistinguishable as long the relationship between means and ends is severed. Third, we shall analyze Agamben's interpretation of pure means as exposing potentiality and compare it with Arendt's argument about action as irreducibly potential. Whereas in Arendt's account potentiality and actuality coincide entirely in action, Agamben's affirmation of potentiality seeks to separate it from actualization and expose it as such in an “inoperative” state. This leads us to a concluding argument that interprets Agamben's “third paradigm” as less an alternative to than a *parody* of Arendt's notion of action that seeks to profane

it and deactivate its every relation to an end and to a subject. The price of this deactivation, however, is a strangely impoverished activity of pantomime, whose “new possible use” is difficult to ascertain. Thus, Agamben’s critique of Arendt illuminates the limits of his political theory, which cannot advance beyond what it criticizes but is resigned to producing parodies of it.

## 2 | THE END IN ITSELF: EUDAIMONIA OR EUPRAXIA?

Agamben addresses Arendt’s work in the final chapter of *Karman* called “Beyond Action.” Having acknowledged the highly influential character of Agamben’s rethinking of action in contemporary political thought, Agamben nonetheless remarks: “And yet, an attentive reading of the chapter of the book dedicated to this concept shows precisely that the author does not succeed in furnishing a coherent definition for it, as if it were not properly a philosophical term” (Agamben, 2019, p. 60). Reminding the reader that the Latin term *actio* is indeed not philosophical but rather belongs to the juridical and religious spheres, Agamben isolates a single example of the philosophical use of the notion of praxis in Greek philosophy, found in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*: “*praxis* and *poiesis* are different in kind. For the end of *poiesis* is different from itself, but the end of *praxis* could not be, since acting well is its own end” (Aristotle, 2014, 1140b).

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt does indeed cite this sentence when defining action in opposition to work (*poiesis*), also evoking Aristotle’s concept of *energeia* (actuality): “It is from the experience of this full actuality that the paradoxical ‘end in itself’ derives its original meaning; for in these instances of action and speech the end (*telos*) is not pursued but lies in the activity itself which therefore becomes *entelecheia*, and the work is not what follows and extinguishes the process, but is imbedded in it; the performance is the work, is *energeia*” (Arendt, 1998, pp. 206–207). She then goes on to argue that Aristotle was “still well aware” of what is at stake in politics when he identified it with the “work of man” (*ergon tou anthropou*) and defined this work as “living well” (*eu zen*): “he clearly meant that ‘work’ here is no work product but exists only in sheer actuality” (Arendt, 1998, p. 207).

For Agamben, the attempt to define action with the help of Aristotle’s notion of praxis is doomed from the outset. This is because, since Aristotle’s own example of praxis, that is, vision, could not possibly constitute action in Arendt’s sense (Agamben, 2019, p. 61). Senses and bodily functions exemplify praxis insofar as they have their end in themselves yet have nothing to do with the self-disclosing deeds and discourse that comprise action for Arendt. Moreover, since activities such as seeing, hearing, or apprehending need no presence of others and are easily performed by individuals in private, Aristotle’s concept of praxis entirely lacks the dimension of publicity that is so important for Arendt’s understanding of action (see Backman, 2010, p. 37). If Agamben wished to demonstrate that Arendt’s concept of action cannot be rigorously modeled on Aristotle’s notion of praxis, he could have stopped right there. Evidently, what Arendt intends by action can at best be approached as a particular variant of Aristotle’s praxis, which, like other variants, has its end in itself, but, *unlike* other variants, consists in self-disclosure by words and deeds in the presence of and in competition with others. Yet, in the remainder of the chapter Agamben continues to criticize Arendt’s concept of action by addressing the problems with Aristotle’s notion of praxis, whose tenuous connection to Arendt’s concept has just been demonstrated.

Thus, Agamben focuses on the idea of praxis as having its end in itself and argues that in Aristotle this end nonetheless continues to be thought separately from the action itself. For Agamben, the proper context of the discussion of praxis in the *Nicomachean Ethics* is the idea of the good as the ultimate end that action can reach. Aristotle identifies this good as *eudaimonia* (happiness): “that for the sake of which everything is done” (Aristotle, 2014, 1097a, 19). This ultimate good cannot be a means for some other end, unlike, for example, a flute, which is the end of the production process but becomes a means for the performance of music once it is produced. Happiness is thus an end in relation to which everything else is a means, but which cannot be a means itself:

We are dealing with an apparatus that founds and simultaneously constitutes as absolute the opposition between ends and means. If there is good as final end, then all human actions appear as means and

never as ends with respect to it; if the good is not, then all actions lose their end and therefore their sense. [...] Praxis, human action, appears as the dimension that opened up for the sake of the good, as what must actualize the final end toward which human beings cannot but aim. This means that between human beings and their good there is not a coincidence but a fracture and a gap, which action—which has its privileged place in politics—seeks incessantly to fill. (Agamben, 2019, p. 63)

Thus, Agamben interprets Aristotle's idea of the "work of man" differently from Arendt (see Agamben, 2007b; 2011, p. 246). This "work" does not consist simply in living well as sheer actuality but in the pursuit of happiness, which remains an end *separable* from the action itself. The gap between action and this ultimate end of happiness resigns human beings to ceaseless activity that seeks, in vain, to fill this gap but only resigns human beings to guilt and being "in debt with respect to their own end" (Agamben, 2019, p. 63). Rather than having its end in itself, action not only remains subjected to an end, but this end, being ultimate, is bound to remain out of reach.

