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A BIOSEMIOTIC ELABORATION OF AGAMBEN'S EXPERIMENTUM LINGUAE: TOWARD AN EXPERIMENTUM SEMIOSEOS

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ABSTRACT: A BIOSEMIOTICS ELABORATION OF AGAMBEN'S EXPERIMENTUM LINGUAE: TOWARD AN EXPERIMENTUM SEMIOSEOS

This paper argues that a dialogue between biosemiotics and Giorgio Agamben's philosophy can be philosophically fruitful and illustrates this through a biosemiotic extension of Agamben's experimentum linguae. It emphasizes that both Agamben's philosophical project and the field of biosemiotics converge in their critical reflection on the relation between language and life, and in a shared - though differently formulated - effort to theorize biological life as inherently meaningful. I suggest that biosemiotics can offer a scientific grounding for Agamben's philosophy of language while also benefiting from a philosophical deepening of its conceptual implications, especially in relation to contemporary questions of politics and ethics. However, the radical nature of Agamben's philosophy of impotentiality and suspension might obstruct this dialogue. To develop their convergence and address this obstacle, I offer an interpretation of



Agamben's work that underlines the influence of non-biosemiotics modes of thought on his thinking, specifically his understanding of language. Since this influence is not neutral but specific and contingent, it opens up the opportunity to replace it with a biosemiotic alternative. I then introduce and elaborate the idea of an experimentum semioseos: an experience of semiosis as such, understood via biosemiotics as spanning both human and non-human forms of life. I argue that the long-term observation of vegetative life - particularly plants - plays a central role in making this experience possible

1. Introduction

In a preface of 1989 for the French translation of *Infanzia e storia*, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben introduced his idea of an 'experimentum linguae'. This *experimentum* concerns an

experience of language itself, in which language does not appear as a necessary system in which humans are thrown and inevitably trapped, but rather as a potentiality that can be actualized or suspended. Central to this «experience of language as such» is the indistinction between language and life, an indifference in which one cannot clearly distinguish the meaningful dimension of language from a supposedly meaningless living body¹.

While in three decades following this first introduction Agamben continued to philosophically explore the indistinction between meaning and life as part of his critique of biopolitics, the scientific investigation of this overlap also gained momentum with the rise of biosemiotics: an interdisciplinary field that studies the production and interpretation of meaning across all forms of life. Although various scientists had been studying meaning in biological systems since at least the 1960s, it was in the first decade of the twenty-first century that these separate inquiries became increasingly organized, institutionalized, and academically recognized under the name of biosemiotics². Since then, the quantity, diversity, and academic importance of both Agamben scholarship and biosemiotics has steadily increased.

Despite a great number of similarities between Agamben's philosophy and the basic principles of biosemiotics, these two discourses have barely been connected, likely due to the specific scope of their methods and disciplines. Specifically, the radical nature of Agamben's philosophy, and the ambiguous status of scientific knowledge that follows from it, seems to forestall its compatibility with biosemiotics. In response to their similarity and missed mutual engagement, this paper takes the first steps in bringing these discourses into dialogue.

¹ G. Agamben, *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience* (1978), tr. en. Verso, London 1993, p. 5.

² For discussions of the history of biosemiotics, see M. Barbieri, *A Short History of Biosemiotics*, in «Biosemiotics», Volume II, Issue 2, 2009 pp. 221-245, and see the first chapter of D. Favareau (edited by), *Essential Readings in Biosemiotics: Anthology and Commentary*, Springer, Dordrecht 2010.

This paper begins by outlining the key points of convergence between Agamben's philosophy and biosemiotics. I then present a general discussion of Agamben's concept of the *experimentum Linguae*, followed by a brief disquisition on the characteristics of Agamben's philosophy that might obstruct a dialogue with biosemiotics. In response to the similarities and problem discussed, I provide a particular interpretation of the *experimentum Linguae* and Agamben's work more generally. This specific interpretation provides the opportunity to then introduce the idea of a biosemiotically informed *experimentum Linguae*: the *experimentum semioseos*, or an experience of semiosis as such. In elaboration of this idea, I argue that the long-term observation of vegetative life - particularly plants - plays a central role in making this experience possible. I conclude that this idea of an *experimentum semioseos* showcases that biosemiotics can offer a scientific grounding for Agamben's philosophy of language while also benefiting from a philosophical deepening of its conceptual implications, especially in relation to contemporary questions of politics and ethics. Ultimately, the goal of this article is not to argue that Agamben's philosophy and biosemiotics match perfectly, but rather to show that their encounter can be philosophically fruitful and productive, and to illustrate this potential through the elaboration of an *experimentum semioseos*.

