

ALL (BUT) NAMES - or how bare is bare life?

A question. Will you be surprised if we tell you that bare life is just a mimetic gesture? Or even just a philosophical mimicry?

Bare life = Invention of bare life and related propedeutic matters

Just imagine. Imagine a well-known philosopher sitting at his desk. Imagine him living 200 years ago, Prussia. Imagine him having difficulties with a particular sentence. The title of his final, definitive work on religion. Imagine this to be an experiment, says he.

He begins, "regarding the title of this work (for doubts have been expressed about the intention concealed thereunder)..."

Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone, Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason.

A thought-experiment. To displace, dislocate the adjective. From a tentative, most likely title - just, or mere or pure rational religion - to the published one, religion within the bounds of bare reason.

If you cannot, or if you are not allowed to write down and publish the first title, what then the latter means? What is bare reason? What is reason alone?

Bare reason, syntactical dislocation. Itself denominating nothing, to be proven just by simple experiments. Invoking none of the known branches of reason.

The philosopher says, "to understand this book in its essential content, only common morality is needed, without meddling with the Critique of Practical Reason, still less with the theoretical Critique."

Bare reason, common morality. Common, base, bare morality.

And how then to comprehend this experimental, base, common, bare and non-definable morality? Think of it as the most popular children's instruction and sermon, says he, the philosopher.

You cannot think bare reason. You cannot act according to it. You can experiment with it, instructing and preaching - taking shelter under the guise of that (fictitious) non-entity called bare reason.

Shall we say that this experiments - dislocations, displacements - have been brought about by censorship, by state-power, sovereignty?

And that this adjective "bare" had been invented within that singular title, within that peculiar syntactical dislocation? Invented to prevent state-intervention - mimicking, dislocating, experimenting (with itself, bare and alone).

Mimicry, mimetic behaviour - the most rudimentary and highest of human faculties. Was it not Benjamin who said that?

Bare reason (not-yet-name and still not an action) has been invented to by-pass and to fight sovereignty, without to know the outcomes of all that experimentation.

The way do put those experiments at trial - to fight sovereignty - was clear for the Prussian philosopher. It meant to question religion and the radical evil.

Will you be surprised if we say that another philosopher, almost exactly 200 years after the Prussian one, fails to mention former's invention, and his experiments?

Fails to mention even the title, most probably the only other one including this strange adjective - bare?

Or, is this just a philosophical mimicry?

Bare life = mere possibility

At some moment bare life became indistinguishable. Or was it rather the story of how bare life became indistinguishable that itself became indiscernible?

Bare life, a mere linguistic possibility, touching upon the bases of the Western thought, philosophers say to us, addressing us in our utmost potentiality. So they say.

Esti de dynaton touto, hoi ean hyparxei hē energeia ou legetai ekhein tēn dynamēn, ouden estai adynaton. (Aristotle, Metaphysics, 1047 a 24-26)

And a thing is capable of doing something if there will be nothing impossible in its having the actuality of that of which it is said to have the capacity. [English translation by W. D. Ross]

a. "Here we have again one of the unprecedented and determining essential insights, through which Aristotle for the first time illuminates a previously obscure realm. In this concise statement, every word is significant. With Aristotle the greatest philosophical knowledge of antiquity is expressed. A knowledge which even today remains unappreciated and misunderstood in philosophy". [Heidegger, 1931]

b. "The answer Aristotle gives to this question is contained in two lines that, in their brevity, constitute an extraordinary testament to Aristotle's genius. In the philosophical tradition, however, Aristotle's statement has gone almost entirely unnoticed". [Agamben, 1986]

Is it ironic, strange or whatever that in referring to something unnoticed, forgotten and misunderstood - and this something, by chance, constitutes the greatest philosophical insight and a testament to an extraordinary genius - a philosopher does not acknowledge his source, omits to put quotation marks? As if truth is just that which is bare of quotation marks.

Even more. What if the matter itself - definition of potentiality - forces someone to omit quotation marks, to forget, neglect tradition, heritage and genealogy?

What if the effort to define possibility beyond its mere status, that is - as a capable possibility or potentiality beyond its bare and immediate meaning, gets obfuscated by the rhetorics needed for such a definition?

What if this effort to go beyond mere possibility is itself mere?