Arendt's interpretation of *eudaimonia* in *The Human Condition* is quite different. In fact, she explicitly rejects the translation of *eudaimonia* as happiness and instead defines it in the following way:

[it] has the connotation of blessedness, but without religious overtones, and it means literally something like the well-being of the *daimon* who accompanies each man throughout life. Unlike happiness, which is a passing mood and, unlike good fortune, which one may have at certain periods of life and lack in others, *eudaimonia*, like life itself, is a lasting state of being which is neither subject to change nor capable of effecting change. (Arendt, 1998, pp. 192–193).

This state of blessedness is only available at the end of one's life, insofar as one withdraws from the unpredictable consequences of one's action. This is why we may only find out about someone's *eudaimonia* from the stories recounting their past actions. Understood in this sense, *eudaimonia* does indeed produce a sort of a split in the human condition, insofar as it might well be sought throughout but cannot really be attained during one's life.

Yet, crucially, *eudaimonia* is *not* even the end that Arendt (and, in her reading, Aristotle) has in mind when speaking about action as having its end in itself. For her, it is not a matter of relating every activity to the ultimate end of "good," which would render all activities (including labor and work) all but equivalent with respect to it as mere means. It is instead a matter of positing an *immanent*, and not ultimate, end of action, which consists entirely in "acting well": *eupraxia*. One acts not in order to attain either happiness or blessedness in the future, but in order to act well in the present (see Tchir, 2017, p. 26). Acting well is the end of action but is not in any way separable from the action itself but is rather its aspect: at any point in the action, one may be acting badly or well. In the first case, the action remains deficient with respect to its end, but in the latter case it attains it fully in the very moment of acting in this manner.

Because Agamben does not even consider *eupraxia* in his critique and focuses exclusively on *eudaimonia*, he is able to conclude that Aristotle's theory of action that Arendt relies on is "far from coherent": indeed, if all activities are "for the sake of" happiness, then both praxis and poiesis appear to have an end, and their distinction becomes dubious. While *poiesis* would have its products as intermediate ends and happiness as its ultimate ends, for which the products in question might well be means, *praxis* that makes no product only has the ultimate end of happiness in view. The difference between *poiesis* and *praxis* thus lies only in the fact that the "being-in-act" (*energeia*) of *praxis* consists fully in the agent and not in an exterior thing" (Agamben, 2019, p. 65): while artisans and artists have their *ergon* outside themselves (in their products), the "human being as such is devoted to praxis, is a man of action" (Agamben, 2019, p. 64).

While both the artisan and the artist are condemned to have their *energeia*, their being-in-act, outside themselves, the man of action is ontologically master of his acts, but for this reason, while the artisan remains such, if he does not exercise his activity, the man of action cannot be *argos*, he constitutively has to act. (Agamben, 2019, p. 65)

The idea of happiness as ultimate end makes every activity a means of attaining this end, while the understanding of praxis as having its *ergon* within the agent makes it the constitutive characteristic of the human being: man is a being, which is consigned for never-ending action for the ultimate end of happiness that remains out of reach.

And yet, if we return to Arendt's idea of *eupraxia*, this tragic vision begins to dispel. First, if the end of praxis consists in its own being done well, then there is no longer a split in the human being that is effected by action: the end of *eupraxia* is attained in the action itself and not in the forever deferred future. Second, "having to act" is no longer the imperative of the pursuit of the elusive end but rather the injunction to *excel* at acting itself, to get better at acting in the action itself. Rather than produce any split in the human being, let alone an imperative of mending it, Aristotle's notion of *eupraxia* rather suggests that the attainment of the immanent end of praxis is considerably easier than the production of an external end in *poiesis*: while in the latter case, numerous things could go wrong, spoiling the final product, in the former case one attains an end as soon as one begins to act (i.e., we see as soon as we open our eyes) and the only question is whether one does so well or poorly (Backman, 2010, pp. 37–38).

To sum up, while Agamben is correct about the difference between Aristotle's notion of praxis and Arendt's concept of action, his focus on the "ultimate" end of *eudaimonia* to the exclusion of the immanent end of *eupraxia* obscures the specific nature of this difference. Since Arendt does not define the end of praxis in terms of the ultimate and elusive end of happiness but defines this end in the immanent terms of *eupraxia*, she only differs from Aristotle in dissociating the action, characterized by this end, from the individual acts of vision or apprehension and relocating it into the public space of appearance. And yet, given Arendt's own argument about the complicity of the philosophers, including Aristotle, in the eclipse of public action, this difference is neither controversial nor damaging to Arendt's wider argument, which never postulated a strict identity between the two concepts to begin with.

