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## Listening to the Unsaid: Giorgio Agamben and the Politics of the Human Voice

### Abstract

The article aims to critically analyze Giorgio Agamben's philosophy of the human voice—his early contribution to the academic debate on speaking and listening. I reconstruct both Agamben's critique of the traditional metaphysical approach to the human voice and his theory of infancy, conceived as an alternative mode of conceptualizing voice and aimed at reformulating speaking and listening as unifying experiences beyond particular languages and linguistic identities.

### Keywords

Giorgio Agamben, Walter Benjamin, Voice, Infancy

### Introduction

In a preface to the English translation of *Infanzia e storia* [*Infancy and History*], one of Giorgio Agamben's earliest works, the author asks: "Is there a human voice, a voice that is the voice of man as the chirp is the voice of the cricket or the bray is the voice of the donkey? And, if it exists, is this voice language?" (Agamben 1993, 3). Inquiring about the ontological status of something apparently as unproblematic as the human voice might be surprising, but Agamben argues that this phenomenon is far more complex than our common sense and philosophical tradition tend to assume. He is not the first to question the unproblematic nature of voice; Jacques Derrida's deconstruction had already offered a systematic critique of this assumption, which exposed unreflective phonocentrism as the default mode of Western meta-

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physics at least from Aristotle on. As famously argued by Derrida, the relation of speaking-listening has commonly been prioritized by philosophers over writing-reading as a quasi-transcendental mode of human expression that acts in the image and likeness of internal monologue without the alienating mediation of language signs required by the written word (Derrida 1973). As such, it has been made into the substantialist foundation of the human subject, the *zōon lōgon échon* of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. However, Derrida deconstructed this long-lasting insistence on immediacy and the "transparency" of the human voice as merely a metaphysical phantasm that fails to acknowledge the complex processes of separation and differentiation that disturb the production of speech just as much as they do in writing.

Agamben follows Derrida's intuition (although, as we will see, not without some serious reservations) to argue that despite this appreciation, the human voice has long been a "blind spot" in Western metaphysics: while philosophers indeed appreciated the use of linguistic symbols as an exclusively human faculty, the emission and reception of sounds stayed underrated as an animal trace in our nature. Even in today's humanities, post-metaphysical in their anti-transcendental stance on language, verbal expression is still taken for granted because modern analytical linguistics tends to favor the empirical study of "hard" language signs over a more original reflection on the very human disposition to speak and listen, an apparently trivial *factum loquendi*. It is worse than a crime; it is a mistake, argues Agamben, and reminds us that our speech is far from obvious and very different from the speech of other animals. Even if we cannot identify the meaning of the words we hear (spoken, for example, in a foreign language unknown to us), we do not think of them as meaningless sounds. We know that they convey a meaningful message to those who understand the language and can decode them. Thus, human verbal expression is much more than a pure biological voice emission: unlike the natural *phōnē* of other animals, says Agamben, it is by inference significant; it always already conveys some meaning. As such, the ambivalent phenomenon of voice needs to be critically examined by each language ontology that seeks to understand humans as linguistic beings.

However, let us add that such ontology's actual stakes are much higher. Agamben contends that critical work on language is, by inference, political because it explores how the biological and social dispositions of *homo sapiens loquendi* condition our being together. Consequently, it might serve to reformulate the theoretical frameworks of community to make this notion much more inclusive. His main argument is that although the voice is a uni-

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versal human property or even the “common good” of all humankind, regardless of spoken languages, ethnic/national identities, and other political divisions, at the same time, the voice is entangled in complex power relations, and cannot help but act as an instrument of separation, alienation or exclusion. That is why one of the main objectives of Agamben’s philosophy is to think of the voice anew, liberate it from the entrapment in competing, exclusivist language systems, and search for the communalizing potential of speaking and listening. To be precise, he seeks to convince us that listening to others, no matter what language they speak, may only be a universalizing, community-building experience if we first realize that underneath the surface of semiotic and semantic distinctions, there is always the common ground of our voice. In order to do this, we must learn to hear this voice, not only the torrents of words it incessantly generates; we must be able to “listen” to our linguistic being unmediated by the production of meaningful speech. This thesis, let us notice, is equally critical of the phonocentric tradition and its Derridean deconstruction; the latter, argues Agamben, although offering valid criticism of the metaphysical theories of language, is essentially optimistic about linguistic fragmentation and echoes its object of critique in acknowledging signification as an imperative property of human language. Agamben’s project challenges this common signification-centered ground and objects to prioritizing the content of speech; instead, it affirms its overlooked core: the original, universal experience of being able to speak and listen, which goes way beyond the semantic distinctions generated by multiple alphabets. Only by the appreciation of this linguistic “communism,” he insists, the human voice may finally act as a truly unifying force.<sup>1</sup>