2. The similarity between Agamben and biosemiotics

This paper, and the idea it articulates, spring from an observed similarity between the core principles of biosemiotics and Agamben's philosophical project. The relevant similarity between these two discourses lies primarily in what they criticize. In the following part, I will outline the similarity of their critique. Essentially, both discourses problematize a rigid distinction between biological life and meaning. I will discuss

this problematization through two elements, namely the criticism of the idea of a 'mere and meaningless biological life', and the criticism of human language as a system isolated and separable from its natural context.

Important to note is that my discussion of biosemiotics attempts to be as general as possible by focusing on the general theses that unite biosemioticians instead of engaging with more specific topics that cause divisions within the field. It is namely in the general principles of biosemiotics that lies the similarity with Agamben's philosophy. Furthermore, what ultimately matters for this paper is the compatibility of Agamben's philosophy with the biosemiotic paradigm in contrast to non-biosemiotic approaches to biology. Only as such the philosophical insights of Agamben's work can be upheld while also leaving space for the internal discussions and frictions that any scientific field requires for progress.

Concerning the idea of a meaningless biological life, Agamben argues that it functions as the fictional yet necessary foundation of biopolitics³. For Agamben, biopolitics concern a politics in which a sovereign power decides over the border between natural life and political life, that is, over what (or rather, who) counts as political. The life of the individual that is excluded from this political domain he terms 'bare life'. According to Agamben, all sovereign politics is biopolitical, since the establishment of 'the political' requires the presupposition of a non-political realm to which it can be applied and from which it can be differentiated. What Agamben wants to point out about this presupposed natural life is that it in fact does not correspond to the idea of a natural life absolutely separate from the political order and hence from sovereign power. Rather, it is defined solely by its exclusion

³ G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995), tr. en. Stanford University Press, Stanford 1998.

from a certain constituted order, and as such still inherently related to and defined by this order. It is, so to say, a 'fictional outside', or, as Sergei Prozorov has accurately put it: «the 'internal other' or 'constitutive outside'»⁴. And although Agamben wants to emphasize that the idea of a mere biological human life is ultimately fictional, bare life can still be artificially created in the context of sovereign politics. In ancient Greece, for example, slaves were excluded from the political realm, while also directly exposed to its power. And in modernity, sovereign politics can, when it suspends the law and the rights of citizens by means of emergency procedures, create a situation in which individuals are both taken from their protective rights while also being potentially exposed to direct and unlimited sovereign power. All these cases are included as that which is supposedly excluded.

For Agamben, this biopolitical distinction between natural and political life is grounded in ontology and language. In fact, ontology itself would be «nothing but the work of language»⁵. The split between essence and existence, just like the split between natural life and political life, is grounded in a split between the linguistic and the non-linguistic (the world 'outside of language'). Language must presuppose this non-linguistic and meaningless realm because, if it does not, then a linguistic expression cannot be understood as designating something other than itself – a thing in the world – making reference impossible. The distinction between a meaningful dimension and a meaningless dimension follows from this presuppositional structure of language. As such, language is understood as a conditioning force that introduces patterns into human thought and behavior by means of the conceptual dichotomies – or 'apparatuses' – that it

⁴ S. Prozorov, *Agamben and Politics: A Critical Introduction*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2014, p. 100.

⁵ G. Agamben, *The Use of Bodies* (2014), tr. en. Stanford University Press, Stanford 2016, p. 127.

automatically presupposes and creates⁶. These dichotomies reappear throughout history and take on the appearance of a necessity, thereby actively limiting the scope of what humans can do and think⁷. In fact, for Agamben, human history is nothing other than the hand-to-hand confrontation with these patterns of thought and behavior generated in language. Agamben's critical philosophy basically comes down to tracing the historical development of these dichotomies and exposing their fictional and contingent nature.