What is more interesting is the difference between Arendt and Agamben that arises from the two different interpretations of the relation of action to an end, which carries important implications for their approaches to politics. Agamben's well-known politics of *inoperativity* that seeks to deactivate the operation (*ergon*) of various apparatuses, in which the human condition is confined (Agamben, 1998, pp. 60–62; 2007b, pp. 6–9; 2016, pp. 245–248; see also De la Durantaye, 2009, pp. 18–20), is only intelligible in the context of his approach to praxis as resigning the human being to ceaseless action for the purpose of attaining the happiness that eludes it (Agamben, 2011, pp. 245–253). It only makes sense to even try to *suspend* the operation of apparatuses, if they are, first, operative at all and, second, operating perpetually, their end being constitutively elusive.

Neither assumption holds true in Arendt's analysis, for whom action is historically contingent and increasingly rare (Arendt, 1998, pp. 289–94). Since its end is contained in itself, it leaves behind no product except the stories that recount its glories and failures. Rather than serve as a perpetually operative apparatus that one should try to stop, we are instead dealing with a tentative and transient arrangement, whose task it is for the contemporary political theorist to *reactivate*. The divergence between Arendt and Agamben thus becomes clear: what one considers a solution cannot but appear to the other as a problem.

In the remainder of the final chapter of *Karman* Agamben proceeds from this divergence to outline his alternative to Arendt's concept of action, which is actually well familiar to Agamben's readers since it consists in the affirmation of pure means and potentiality—two central concepts of Agamben's oeuvre that have already been discussed extensively (Chiesa & Ruda, 2011; Wall, 1999, pp. 115–161; Whyte, 2009). Adam Kotsko has argued that Agamben's works often present solutions before working out the problems they are intended to solve (Kotsko, 2020, pp. 52, 148). Pure means and pure potentiality are arguably good exemplars of this "solutions first" approach, having become familiar to the reader long before the problems that these concepts venture to solve were even identified. Nonetheless, in the case of action, the sheer familiarity of these notions as markers of Agamben's approach risks obscuring the operation of very similar notions in the approach Agamben criticizes, that is, Arendt's theory of action. In the following two sections, we shall demonstrate that the indistinction of ends and means and potentiality and actuality is already at work in Arendt's theory of action in a more nuanced manner than Agamben's somewhat one-sided affirmation of means over ends and potentiality over actuality. In the final section, we shall address the question of whether this one-sided affirmation actually leads Agamben anywhere "beyond action."

### 3 | GESTURE: MEANS OR END?

We have seen that Agamben interprets the notion of “end in itself” as an end *separate* from action, to which it remains subordinated. While action does not produce its own particular product, it remains guided by the search for happiness. Thus, the idea of end in itself does not in any way dispense with the means-to-an-end logic, but only succeeds in positing an end that could never itself be a means to some other end and for which, therefore, everything else must serve as a means: “precisely the irreducible tension toward what can never be a means condemns the one who acts to the split between means and ends” (Agamben, 2019, p. 66).

Since it is the split itself that is a problem for Agamben, the solution could never consist in positing any other ultimate end than happiness. Instead, the means must be separated from any such end more radically than ever before, so that ultimately only the means remains, devoid of any relation to the end. This is what Agamben intends to achieve in his elaboration of Walter Benjamin’s notion of pure means as “a means that, while remaining as such, has been emancipated from the relation with an end” (Agamben, 2019, p. 81; see also Agamben, 1999, pp. 77–85; 2000, pp. 57–60; 2005, pp. 60–64; 2007a, p. 87–90). In Benjamin’s work, the most famous example of a pure means is divine violence, which is neither law preserving nor law establishing but manifests itself as such, in the absence of any relation to an end (Benjamin, 1978, pp. 291–315). In contrast, Agamben’s preferred paradigm of a pure means is *gesture*, which he also relies on to illuminate the admittedly arcane idea of divine violence.

The means shows itself as such in the very act, in which it interrupts and suspends its relation to the end. Just as, in the gesticulations of the mime, the movements usually directed at a certain goal are repeated and exhibited as such—that is, as means—without there being any more connection to their presumed end, and, in this way, they acquire a new and unexpected efficacy, so too does the violence that was only a means for the creation or conservation of the law become capable of deposing it to the extent that it exposes and renders inoperative its relation to that purposiveness. (Agamben, 2019, p. 82)

Agamben insists that a pure means *remains* a means even as it is emancipated from any relation to an end: “a praxis that, while firmly maintaining its nature as a means, is emancipated from its relationship to an end: it has joyously forgotten its goal and can now show itself as such, as a means without an end” (Agamben, 2007a, p. 86). Yet, what does it mean for the means to remain a means in the absence of any end? We have seen that the separation of an end from the means, as in the elevation of happiness to the status of the ultimate end, only led to the *split* between means and ends, and the subjection of human beings to action as an imperative. What happens when we now separate the means from the end and expose its mediality freed from any relation to it? Does not this freedom from any external end suggest that this means now has its end in itself? Agamben insists that gesture cannot be “conceived as end in itself” (Agamben, 2007a, p. 82), which is the only reason why “in gesture, each member, once liberated from its functional relation to an end—organic or social—can for the first time explore, sound out and show forth all the possibilities of which it is capable, without ever exhausting them” (Agamben, 2007a, p. 82).