That said, my article aims to analyze Agamben’s theory of voice critically and argue that it might serve as a valuable contribution to the philosophical debate on speaking and listening. I seek to reconstruct both his critique and the affirmative reinterpretation of the human voice to do this. As the most elaborate reflections on this notion are to be found in two of his early works: the 1978 *Infanzia e storia* and the 1983 *Il linguaggio e la morte* [*Language and Death*],<sup>2</sup> my analysis is mainly focused on these two pieces, with only occasional references to his later texts. Perhaps the most significant source

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<sup>1</sup> Although Agamben’s reflections on language are generally more concerned with literature than art, he occasionally suggests that especially visual arts might serve to reformulate speaking and listening beyond the paradigm of signification and think of human language in a non-identitarian manner (see Agamben 1992).

<sup>2</sup> In the text I refer to the English translations of these two works: *Language and Death* (1991) and *Infancy and History* (1993).

of inspiration for Agamben's theory is Walter Benjamin's philosophical linguistics which offers an intriguing stimulus to think of language in non-significative terms. Thus, my paper aims to demonstrate both the Benjaminian background of Agamben's linguistic project and a bold elaboration of Benjamin's intuitions through his theory of voice. To do it, I first reconstruct Agamben's critique of what he calls "Voice" and show how the metaphysical "machine" structures our perception of speaking and listening. Second, I analyze his project of deactivating this machine by exploring the notion of infancy, which is supposed to challenge the signification-centered imperative of human speech. Finally, I offer a critical appraisal of his theory of voice and expose some serious ethical dilemmas involved in it.

### Diagnosis

The issue raised in a preface to *Infancy and History* is confronted by Agamben's next book, *Language and Death*, where voice acts as a prism through which Western metaphysics has theorized the relation of the human-animal to *logos*. Agamben argues that what we commonly call the "human voice" is a "no-man's-land between sound and signification" (Agamben 1991, 33), a topologically indeterminate link of natural, not-yet-significant acoustic signals with the signifying *actus loquendi*. As such, it might as well be called a threshold between the "animal" (emission of sounds) and the "human" (production of meaningful speech). Agamben refers to the classics of German idealism, who interpreted voice as an anthropogenetic force to support his thesis. For Herder, he notes, the human voice originates from the scream of a dying animal or of what is "animal" in a human; for Hegel, the sublation of the natural order symbolized by this scream initiates human self-consciousness which has to transcend the immediacy of nature to ground the subject, *homo sapiens loquendi*, in language (Agamben 1991, 48).<sup>3</sup> It might be argued then that the moment our language is born is also the moment when the natural voice we share with other animals is negated to make room for the abstract sign system. In other words, *langue* cannot help but terminate the intimate relation which has linked us to our linguistic being and alienates humans from their original expression, from the production of sounds unmediated by symbols.

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<sup>3</sup> The originals to be found in *Über den Ursprung der Sprache* (Herder 1965, 27); and *Jenenser Realphilosophie*, vol. 2: *Die Vorlesungen von 1805–1806* (Hegel 1931, 161).

Agamben's central thesis is that Western metaphysics' erasure of the animal voice has been made into the foundation of human subjectivity, with natural sounds suspended and subjected to what he terms Voice, capitalized to emphasize its onto-theological connotations. This notion no longer designates the biological apparatus conditioning verbal communication. Instead, it is a metaphysical construct that defines humans as speaking beings, the beings constituted by silencing their original, immediate sound expression. Agamben argues that this is the price to pay for passing the threshold between animal and human—the threshold which Western metaphysics only allows the crossing of once, then persistently safeguarding the anthropological difference generated by this passage (Agamben 1991, 45-47). The Voice as such is a norm of humanity or a way the philosophical tradition constructs the human as a subject: the being qualitatively different from the rest of animals and irreducible to its animality.

Even more importantly, the transition from voice into Voice, this overlooked foundation of Western metaphysics, marks the origin of signification as a paradigm of human speech. Consequently, our being-in-language is never a natural, not-yet-meaningful experience of human's linguistic nature but a "pure intention to signify" (Agamben 1991, 33), already a desire to articulate some meaning. Agamben argues that this imperative of signification founds human subjects on double negativity or double exclusion. On the one hand, it calls for the suspension of the original *phōnē*, which stays inexpressible and subjected to Voice. On the other hand, the Voice, as the transcendental condition of our speech, cannot be captured by the sign system, making it an imperceptible (and unreflected) horizon of human *logos*, the non-place of language. As a result, human speech is by its nature aporetic, so close to the human-animal and yet separated from it by an unbridgeable gap. That is why *Language and Death* cannot help but eventually answer the opening question of *Infancy and History* in a highly ambiguous way: yes, there must be a human voice because there is speech, but if the speech entirely depends on the Voice, this constitutional "forgetting" of *phōnē*, is the human voice truly ours?