Although differently, biosemiotics also problematizes the idea of a meaningless natural life, but for all life, not just human life. Biosemiotics is an interdisciplinary research agenda that concerns itself with a large range of different forms of communication and signification within and between living systems⁸. It studies «representation, meaning, sense, and the biological significance of sign processes – from intercellular signaling processes to animal display behavior to human semiotic artifacts such as language and abstract symbolic thought»⁹. Across its various schools and interpretations, one of the foundational claims of biosemiotics is that life and meaning are coextensive: that the capacity to produce, interpret, and respond to signs is not an added function of advanced organisms, but a defining characteristic of life itself. Biosemiotics does not just concern a new study within biology, but with its central claim that semiosis is a central and essential element of life, biosemioticians view it as a new paradigm for biology¹⁰.

⁶ G. Agamben, *The Signature of ALL Things: On Method* (2008), tr. en. Zone Books, New York 2009, p. 35.

⁷ G. Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, tr. en. Stanford University Press, Stanford 2009.

⁸ J. Hoffmeyer, *Biosemiotics: An Examination into the Signs of Life and the Life of Signs* (2005), tr. en. University of Scranton Press, Scranton 2008.

⁹ D. Favareau (edited by), *Essential Readings in Biosemiotics: Anthology and Commentary*, cit.

¹⁰ D. Galik, *Biosemiotics: A new science of biology?*, in «Filozofia», Volume LXVIII, 2013, pp. 859-867, see also M. Anderson, J. Deely, M. Krampen, J. Ransdell, T. A. Sebeok, T. Uexküll, *A semiotic perspective on the sciences:*

The biosemiotic paradigm distinguishes itself from the dominant neo-Darwinian or Modern Synthesis frameworks in modern biology, which are still «alive and well» today¹¹, by proposing that meaning-making and interpretation are essential properties of living systems, not merely derivative features. Neo-Darwinism has emphasized random mutation and natural selection as the principal drivers of evolution, and is inherently reductionist, gene-centric, and mechanistic¹². Biosemiotics, in contrast, challenges the idea that life can be adequately understood through such explanatory models alone¹³. Instead, it proposes to complement the mechanistic methodology and study of isolated systems characteristic of traditional approaches in science with substantially different methodologies and studies of phenomena that are not directly accessible for empirical investigation, like meaning, interpretation, agency, and internal representations¹⁴. The scope of variation and differences among biosemioticians is large: ranging from Barbieri's theory of organic codes, which sees biological meaning grounded in rule-governed correspondences¹⁵, to more interpretive models of sign-use and agency¹⁶. And although there is disagreement on where exactly semiosis begins (the so called 'lower semiotic

Steps toward a new paradigm, in T. A. Sebeok, *I Think I Am a Verb*, Plenum Press, New York 1986.

¹¹ Z.B. Hancock, E.S. Lehmberg, G.S. Bradburd, *Neo-darwinism still haunts evolutionary theory: A modern perspective on Charlesworth, Lande, and Slatkin (1982)*, in «Evolution», Volume LXXV, Issue 6, 2021, pp. 1244-1255.

¹² E. Mayr, *The Growth of Biological Thought: Diversity, Evolution, and Inheritance*, Belknap Press, London 1982.

¹³ J. Hoffmeyer, *Biosemiotics: An Examination into the Signs of Life and the Life of Signs (2005)*, tr. en. University of Scranton Press, Scranton 2008, and W. Wheeler, *The Whole Creature: Complexity, biosemiotics and the evolution of culture*, Lawrence and Wishart, London 2006. For more recent discussions, see D. Noble, *The Illusions of the Modern Synthesis*, in «Biosemiotics», Volume XIV, 2021, pp. 5-24, and A. Gare, *Joining Forces Against Neo-Darwinism: Linking Organicism and Biosemiotics*, in «Biosemiotics», Volume XIV, 2021, pp. 61-65.

¹⁴ A. Sharov, T. Maran, M. Tønnessen, *Towards Synthesis of Biology and Semiotics*, in «Biosemiotics», Volume XIII, 2015, pp. 1-7.

¹⁵ M. Barbieri, *The Organic Codes: An Introduction to Semantic Biology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003.

¹⁶ J. Hoffmeyer, *Signs of Meaning in the Universe (1993)*, tr. en. Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1996.

threshold') - with figures like Kalevi Kull arguing, for example, that this threshold is found on the border between life and death¹⁷, while the physiosemiotics of John Deely argues that some non-living processes should also be counted as semiotic¹⁸ - biosemioticians are united in their view that meaning-making and semiosis are coextensive with most life, and they all resist the reduction of life to a meaningless set of purely chemical processes.