While we shall deal with the question of possibilities in the following section, let us first consider the question of whether a pure means differs from an end in itself. To begin with, both notions are produced by separation: in the first case, a means is separated from an end and becomes pure, while in the second case an end is separated from the means and becomes something like a pure end, an end that can never become a means and in relation to which everything is presumably a means but in a strangely disconnected way. Happiness in Agamben’s example above was only an end in the sense that it orients and guides all action, which nonetheless does not attain it, having no product of its own that it could deploy as a means towards it. If in both cases the means and the end are separated, how do we even know which is which? An end, which no action produces but which hovers above any possible action as its unattainable goal, does not appear that different from a means that no longer leads to any end but exposes itself as such. In both cases, we are dealing with something like a self-exposing or self-revealing activity that may be seen either as a means that no longer seeks to attain any end or as an end that no longer has any means to attain itself.

To recall Arendt's analysis in *The Human Condition*, action is indeed constitutively characterized by this self-exposure: "In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and the sound of the voice" (Arendt, 1998, p. 179). This activity of showing and revealing is evidently a pure means, insofar as it is not undertaken for some purpose of, for example, currying favor, deception, or seduction. The latter remains an ever-present possibility, which explains the fragility and transience that Arendt associates with action. Yet, while Arendt recognizes the possibility of this resumption of the means-end relationship (Arendt, 1998, p. 180), she clearly views it as the loss of the quality specific to action, "through which it transcends mere productive activity, [which] has no more meaning than is revealed in the finished product and does not intend to show more than is plainly visible at the end of the production process" (Arendt, 1998, p. 180). This quality consists precisely in the exposure of the speaker and doer in their speech and action.

Yet, precisely as long as this exposure is not undertaken in order to achieve some goal, it becomes indistinguishable from a pure end that is no longer a means to anything else: *one shows oneself to show oneself* and not for any other end that would be separable from the showing. The *eudaimonia* that Agamben posits as the end of all action in Aristotle is for Arendt only attained at the end of the actor's life and is in any case produced not by the actor himself but in the stories recounting his actions (Arendt, 1998, pp. 193–194). In contrast, the notion of *eupraxia*, which Arendt understands as the immanent end of action, is rather more appropriate in grasping this specificity of action: while action has no end beyond the self-exposure that it consists in, it nonetheless ventures to expose itself *well*, to *excel* at self-exposure in the "agonal spirit, the passionate drive to show one's self in measuring up against others that underlies the concept of politics prevalent in the city states" (Arendt, 1998, p. 194; see also Arendt, 1977, pp. 124–25, 221–240). One reveals oneself for no other purpose than to do it well. Action is therefore a pure means that, precisely by virtue of being separated from any end, is indistinguishable from an end produced by such a separation. As long as the means-end relation is interrupted, pure ends and pure means are indiscernible from each other, precisely to the extent that they both consist solely in self-manifestation and exposure. Whenever they are not related to each other, means and ends are one and the same.

Interestingly, Agamben admits as much when discussing the critique of purposiveness in ancient thought: "an end that can never be a means is completely in agreement with a means that can never be an end" (Agamben, 2019, p. 69). Yet, he goes on to interpret this "agreement" as a gap that leads to the quest of human beings for the end that is out of reach by using means that do not attain it. Nonetheless, Arendt's account of self-exposure in action permits us to approach this agreement otherwise: an end to which no means leads is strictly *identical* to a means that leads to no end. The rupture of the relation between means and end leaves the two activities suspended in self-exposure.

This entails that Agamben's elevation of gesture (as means without end) to a separate, "third type of action," alongside *poiesis* and *praxis*, is entirely unwarranted, as Arendt's concept of action already contains the indetermination of means and end that Agamben seeks to highlight with the notion of gesture. This is attested even on the etymological level, as Agamben presents this third type of action by discussing Varro's reflection on the verb *gerere*, which refers neither to making nor to acting (*agere*), but rather, as in Varro's example of the magistrate, to *assuming* and *supporting* a public office or function (Agamben, 2019, p. 84). While Agamben does not refer to Arendt in this discussion, her analysis of action in *The Human Condition* also explicitly addresses the verb *gerere*. In her reading, both the Latin verbs *agere* and *gerere* refer to action, but while the first refers to setting action into motion or "leading," the second refers to "bearing," seeing through or finishing the action in question. While the two senses of action may be separated into two different functions (those of ruling or leading and executing or following), Arendt seeks to highlight precisely their interdependence. Moreover, she argues that, just as with the Greek *prattein*, the verb *gerere*, which originally referred only to completion of the action, gradually "became the accepted word for action in general, whereas the words designating the beginning of action (*archein*, *agere*) became specialized in meaning, at least in political action" (Arendt, 1998, p. 189), referring to ruling and leading. Thus, action always already includes the dimension of "bearing" or "assuming" that Agamben seeks to reserve for gesture as the "third type of action."