One might ask why this original moment of separation is vital to Agamben. Apparently, for two reasons, both of which are political. First, contends Agamben, language founded on the Voice, this "original mythologeme of metaphysics" (Agamben 1991, 85), starts to act in the image and likeness of a powerful sovereign whose ruling is based on the classical maxim of *divide et impera*, thus laying the ground for all further divisions and separations that hopelessly stigmatize the lives of humans as speaking beings. In other

words, the Voice is the negative foundation of our human condition. As long as its machinery is not deactivated or at least challenged, any radically inclusive community (like the community of all humankind or humans and other animals) cannot help but remain phantasmatic. Second, although the language of signs constituted by the Voice machine is supposed to be an instrument of subjectivation, it acts as an objectifying force. Our conventional language, the language as we know it, is a prisoner of signification: if there is always some object of communication, some message to transmit, the speakers (and listeners) are nothing but instruments of this transmission. To be potentially non-objectifying, argues Agamben, the act of speech must go beyond signification towards the intimate experience of language and our experience as speaking beings. However, how do we let language speak through us in a world of signification? How do we realize that before language communicates anything to us, the language is? This question is confronted in *Infancy and History*, where Agamben seeks to theorize the universal experience of speaking and listening beyond the semantic distinctions generated by multiple alphabets. This area of his philosophical linguistics also seems most inspired by Benjamin's critiques of language. That is why, before moving on to Agamben's idea of infancy, let us briefly discuss its Benjaminian background.

## Remedy

Benjamin's idea of language is most elaborately expounded in the 1916 *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* [*On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*] and the 1923 *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* [*The Task of the Translator*], the pieces directed against theorizing language merely as a means of communication. Benjamin argues that all instrumental theories of language, which he calls "bourgeois" (Benjamin 1996a, 65), are so focused on what we speak about that they miss something much more fundamental: the very fact that we speak. As such, they are too reductionist to grasp the nature of human language, which goes far beyond the transmission of messages. To meditate on this nature, Benjamin distinguishes between communication "through language" (*durch die Sprache*) and "in language" (*in der Sprache*) (Benjamin 1996a, 63). Whereas for the former, language is a means, an external mediator of communication, for the latter, it is a reservoir of communication, thanks to which the communication is direct, immediate, and non-instrumental. But what is to be communicated in language if there is no external message? As argued by Benjamin, only "pure

language," which "no longer expresses anything" (Benjamin 1996b, 261), "knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication" (Benjamin 1996a, 65). This linguistic essence, however, can only be heard if the acts of speaking and listening are not wholly (and hopelessly) saturated with meaning, if "language communicates itself" (Benjamin 1996a, 63) and nothing else.

Benjamin's conception of pure language, intriguing yet somehow obscure (how do we use voice and produce speech without communicating anything?), is taken up and elaborated in *Infancy and History*, where Agamben seeks to theorize the universal experience of speaking and listening beyond linguistic fragmentation. There, he comes up with a simple but ingenious idea that pure language, if it does exist, is most likely to be found at the threshold of our linguistic being: in infancy, understood as the fleeting moment when the human voice has not yet been subjected to the machine of Voice. Agamben provides two main arguments to support his thesis. First, he contends, thanks to the fact that infants do not yet produce meaningful speech, they can immerse themselves in language to an extent unachievable ever again (Agamben 1993, 50). Their babbling and quasi-words need no semiotic exteriorization, which is why no separation practices are involved in the production of infantile "speech." As a result, the living being coincides here (at least for a short while) with the speaking being, from which it will unavoidably be alienated once the machine of Voice is put into motion. Second, and no less importantly, infancy marks when our original disposition to speak has not yet been diminished by confining it to just one or several languages. Thanks to their inborn linguistic competence, Agamben notes, infants can say anything in any language (Agamben 1993, 51–52). It is only in acquiring grammar and vocabulary that this original *potenza* is actualized in a highly reductionist way, "as if the acquisition of language were possible only through an act of oblivion, a kind of linguistic infantile amnesia" (Heller-Roazen 2008, 11). Thus, as we can see, infancy is not theorized by Agamben as a state of deficiency that is supposed to be promptly terminated by learning words but, quite the opposite, as the greatest potentiality of language, worth reflecting on and affirming as a unique chance to experience the nature of our human language beyond particular linguistic (and political) identities.