Fully intertwined with the critique of a 'meaningless life' is the critique of language understood as a system sharply distinct and separable from the natural (human) life that speaks it. The shared target of both biosemiotics and Agamben is a paradigm that emerged with structuralism and was extended through post-structuralism and formalist theories of language: a view in which language is conceived as an autonomous, actualized system of signs, understood separately from its natural context. This view of language represents the other side of the dichotomy that also gives rise to the idea of a meaningless biological life. It is exactly the idea of language as an always already actualized system that Agamben critiques and wants to overcome. For Agamben, we too quickly think of language as 'language', as a system that is 'out there'¹⁹. He criticizes how language then appears as something *necessarily* present, as something that, especially in poststructuralism, *inevitably* mediates our relation to the world 'outside of language'²⁰. What remains unthought in these visions of language, according to Agamben, is the potentiality by means of which humans can suspend their use of language. In fact, it is exactly in humans, in the natural life that speaks (or not), that

¹⁷ K. Kull, *Vegetative, Animal, and Cultural Semiosis: The semiotic threshold zones*, in «Cognitive Semiotics», Volume IV, 2009, pp. 8-27.

¹⁸ J. Deely, *Physiosemiotics in the Semiotic Spiral: A Play of Amusement*, in «Sign Systems Studies», Volume XXIX, Issue 1, pp. 27-48.

¹⁹ J. Maxwell, C. Colebrook, *Agamben*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2016, p. 36.

²⁰ G. Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity* (1982), tr. en. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1991.

this 'pure potentiality' for language resides²¹. In short, it can be said that Agamben criticizes the paradigms dominant after the linguistic turn for their inability to think language as grounded in and inseparable from the *living being* that can both speak or not speak.

Biosemiotics also problematizes the understanding of language as something separated from its natural context. In fact, the idea of language as a 'thing in itself' has been referred to by eminent biosemioticians Donald Favareau and Kalevi Kull as «fundamentally *anti-biosemiotic*»²². One particular way of defining biosemiotics is as the study of all pre-linguistic sign systems which «constitute the biological and material relational conditions» that human language requires (besides also studying the semiotic processes which are not direct predecessors to human language)²³. This idea of human language as grounded in and made possible by simpler semiotic processes can be found in the work of many different biosemioticians. For example, Terrence Deacon, in his book *The Symbolic Species*, argues that the competence to interpret human language depends upon the ability to engage in simpler forms of semiotic interpretation²⁴. Giorgio Prodi has also argued that human language is an extremely complex form of natural semiosis, and is thus grounded in a 'language' intrinsic to nature²⁵, and Thomas A. Sebeok's modeling systems theory likewise emphasizes that language is a secondary modeling system, dependent on and emerging from more primary semiotic systems that are present across species and even within single-celled organisms²⁶.

²¹ G. Agamben, *Infancy and History*, cit., p. 56.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²³ E. Velmezova, K. Kull, S. J. Cowley (edited by), *Biosemiotic Perspectives on Language and Linguistics*, Springer, Dordrecht 2015, p. 16.

²⁴ T. Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-Evolution of Language and the Brain*. Norton & Company, London 1997.

²⁵ F. Cimatti, *A Biosemiotic Ontology: The Philosophy of Giorgio Prodi*, Springer, Dordrecht 2018.

²⁶ T.A. Sebeok, M. Danesi, *The Forms of Meaning: Modeling Systems Theory and Semiotic Analysis*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2000.

As now demonstrated above, the similarity between biosemiotics and Agamben's philosophy lies most visibly in what they critique, namely a sharp and unbridgeable distinction between meaning and biological life. While both also provide a vision – to use a broad term – of the overlap between life and meaning, the ways in which they do differ strongly. More specifically, the manner in which Agamben's radical philosophy offers an alternative might obstruct any dialogue between the two discourses. The next section discusses Agamben's idea of an *experimentum linguae*, which stands at the heart of his positive philosophy, and why the character of this idea might obstruct a dialogue between the discourses in question.