[Because] the actor always moves among and in relation to other beings, he is never merely a “doer,” but always and at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin, and the story that an act starts is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings. Since action acts upon beings who are capable of their own action, reaction, apart from being a response, is always a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others. Thus, action and reaction among men never move in a closed circle and can never be reliably confined to two partners. (Arendt, 1998, p. 190)

This indistinction between doer and sufferer in the concept of action resonates with Agamben’s understanding of *gerere*: “those who *gerunt* are not limited to acting, but in the very act in which they carry out their action, they at the same time stop it, expose it, and hold it at a distance from themselves” (Agamben, 2019, p. 84). However, the resonance is only partial: whereas Arendt finds in the verb *gerere* the implication of suffering in every doing, Agamben interprets it in terms of inoperativity: “it is an activity or a potential that consists in deactivating human works and rendering them inoperative, and in this way, it opens them to a new, possible use” (Agamben, 2019, p. 84).

Yet, it is difficult to see what warrants this interpretation of *gerere*, aside from the claim that in modern languages this verb was only conserved in the term “gesture” (Agamben, 2019, p. 83). While this might be the case, it does not warrant the retroactive application of Agamben’s rather idiosyncratic interpretation of gesture to the verb *gerere*, whose scope of reference was much wider. Assuming or bearing a public office or function does suggest a certain indiscernibility between the doer and the sufferer since one acts only insofar as one also suffers the function or office that one bears, but it need not imply rendering this function or office inoperative. In contrast, the gestures of the mime do indeed render inoperative the functions these actions were originally meant to serve, insofar as they are exposed in the absence of any purpose they were intended to serve. Of course, this inoperativity is, in a strict sense, only observable in those gestures that originally pertained to *poiesis* and not to *praxis*, that is, the activities that were meant to have an end or product outside themselves but clearly lack it in the context of the mime’s performance. A mime can expose and render inoperative the gestures defining the activity of the house-builder, a sculptor, or a shoemaker. Yet, what would be rendered inoperative in the miming of a dancer or, for that matter, of the “words and deeds” of Arendt’s political actors? If the activities in question never produced any works, then their gestural exposure in the absence of these works would render nothing inoperative, as the activities in question were not operative (or productive) to begin with. Agamben’s insistence on the inoperativity of pure means obscures for him the indistinction of ends and means already at work in Arendt’s concept of action and leads him to a one-sided affirmation of ends over means that is rather less nuanced than Arendt’s demonstration of their indetermination.

#### 4 | POWER: POTENTIALITY OR ACTUALITY?

Let us now consider the question of possibility or potentiality. As we have seen, for Agamben gesture opens action to a “new, possible use,” just as pure means “explore, sound out, and show forth all the possibilities of which it is capable, without ever exhausting them” (Agamben, 2019, p. 82). This is why Agamben refers to Albert the Great’s discussion of mimes and dancers as exemplars of the mode of being that characterizes potentiality: “The evolutions that mimes carry out are the rotating completion of their rotating being, and the dance of dancers who dance together in a scene is the completion of their ability to dance and of their potential to dance as potential” (Albert the Great cited in Agamben, 2019, p. 82).

Agamben does not comment on the notion of completion (*perfectio*) in this quotation, but it clearly resonates with his own earlier attempt to conceive of a potentiality that would not be exhausted in its actualization but would rather pass into actuality *as* potential. In Agamben’s reading of Aristotle, “material” or “possible” potentiality of, for example, a child who cannot write but may potentially become a poet is distinguished from a “perfect potentiality” of, for example, a poet, who already *can* write poetry but does *not* do so (Agamben, 1999, p. 247). Only the latter potentiality is truly worthy of the name, insofar as it retains its potential for being “impotential,” for *not* passing into actuality. Thus,

potentiality necessarily “maintains itself in relation to its own privation, its own *steresis*, its own non-Being” (Agamben, 1999, p. 182). This permits Agamben to identify potentiality with his other favored concept of inoperativity: “The only coherent way to understand inoperativeness is to think of it as a generic mode of potentiality that is not exhausted in a *transitus de potentia ad actum*” (Agamben, 1998, p. 62). By implication, this entails that for Agamben the only way to manifest potentiality without exhausting it in the act is by rendering this act inoperative.