Mere possibility, philosophers would like us to believe, is not just something common-sensical, but it is also highly perceptible to manipulation, in hands of those less-equipped.

Those who misperceive possibility, taking it just as mere, will say, philosophers tell us:

You write. While you write you are able to write.

You don't write. You are not able to write.

Does it mean that a definition of potentiality - itself mere by way of quoting unacknowledgedly, by philosophical mimicry - reads as follows:

You define potentiality. While you define potentiality you are able to define it.

You don't define potentiality. You are not able to define it.

Does this mean that potentiality has to part away from philosophical definitions of it? Parting away from philosophical possibilities, mere not perfect ones? Parting away from possibilities that always get just or mere philosophical by way of failing to put quotation marks, by way of failing to cite other philosophers?

Perfection gets mere. And mere gets...

Bare life = conversion

First we take up the, so to say, negative example - expressing both the most known historical case of violence and perhaps a case where - if we are to follow Gil Anidjar's intuition - biopolitical theory touches upon its own limit.

It's the case of the Muselmann, the Muslims from Auschwitz, in regard of whom Primo Levi has said that if he could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, he would have chosen that image most familiar to him. Jews becoming Muslims, within the barbed wire of the concentration camps.

And this is the place where Anidjar's criticism of the biopolitical theory sets in, then though he will agree that it was Agamben who has "broken new ground" in his writings, offering a new perspective of such an important phenomenon like

the extermination camps, Anidjar's attention will be drawn by the circumstance that, at least for Agamben, the highly culturally saturated motif of conversion from a Jew into a Muselmann, into the Arab goes unnoticed. Anidjar argues that such a conversion is not, as it most likely seems for Agamben, just an act brought about by the purely industrial and bureaucratically rational killing of people, where Muselmann would be the figure of the most debased life. For Anidjar it is more likely that such a conversion produces a side-effect, which escapes the logic of the political as it was defined by Schmitt. Conversion of the Jew into the Arab inside the camp, though it could be hardly argued, that it is an voluntary act of subversion, nevertheless brings about the breakdown of a certain logic of the political realm, since with that conversion the possibility to differentiate among types of enmity has been stalled. Where Jews are not discernible as Europe's theological and Arabs, Muslims as Europe's political enemies... Where this distinction is subverted not due to fabrication of corpses, but precisely because of simple (nominal) conversion.

In passing, we will notice, that an analogous argument has been put by Philipp Sarasin in reference to Foucault's distinction between the archaic and the modern form of racism, as Foucault has developed that distinction in his lectures in the 70's. Then it seems that even though the new racism of the state, which for Foucault basically is life-promoting, does not need to recurr to the old-fashioned repressive standards of governance - at least provisionally it does need the back-up by the culturally charged imaginary of the old kind of racism, where the repressive social and political selection was not just a mere technological act or administrative decree, but an act embedded into the complex network of racial, ethnical, geographical and other differences.

But, then, how you will account for someone like Shabbatai Zvi - if we are to talk about something which seems to be a positive example, prefiguring formally very much the negative one within Nazi-camps? How you will account for someone who voluntarily converts. Jew becoming Arab. Jews becoming Arabs.

How to think about this life?

Bare life = radical self-definition

* Kertész

We are dealing with a problem that has been outstandingly localized by Imre Kertész in his novel *The English Flag*. What is creation, production and where lies its connection with life and memory? Which are the figures-of-production figures in the times of suspension, violence and emergency?

We quote: “We have to do our best to find out such formulations that will be universally pregnant with experience of all the diversity of the living (or catastrophe), we must find the definitions that will help in death, and yet leave something to the survivors”.

Kertész pleads for the function of life (not art) being “a radical definition” of itself in times of catastrophe (all modern times). According to him, this radical definition is oftentimes not to be found within specific work of art, for the very formulation, act, gesture, work itself, are already the only possible products of our age (after and during the catastrophe). It is in this sense that *Bartleby's* “I prefer not to” is an example of such radical definition – being an act, bare act together with its desoeuvrement.

In Kertész’s work this definition comes from the mouth of a “real man”, a Hungarian author called Ernő Szép, who defines himself with “I used to be Ernő Szép” when asked to introduce himself by his friends in times of Communist

persecution. Kertész believes that such a moment of self-definition reveals the artistic purpose, if such a thing is possible in contemporary art.