3. *The experimentum linguae*

Central to Agamben's positive philosophy is what he has called the *experimentum linguae* (*EL* from here on): an experience of language itself that comes about in the suspension of meaningful discourse. In short, it refers to an experience of language in which we encounter not its referential meaning but its pure existence; an experience «in which the limits of language are to be found not outside language, in the direction of its referent, but in an experience of language as such, in its pure self-reference»²⁷. This stands in opposition to the effects of the earlier discussed presuppositional structure of language, which presupposes the borders of language outside of language, in some 'non-linguistic' object that language supposedly tries to express but never fully can. Instead, the borders of language are experienced in the 'pure self-reference' of language: in the suspension of representation and meaning, language *exposes* itself, as it is no longer 'covered' by its reference to something other than itself. Therefore, what is experienced is 'language as such'. In the *EL* and the suspension of

²⁷ G. Agamben, *Infancy and History*, cit., p. 5.

representation, language exposes its 'normal' functioning; it becomes visible as that which normally renders itself invisible in representation. One can think here of the experience of encountering a foreign language that one does not speak, but still recognizes as language²⁸.

In his book on Agamben, Leland de la Durantaye has emphasized that this experience is essentially an experience of the matter of language²⁹. And indeed, Agamben writes that the «*experimentum Linguae* [...] marks the decisive event of matter»³⁰. And, more elaborated, he writes that «where language stops is not where the unsayable occurs, but rather where the matter of words begins. Those who have not reached, as in a dream, this woody substance of language [...] are prisoners of representation»³¹. Books, receipts, speeches, conversations, subtitles: these all are material things in the world that, in their everyday functioning, refer to other things due to their discursive nature.

The *EL* does not, however, concern material reality as something 'naked' and inherently meaningless, but exactly a materiality that has the *potential* to have and not-have meaning, that has the potential to represent and not-represent something: the «being-in-language-of-the-non-linguistic»³². In fact, Agamben envisions an experience in which both 'language as such' and 'pure potentiality' concern the same thing. While apparatuses – which follow from the presuppositional structure of language – limit human potentiality, the *EL*, as the experience of the matter of language that can signify this or that – or not – opens up the sphere of possibility to live, do, and think otherwise. Language is the primary apparatus by means of which all other apparatuses

²⁸ Y. de Boer, *Agamben's Ethics of the Happy Life: Beyond Nihilism and Morality*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2024, p. 29.

²⁹ L. de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2009, p. 132.

³⁰ G. Agamben, *Potentialities*, cit., p. 219.

³¹ G. Agamben, *Idea of Prose* (1985), tr. en. State University of New York Press, New York 1995, p. 37.

³² G. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, cit., p. 104.

function because before human beings can organize themselves in a certain way, identify themselves in a certain way, or think about and define the world, they must know how to speak. Therefore, the experience and awareness of the *potential for language* counters the conditioning character of language and turns into a gateway to a life grounded in possibility instead of prescription.

As such, the experience of language itself, that is, as a potential that can be actualized or not, is far from a trivial experience, since for Agamben it implies the becoming potential of all human acting and thinking. While the example of the encounter with a foreign language helps to render intelligible what is meant with the experience of language in the suspension of its referential meaning, it does not illustrate the profound nature of the *EL*. Rather, one needs to envision it as the possible basis for a form of life defined by potential rather than by predetermined rules and laws: «a life - human life - in which singular modes, acts, and processes of living are never simply facts but always and above all possibilities of life, always and above all potential».³³ The *EL* is not something one goes through once with the effect of having then reached some sort of permanent enlightenment, but concerns a possible way of relating to one's own existence and the world. The form of life centered around the *EL* involves understanding any identity, any human activity or institution as contingent, as something that can be suspended and done otherwise.

Another, yet related way to emphasize the foundational character of the *EL* is by turning to the double meaning of the term *experimentum* and by underlining that what is ultimately at stake in it is nothing but subjectivity itself. As Catherine Mills has pointed out, and as can be noticed in comparing different passages from Agamben's work, the term *experimentum* refers

³³ G. Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, cit., p. 207.

simultaneously to 'experience' and 'experiment'³⁴. It concerns an experiment insofar one's mode of life is put to the test, meaning that the normal way of living is suspended just as, in order to open up space for new artistic experiments, the painter needs to suspend their 'normal way' of painting. And, what is suspended in this case, is nothing but *the particular way in which language actualizes itself*, meaning the specific and historically contingent ideas and dichotomies that it expresses. These apparatuses determine, as already mentioned, what humans can think and therefore do: they constitute the subject. The *EL*, then, concerns the suspension of this or that particular subject, and what comes to light in this suspension is *subjectivity as such*: the pure potential of being constituted in and through language as this or that subject (the Christian, the communist, the owner, etcetera). Not what is painted, but the possibility of painting itself stands at the center of attention. As such, this experiment-experience can never be had by a pre-existing 'self'. Rather, it always involves a loss of the self and the ideas that make up one's world.