The activity of dancers, in which every relation to an end is rendered inoperative, exposes their potentiality to dance, explores the possibilities available to them without exhausting them. Just as gesture, dance is a pure means that is not related to any end but simply exposes itself as potential. “Dance is the perfect exhibition of the pure potential of the human body” (Agamben, 2019, p. 82). Insofar as they manifest potentiality without exhausting it in the actualization of any end, gesture and dance thus offer a paradigm of human activity or even human existence in general that is no longer tied to the juridical sense of *actio*, which, as we have seen, assesses actions in terms of their consequences and imputes responsibility for them to subjects. Insofar as dancers and mimes take up and manifest their gestures and moves without in any way willing or choosing them as means to an end, they could not possibly be held responsible for them.

In his book-length discussion of Pulcinella, a character of *commedia dell'arte* that serves as an embodiment of his many key concepts, from form-of-life to inoperativity (cf. Kotsko, 2020, pp. 186–189), Agamben explicitly rejects the possibility of any imputation of responsibility and guilt to this figure, whose gag “is not a chargeable action, it entails no responsibility” (Agamben, 2018, pp. 64). Pulcinella is not to blame for his features, his voice or his activities (Agamben, 2018, p. 115), none of which he has willed or chosen: “Pulcinella has chosen nothing: he is that which has never chosen to do or be—not even by mistake” (Agamben, 2018, p. 49). In contrast to the tragic split that defines the subject of action, this theatrical character is always already innocent. Thus, Agamben concludes that “praxis—human life—is not a trial (an *actio*) but rather a *mysterion* in the theatrical sense of the term, made of gestures and words” (Agamben, 2019, p. 83).

In this sentence, Agamben still uses the word “praxis,” even as one page later he will offer gesture as a “third kind” of action beyond poiesis and praxis. While Arendt is no longer mentioned at this point in the chapter, the contrast is presumably still between her concept of action and Agamben’s own. Yet, as we have seen, Arendt’s concept of action entirely eschews the juridical sense of *actio* and is not even primarily derived from this verb, whose meaning she in any case interprets differently and traces to “setting in motion” and “leading” rather than a trial or a ritual. Moreover, in her interpretation of the Greek polis Arendt explicitly rejects the idea that lawmaking belongs to the sphere of action, placing it instead in the sphere of work: “the laws, like the wall around the city, were not results of action but products of making” (Arendt, 1998, p. 194–195). Legislative activity clearly has its end outside itself and, while it may lay foundations for action in the polis, it does not itself exemplify action. This is why for the Greeks it did not matter that the legislator could be a noncitizen: since his activity was contained in the product (law), the origin and other attributes of the legislator mattered little for politics: “his work was not political; political life, however, could begin only after he had finished his legislation” (Arendt, 1998, p. 64, fn 65). The elevation of lawmaking to the rank of supreme political activity by Greek philosophers resulted from the fateful confusion between action and work in philosophical discourse and accounts for the eventual degradation of action in Western societies.

Insofar as it consists in self-revelation through words and deeds in the public space of appearance, Arendt’s understanding of action is certainly closer to *mysterion* rather than to *actio* in Agamben’s preferred sense (Arendt, 1998, pp. 192–194). Yet, rather than define action as theatrical, Arendt defines theatre as *imitation* of action. For her, “the theatre is the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art” (Arendt, 1998, p. 188). Nonetheless, this transposition is only attained by imitation or mimesis: in Greek tragedy, only the chorus does not imitate:

the specific revelatory quality of action and speech, the implicit manifestation of the agent and speaker is so indissolubly tied to the living flux of acting and speaking that it can be represented and “reified” only through a kind of repetition, which according to Aristotle prevails in all arts, but is actually

appropriate only to the drama, whose very name (from the Greek verb *dran*, “to act”) indicates that playacting actually is an imitation of acting. (Arendt, 1998, p. 187)

While Agamben wishes to derive his “third kind” of action from the theatrical performance of mime and dance, Arendt performs the reverse gesture of interpreting theatrical art as an imitation of action.

Why is it that theatre can only imitate, however faithfully, action in the public space? It is precisely because action does not execute a model or produce a work that it possesses an *unpredictability* that theatrical performance, guided by the script of the play, could not possibly attain. It is precisely this unpredictability that renders the space of action irreducibly *potential*. It is notable that while Agamben criticizes Arendt’s account of action as sheer actuality at the end of Chapter 28 “Power and the Space of Appearance,” he does *not* discuss her treatment of the potentiality of action earlier in the same chapter, where she explicitly presents the space of appearance constituted in action as a site for the manifestation of potentiality or, in her terminology, *power*.

Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence. [The] word itself, its Greek equivalent *dynamis*, like the Latin potential with its various modern derivatives or the German *Macht*, indicates its potential character. Power is always, as we would say, a power potential and not an unchangeable, measurable and reliable entity like force and strength. While strength is the natural quality of an individual seen in isolation, power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse. Because of this peculiarity, which power shares with all potentialities which can only be actualized but never fully materialized, power is to an astonishing degree independent of material factors, either of numbers or means (Arendt, 1998, p. 200; see also Arendt, 1977, pp. 245–247)

There is a clear resonance between this fragment and Agamben’s understanding of pure means as manifestations of potentiality that renders all works inoperative and exposes itself as such. This fragment also suggests that Arendt’s approach to power succeeds in the task that Agamben has posed since his earliest works on potentiality, that is, thinking potentiality that exists in actuality as such: “Contrary to the traditional idea of potentiality that is annulled in actuality, here we are confronted with a potentiality that conserves itself and saves itself in actuality. Here potentiality, so to speak, survives actuality and, in this way, gives itself to itself” (Agamben, 1999, p. 184)

On the one hand, as we have seen, Arendt’s action is “sheer actuality” or *energeia*, since it leaves no work behind and has its end in itself; yet, on the other hand, action is entirely contained in the manifestation of potentiality (*dynamis*) of speech and action in the public space of appearance. What is actual is therefore potentiality itself, but not as actualized and thereby exhausted potential, but as something only actualized *as* potential. This is why Arendt insists that “power, like action, is boundless” (Arendt, 1998, p. 201): while boundless strength is difficult to conceive of, it is easy to imagine how power can grow endlessly, even and perhaps especially when it is divided: “power can be divided without decreasing it and the interplay of powers with their checks and balances is even liable to generate more power, so long, at least, as the interplay is alive and has not resulted in a stalemate (Arendt, 1998, p. 201). This boundlessness is what makes power relatively independent of “numbers or means”: as long as power is understood not as the actualization or materialization of the potential but rather the manifestation of its existence, it has no need of means since it already contains its own end.

Yet, in contrast to Agamben, Arendt’s affirmation of potentiality does not identify it with inoperativity, because she does not approach action as an operation to begin with. The stories and poems recounting past actions are not the products of action itself but works produced only when the action has expired and thereby lost its unpredictable and hence potential character (Arendt, 1998, pp. 192–194). An unfolding action, in which the means-end relation is dissolved, only exposes itself and produces no work, so there is nothing that could be rendered inoperative in it. Just as pure means and pure end are indistinguishable when no longer related to each other, potentiality and actuality become indiscernible in the space of action, which is only potential as actual and only actual as potential. In contrast,

Agamben's insistence on equating potentiality with inoperativity leads him to affirm potentiality over actuality, whereby possibilities are only exhibited in the repetitive and exaggerated manner of Pulcinella's gags rather than acted on in unpredictable ways.

## 5 | PARODY: POLITICS OR PANTOMIME?

We have demonstrated that Agamben's critique of Arendt's concept of action misses its target on three occasions pertaining, respectively, to the question of the end in itself, pure means, and potentiality. On none of these three occasions, Agamben engages with the specificities of Arendt's own argument, venturing instead to debunk her argument indirectly, with reference either to Aristotle or to the etymology of the verb *actio*. In this manner, his critique omits precisely those aspects of Arendt's approach that come closest to his own "third" paradigm and thereby considerably overstates the novelty of the latter.

This does not mean that the two authors' concepts of action are identical, but only that Agamben's approach does not really amount to an alternative to Arendt's. His "third kind" of action is at once very close to Arendt's concept in its emphasis on potentiality and self-exposure and clearly distinct from it in its choice of examples: it is too close to constitute an alternative but too distinct to be a mere elaboration. We may suggest that what Agamben offers in *Karman* is less a move "beyond" Arendt's concept of action than a step *beside* it that is best approached as a *parody*.

In contrast to Arendt's treatment of Greek tragedy as the *mimesis* of action, Agamben treats gestural performance as primary and nonderivative, itself offering an example for political practice to emulate. Politics and theatre thus exchange places and what was resigned to imitation becomes the model to be imitated. This displacement corresponds to what Agamben has analyzed as the logic of parody, a relocation of an object or a practice to a new, unconventional or unsuitable context, which would deactivate its force and render it inoperative (Agamben, 2007a, pp. 37–51). Parody takes up a preexisting model or concept and transforms it from something serious into something comic, leaving some formal elements intact but also adding new incongruous or ridiculous ones. In this manner, Arendt's "potential space," in which human beings reveal and distinguish themselves by words and deeds, is recast as a pantomime theatre, where these words and deeds are exhibited as gestures, in which what is rendered inoperative is less the "work," which was never there to begin with, than the very actuality of the action itself. As we have demonstrated, it is precisely the question of inoperativity that truly separates Agamben from Arendt: whereas for Arendt ends and means, potentiality and actuality, are indiscernible in the space of action, Agamben persistently affirms means over ends, potentiality over actuality in order to suspend what is for him an endless pursuit of ends that resigns us to responsibility and guilt.

Since Agamben makes so much of the originary belonging of the notion of *actio* to a juridical and religious context, its parodic relocation to the theatrical context offers a good example of what he termed *profanation*, a form of parody that deactivates the canonical use of actions and objects and opens them to a new use (Agamben, 2007a, pp. 73–74). "To profane means to open the possibility of a special form of negligence that ignores separation, or, rather, puts it to a particular use" (2007a, p. 75). The expectation is that this negligence will liberate the potentialities of action that its separation in a privileged context, for example, of law or religion, limited and contained.