However, at another level life and art (the great art, with capital A) are inseparable and closely interwoven. These are the moments of “thunderbolt”, of a stop, of epiphany, when art enables the making of “radical definition”. Kertész says: “...never again, not even in the hugest of disasters, in the deepest awareness of catastrophe, could I live as if I’d never seen or heard Wagner’s opera Walküre....as if the world of this opera did not continue to exist, despite the catastrophe world”. From the darkness of the concert hall arises the insight that the only possible way to bridge the differences between the two worlds – art/fiction and catastrophe/reality is to work on a radical definition of singular existence.

It is the other moment of epiphany- the moment of the “The English Flag”, the passage of an English jeep through insurgent and temporarily “free” Budapest that brings about the transformation of art into life, the moment of “radical encounter” for Kertész. And the radical encounter means, “that the only possible act in this world is self-denial as an act”.

Experience of art and of life are therefore not of the same kind, not to be leveled down. We ought to focus our attention to the way the formula “I came to witness of the truth” finds its place between us and production, or in other words, the way the life production functions as an actless act, and to ask to its figures and forms of its self-analysis.

* Gould

With Gould, the point of epiphany, or the moment of radical definition, was the moment of his giving up of the concert hall. This was when he defined himself as Glenn Gould, this was when he put his life in state of self-denial through act. This was when Gould started interviewing glenn gould, which continued throughout his life. This is why his performance was virtuosic - not because of his interpretation skill, but because it became the field of re-establishment of the radical definition of himself, the establishment of the self as a figure. This is the normative situation through which Gould teaches us that virtuosity means much more than merely non-productive acting, that it is a matter of struggle with our internal witnesses and testimonies. Virtuosity as the moment of radical definition is the moment of our normative life experience becoming the experience of political act »that is already here«, offering us in return our own life as source of political power and discursive creativity.

Bare life = relation

"In order not to relate, and to break with the "logic of sovereignty" as well as with the bad infinity of iterability, of a perpetual, always renewed and always frustrated relating, one must maintain oneself in the relating of the relation. As a consequence, to speak of Auschwitz as a remainder does not just mean to relate to it through testimony. It means to become testimony and to stop testifying to something - to Auschwitz". [Alexander Garcia-Düttmann]

The punctum of biopolitical philosophy is that of religion as the privileged modus of relating. The relation between god and man is the final and the highest possible relation – both systemically and historically – before thinking fully realizes its having come into existence. At least that is what Hegel is saying. The

highest and the final relation – at the same time just a step away from what really matters. But – and that includes the entire enigma of philosophical thinking since Hegel – is the realization of philosophy possible without the realization of religion as the total, world-system? ... In terms of system, it may be thinkable, but in terms of history? Especially since Hegel, in his late lectures on the philosophy of religion, assumes nothing else than an absolutely historical fiasco of the absolutely revealed religion. And consequently, of relationality as such. He is left with no choice but to conclude that it brings us back to the epoch of late (Roman) imperialism.

The sovereign relation, as described by Agamben, describes an identical case: an absolutely immanent-relational world, in which the absolute, that is, the essential missing of truth – falsity – is still possible. Insofar the sovereign relation is still a remainder of transcendence in immanence, that is, a force that violently evicts life from the world (as relating). In that sense, Auschwitz is a (personal) name for suspending all relations, but an absolutely false one.

Auschwitz - bare name falsifying all other names. Cancelling them, liquidating. Being not-yet-name and still not an action.

Bare life = peasant's knowledge

Since Kafka we are haunted again by peasants, by their other intelligence. The way for us to come to an end will be by citing, of mimicking other ends, therefore coming to terms with bare life.

As if bare life ever needed a definition, peasant will say.

The end. Converting an Emperor of Nothing into a creature within burrow (Peter Berling, Don Fernando de Guzman, Doctor)

"One morning... at the end of October... not long before... the first drops... of the insufferably long... autumn rains... fell... on the parched... cracked ground... on the western side of the farm... so that... the stinking bog... makes the tracks... impassable... until the first frosts... and it cuts off the town too... Futaki was woken... by the sound of bells.

The closest church was... eight kilometers to the South-West... on the old Hochmeiss field... a solitary chapel... But not only was no bell there... the church tower had collapsed... during the war..." [Bela Tarr, Satantango]