The true radicality of Agamben's philosophy, which is also what can obstruct the dialogue between his work and biosemiotics, lies in the fact that Agamben wants to think a subject, a form of life, that is nothing but the incessant suspension of any particular subjectivity. The form of life that centers around the *EL* should be understood as «a practice of self that finds its identity only in a letting go of self»³⁵. According to Agamben, the potentiality that defines the experience of language as such, and the way of life that corresponds to it, should always be thought as 'impotentiality', or the potential not-to. This philosophical move ingeniously overcomes the distinction between

³⁴ C. Mills, *The Philosophy of Agamben*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 2008, p. 25.

³⁵ J. Smith, "I am sure that you are more pessimistic than I am...": An interview with Giorgio Agamben, in «Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society», Volume XVI, Issue 2, 2004, pp. 115-124, p. 117.

potentiality and actuality, since the latter can now be thought of as the impotential of impotentiality. And as such it also overcomes other linguistically expressed dichotomies such as the one between a merely biological life (a potential to be actualized) and the meaningful political life (actuality). While it is certainly feasible to positively express and explain a potential for something specific, defined by a particular goal, like the ability to hear, this reduction to an end cannot as easily be done with impotentiality – the ability to not-do this or that. It concerns exactly something that always disappears in every explanation or name, similar to how the word ‘language’ or ‘word’ still refers to an abstract category instead of to the singular and actual taking place of language. Therefore, by defining the human as the (im)potentiality for language and by placing the suspension of all discursive reference at the center of his philosophy, the place of scientific truth (which is always expressed discursively) becomes ambiguous at least.

Agamben’s positive philosophy, with the *EL* and the idea that «there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize» at its core, thus seems to leave little to no room for new theories, whether factual or not³⁶. More specifically, Catherine Malabou and Naomi Waltham-Smith have argued that key continental philosophers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Agamben exclude biology and biological knowledge from their thinking³⁷. For example, Malabou writes that «for Foucault, as for Agamben [...] even in different ways, biology is always presented as intimately linked with sovereignty in its traditional figure. Biology is always depicted as a science that transgresses its limits to

³⁶ G. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, cit., p. 43.

³⁷ Catherine Malabou in her essay *Will Sovereignty Ever Be Deconstructed?*, which can be found in B. Bhandar, J. Goldberg-Hiller, *Plastic Materialities: Politics, Legality, and Metamorphosis in the work of Catherine Malabou*, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2015, p. 35-46, and N. Waltham-Smith, *Confronting continental philosophy’s fears of biologism*, in «Music & Science», Volume I, 2018.

repress, domesticate, instrumentalize life»³⁸. In fact, their criticism can be grouped with a wider and frequently voiced criticism against Agamben's philosophy, namely the exclusion of the mere possibility to formulate any alternative that articulates concrete policies, political strategies, socio-economic structures, identities, or practices (except for philosophy as a path towards the *experimentum Linguae*). The exclusion of this possibility follows from Agamben's idea that the dynamics of biopolitics and sovereignty can ultimately be led back to the presuppositional structure of language itself, of the fact that language always already needs to presuppose the non-linguistic in order to function. To exactly what extent this criticism is accurate is outside the scope of this paper, and understanding the status of scientific knowledge in Agamben's work requires a separate inquiry, as Agamben does engage with scientific literature all throughout his oeuvre. Nevertheless, in general this widespread diagnosis is certainly appropriate enough to consider it as a serious obstacle for a dialogue between Agamben's philosophy and biosemiotics.

4. *Beyond the gap between explanation and experience*

So far, I have discussed the similarity between Agamben and biosemiotics, the *experimentum Linguae* and why its radical nature might obstruct a dialogue between the two discourses in question. In the following part, I present a way in which the discussed obstruction can be overcome and Agamben's thought and biosemiotics can come together in a philosophically valuable manner. I then illustrate this possibility through the elaboration of the idea of an *experimentum semioseos*.