Let us notice, however, that as long as the infantile experience of using the voice beyond signification were thought of in a purely chronological manner, as the very first phase of human psychosomatic development, which elapses when the child is constituted as a proper subject of language,

it would be philosophically fruitless. The ontogenetic axis of human life is one-way only: to put it bluntly, we cannot unlearn how to speak and perhaps should not want to be able to. This inability is why Agamben makes it clear that the infancy he mediates on shall be understood kairologically: as the origin to be sought inside rather than before language, or, as he puts it elsewhere, as “a present where we have never been” (Agamben 2009, 52), the present which might open up for us when we stop pondering over speaking and listening in significative terms only. This assumption is yet another point where he follows Benjamin, whose *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* [*The Origin of German Tragic Drama*] famously offered an unchronological theory of the origin which conceptualized the titular notion non-genetically. As Benjamin argues, a philosophically productive concept of origin is not to be considered as the inception of some phenomena at a particular moment in time but, instead, as “an eddy in the stream of becoming” (Benjamin 2003, 45), an operative an-archistic force shaking the current state of affairs from the inside and thus making us reflect on them anew. This force is precisely what Agamben’s infancy is ultimately about: we must first retrieve our long-forgotten voice and explore the repressed potentialities of speech to think of language as a universal, communalizing property beyond all its separations generates. In short, we must be able to see infants in ourselves.

But how do we do it? How do we “regress” to infancy once we have acquired a linguistic competence for better and for worse? By babbling and making inarticulate sounds instead of producing meaningful speech that we are used to? To avoid such a nonsensical conclusion, Agamben clarifies that the only infant-like condition accessible to us, language users, is the experience of wordlessness, the opening of our voice to the moments of silence and immersing ourselves in muteness. As argued in *Infancy and History*, it is precisely the ability to silence our speech and deactivate the machine of signification that distinguishes *homo sapiens loquendi* from other animals which cannot help but “speak”: even if they produce no sounds, they keep exchanging soundless messages and are always in a significative mode, although unmediated by any semiotic system (Agamben 1993, 47-48). Unlike them, humans are the only speaking beings able to make the semantic machinery inoperative and “non-speak”: fall silent “in their very possibility of speech” (Agamben 1999a, 46), thus making the proper use of their infantile linguistic potentiality. That is why the remnant of our voice is, paradoxically, only to be found in muteness, at the moment when we hear no words produced by others or by ourselves, thanks to which we can finally “listen” to our universal linguistic nature and the very fact that we are capable of speaking even if we choose not to do it.



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## Conclusion

Agamben's exploration of "the capacity to speak solely in the name of an incapacity to speak" (Agamben 1999a, 58) is a valid complement to his kairological conception of infancy. At the same time, however, it is the most problematic point of his speculations on "pure language," which involves some serious ethical doubts. Why is that? If, as Agamben argues, the distinguished mode of our being in a language is to be sought in the "silence of the word itself" (Agamben 1995, 113), at the threshold of speaking and non-speaking, it should be inferred that this mode is only available to those who can both speak and non-speak. But what about people suffering from aphasia who are, for whatever reasons, unable to produce speech although having the inborn linguistic competence? The people immersed in silence, for better and for worse, who cannot spontaneously fluctuate between these two modes of our being in language? Are they, for this reason, excluded from the reputedly all-inclusive domain of pure language, which, as we remember, is supposed to be the universalizing property beyond all the separations generated by multiple linguistic systems? Unfortunately, Agamben fails to confront this dilemma. His readers are somehow left troubled by the fact that in one of his most famous (and most controversial) books, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz* [*The Remnants of Auschwitz*], he speculates on the emancipatory potential of muteness in the context of Shoah, and juxtaposes the natalistic figure of the infant with the thanatic figure of *Muselmann*—both suspended at the threshold of language yet so infinitely different in the incorporation of non-speaking to their "speech."

Regardless of these dilemmas and some aporias integral to the kairological idea of infancy, Agamben's linguistic project elaborated in his early works remains a thought-provoking variation on Benjamin's "pure language," challenging the phonocentric legacy of Western metaphysics and its Derridean deconstruction both. What it advocates, as we have seen, is to flee from the prison of meaning by immersing in the original potentiality of speech prior to any signification since "language, which for human beings mediates all things and all knowledge, is itself immediate" (Agamben 1999b, 47). This potentiality is found in the infantile non-place of human language, in the spontaneous event of *logos* unmediated by semiotics and semantics, and thereby common to all human animals regardless of their particular cultural identities. This community is what precisely is finally at stake in Agamben's philosophical quest: to realize that somewhere beyond the separating Voice machine, there is always the unifying experience of our "little" voice, which

might be used to think of a more universal, non-exclusive mode of being together, irreducible to any national or ethnic communities based on a language. Because speaking and listening to multiple particular languages may only be an instrument of understanding and solidarity if we first open ourselves to the “infantile” linguistic condition that we share with all other humans and learn to “listen” to it in an attentive, unprejudiced way. As argues Agamben, “what unites human beings among themselves is not a nature or a common imprisonment in the signifying language; it is the vision of language itself” (Agamben 1999b, 47): a pure, non-objectifying being in a language without any presuppositions, distinctions or separations. If there is any “speech” worth listening to, it is definitely this one.

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