Inoperativity is not inert; on the contrary, it allows the very potentiality that has manifested itself in the act to appear. It is not potentiality that is deactivated in inoperativity but only the aims and modalities into which its exercise has been inscribed and separated. And it is this potentiality that can now become the organ of a new possible use. (Agamben, 2010, p. 102)

However, this is where we encounter a problem. It appears that the *only* new use that Agamben can demonstrate for his "third kind" of action is the performance of dancers and mimes. Even the "divine violence" that was another example of pure means is ultimately explained by analogy with the gesticulations of a mime, as there does not seem to be another way to conceive of a violence that serves no end whatsoever. While Agamben's earlier examples of play and

profanation were often bemusing, they at least clearly demonstrated the dissociation of the activity from the production of a work: a cat playing with a ball of wool without knitting anything (Agamben, 2007a, pp. 85–86) or Bucephalus reading the law books without applying the law (Agamben, 2005, p. 63). Yet, in a parody of action such a dissociation cannot be demonstrated, since there was no work to be produced there to begin with. The effect of Agamben's profaning parody is thus a dissociation of action not from work, but from its subject. In his reading of *Pulcinella*, Kotsko suggested that the book, which recapitulates the key themes of Agamben's thought, may be a form of self-parody (Kotsko, 2020, p. 189), albeit a 'serious' one, insofar as "the perfect comprehension of the phenomenon is its parody" (Agamben, 2013, p. 5). While this might indeed be the case, the book's protagonist also exemplifies nothing less than a parody of the self, of the subject of action as conceived of by Arendt: "[The] action that, according to an ancient and venerable tradition, is the place of politics, no longer has a place, has lost its subject and its substance. Calling into question the primacy of praxis, *Pulcinella* recalls that there is politics beyond or before action" (Agamben, 2018, p. 65).

And yet, this politics beyond or before action has no other content than the displacement of action itself into the sphere of gestures, where it is dissociated from the subject and rendered inoperative. Agamben's insistence on inoperativity as the principle of his "third kind" of action does indeed lead to the loss of both the subject and the substance of politics, which ends up stuck in a loop of exposing its gestures: "[*Pulcinella*] does nothing but say the impossibility of speaking and does nothing than the impossibility of action. Each time, he bears witness to the fact that one can neither act an action, nor speak a word—that living life is impossible and that this impossibility is the political task par excellence" (Agamben, 2018, p. 66). While parody might well be an appropriate mode of expressing this impossibility, it is by definition incapable of overcoming it and instead keeps reenacting it as its own supreme gesture.

This is why this paradigm does not illuminate a wider series of profane and inoperative (non-) subjects, but keeps revolving around *Pulcinella* himself, as well as his derivatives from Punch to Bugs Bunny. In the conclusion to *Pulcinella*, Agamben imagines the author of the drawings, Giandomenico, looking back on his own life and realizing that "he would like to live it like *Pulcinella*, without inquiring into its meaning, its outcome or its failure" (Agamben, 2018, p. 122). And yet, it is difficult to see how anyone *but* *Pulcinella* could live like that: "'I' cannot live—only *Pulcinella* can" (Agamben, 2018, p. 125). *Pulcinella* is thus not simply a particularly apposite example of Agamben's politics beyond action, but literally its *only* example: to go beyond action is to *become* *Pulcinella*, a subject of parody whose gestures cannot be imputed to it and which knows neither responsibility nor guilt.

Nonetheless, the benefits of this parodic distancing for our understanding and practice of politics are difficult to ascertain. It appears that in his desire to free action from its reduction to the trial of *actio* Agamben ends up throwing the baby out with the bathwater, dispensing with every notion of subjectivity and responsibility in the process. While Arendt would certainly agree that "human life" is indeed "not a trial but a *mysterion*," her account of this *mysterion* is much richer and more meaningful than Agamben's reduction of every deed to gesture, whose political, let alone emancipatory, significance is anyone's guess. Her understanding of action as performance highlights the way in which the pure actuality of action, which produces no work aside from itself, is at the same time irreducibly potential, opening, and multiplying possibilities rather than working to attain some end, final, or intermediate. The *mysterion* of human action is radically open-ended, its indeterminacy only partially mitigated by our faculty of making promises (Arendt, 1998, pp. 243–247).

Agamben's parody of Arendt's concept cannot but efface this open-ended character of human existence. Gestures cannot be unpredictable by definition, as their very recognition *as* gestures depends on their familiar and repetitive character. By the same token, a new beginning that the open-endedness of action makes possible is unattainable in gesture, which must have always already begun to become available to a mime. The price for freeing the subject from any responsibility for its actions is the reduction of these actions to pantomime, in which the idle repetition of gestures and words in a "[squeaky] voice similar to Donald Duck's" (Agamben, 2018, p. 45) comes to replace self-disclosure in discourse and deeds.

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