Central to my argument is the fact that Agamben's philosophy is rooted in the idea that the theoretical gap between biology and linguistics, natural history and cultural history, life and

³⁸ B. Bhandar, J, Goldberg-Hiller, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

language, semiotic and semantic, cannot be theoretically filled without reducing one side to the other. This gap is for him expressed most clearly by «Émile Benveniste's doctrine of the irreducible opposition between the semiotic and the semantic»³⁹, which is probably by far the most cited idea in Agamben's oeuvre, and which can also be read as «the disjunction between the living being and the speaking being»⁴⁰. And indeed, if one understands life and language through non-biosemiotic biology and linguistics – which is the standard, especially in the times that Agamben's philosophical career began – their difference might appear as theoretically unbridgeable. Furthermore, this gap is strongly reflected by the everlasting intellectual split between the humanities and the natural sciences. And the concern that any attempt to overcome this gap theoretically results in the postulation of either nature or culture as the 'included exclusion', or the 'constituted outside' (like, as discussed, the idea of bare life) has only been fueled by intellectual projects before the advent of biosemiotics. One can think here of, for example, linguistic naturalism, social darwinism, sociobiology, and evolutionary psychology⁴¹. In fact, for Agamben, this gap has determined the whole Western metaphysical (and hence intellectual) tradition⁴².

³⁹ G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, cit., p. 25. See also (of the same author) *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (1977), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1993, p. 158; *Infancy and History*, cit., p. 6; *Language and Death*, cit., p. 24; *Remnantz of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (1998), tr. en. Zone Books, New York 1999, p. 115; *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1999, p. 102; *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (2000), Stanford University Press, Stanford 2005, p. 65; *State of Exception* (2003), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2005, p. 39; *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath* (2008), Stanford University Press, Stanford 2011, p. 70; *The Signature of All Things*, cit., p. 61; *Taste* (2015), tr. en. Seagull Books, London 2017, p. 63; *What is Philosophy?* (2016), tr. en. Stanford University Press, Stanford 2018, p. 8; *La Voce Umana*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2023, p. 21; *Il corpo della Lingua: esperruquancluzelubelouzerirelu*, Einaudi, Torino 2024; *Lo Spirito e La Lettera: Sull'Interpretazione delle Scritture*, Neri Pozza Editore, Vicenza 2024, p. 40.

⁴⁰ G. Agamben, *Remnantz of Auschwitz*, cit., p. 143.

⁴¹ E. Velmezova, K. Kull, S. J. Cowley, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁴² G. Agamben, *Infancy and History*, cit., p. 51.

The point I want to make is the following: Agamben's philosophy is strongly determined by (the limits of) the ontological framework of non-biosemiotic linguistics, biology, and philosophy. This influence is not neutral, but theoretically and historically specific and contingent. It is *by means of* a non-biosemiotic understanding of linguistics – which reduces language to one or a few types of semiotic processes – that the *experimentum Linguae* is understood as an «experience of negativity», as something that cannot be theorized positively⁴³. Thus, even the *experimentum Linguae*, which supposedly involves even the suspension of the subject itself, is still determined by a particular understanding of what language is. This is not very surprising: to even vaguely understand that you are experiencing 'language as such', it seems necessary to have at least some, albeit minimal, idea of what language is. Now, I do not want to focus on this as a deficiency on Agamben's side, but rather present it as an opportunity for dialogue. The *experimentum Linguae* is, despite its constitutive nature for the subject, always already accompanied by an ontological understanding of language, which is grounded in a wider set of knowledge about the world. The opportunity lies in the fact that this understanding can also be replaced or adjusted. Biosemiotics offers such a different ontology of language, namely language understood as a form of semiosis, as part of a larger group of phenomena that are not just found in the human realm, but also in the world of plants and animals.

5. *Towards an experimentum semioseos*

In this light, I want to introduce the idea of an *experimentum semioseos*: a biosemiotically informed *experimentum Linguae*, the experience of semiosis as such (*ES* from here on). For the most part, this *experimentum* is the same as Agamben's original: an

⁴³ G. Agamben, *Language and Death*, cit., p. 96.

experience-experiment in which the subject, the 'self', is suspended, in which one's way of life is put to the test, at least as much as possible, and in which all the acts and processes of living appear as possibilities rather than facts. It involves a vision of the potentiality that the human embodies, a 'pure potentiality' understood simultaneously as the potential to do and the impotential to not-do. An awareness of the possibility to speak and categorize the world, to self-identify, to do and make things, to organize politically and to make art, and, most importantly, the possibility to also not do these things. An experiment that can be the locus of a way of living.

The *ES* is different from Agamben's *EL* in at least the following two intertwined ways: 1) the relation between scientific explanation and the *experimentum* is not defined by mutual exclusion but by reciprocal engagement, and 2) its object is not (just) accessible through and in moments of the suspension of meaningful discourse and thought - a 'present *absence*' - but (also) through the observation of the actual living beings that are actualizing, constituted by, and engaging in pre- or non-semiotic processes, especially plant life - a 'present *presence*'. The first characteristic that differentiates the *ES* from the *EL* is that the *ES* does not exclude theoretical explanation. In the case of a non-biosemiotic understanding of language, the *EL* starts where knowledge ends, and vice versa, thereby excluding the possibility to theoretically account for this experience. This, on the contrary, is exactly what biosemiotics provides: a theoretical and scientifically grounded account of pre-linguistic semiotics. By means of the tools and terminology of semiotics, biosemiotics bridges the gap between biology and linguistics. Indeed, the latter two are understood as sub-disciplines within the larger field of biosemiotics⁴⁴. To replace the non-biosemiotic ontological framework of language that influences Agamben's idea

⁴⁴ E. Velmezova, K. Kull, S. J. Cowley, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

of the *EL* for a biosemiotic one therefore means that experience and explanation are no longer mutually exclusive. In that case, the *EL* is no longer just negatively graspable as the suspension of meaning, but also positively in semiotic terms. In this sense, engagement with biosemiotic studies only stimulates the more existential contemplation that belongs to the *ES*. And vice versa, the *ES* stimulates continual critical reflection on biosemiotic discourse, reminding us of its discursive nature and the difference between discourse and object of reference. As such, Agamben's idea of impotentiality does not lose its value. Instead, in light of biosemiotics' ability to articulate the passage between pre-linguistic and non-linguistic semiosis towards linguistic semiosis, it now rather stimulates a reciprocal engagement and oscillation between experience and its theoretical interpretation: the philosophical idea of impotentiality prevents biosemiotics from becoming dogmatic.

Secondly, the *ES* is more general than Agamben's original, meaning that its object - semiosis - involves a more extensive 'thing' or range of processes, objects and (living) systems in the world than Agamben's 'language as such'. This broadening also brings new and different ways of entering the *experimentum*. While the *EL* concerns the 'matter of language' and its potentiality, like the physical texts, sounds, letters, human bodies, etcetera, the *ES* concerns all the material things that engage in or are the object of semiosis, like plants, animals, odors, levels of humidity, paintings, facial expressions, DNA, temperature, sunlight, and so on. For the experience of language as such, there is basically one type of relevant object, namely the physical scripture, sound or individual that attempts to express itself but fails or refuses, and, with the exclusive focus on meaningful language, these things or beings appear explicitly and solely as 'meaningful' in their suspension of meaning. And while this is also relevant for the *ES*, the latter, with its focus on semiosis

instead of only language, has even in the suspension or absence of linguistic meaning, still eye for the non- and pre-semiotic processes *in their active functioning*, which are displayed by animals (including humans, of course), plants, fungi, protists, and bacteria. As such, it not only comes about by means of witnessing a suspension, but also and more so through analogically recognizing the general phenomenon of semiosis through comparison and similarity.

More specifically, I believe that the long-term observation of vegetative life occupies a privileged position for the *ES*. The non-linguistic semiotic meaning-making of humans and animals, like facial expressions, hand gestures, or barking, might still be easily attributed a linguistic meaning and, in the case of non-human animals, anthropomorphized. Vegetative life, including both plants and fungi, clearly displays, from a biosemiotic perspective, semiosis. However, these semiotic processes will not, without obvious error, be understood as involving discursive meaning. Simultaneously, vegetative life is still phenomenologically relevant for humans, in contrast to bacteria and protists. Plants and fungi form, so to say, the threshold of semiotic activity in our observable world. Furthermore, this observation ought to be long-term, for the simple reason that the semiosis displayed by vegetative life, at least those directly observable for the human eye, are relatively slow and subtle compared to other forms of semiosis. Plants and fungi, quite simply, often take more time to react.

Let me now sketch a more illustrative image of the *ES*. Semiosis comes into view when one observes plants and fungi over a longer period of time, witnessing their movement, growth, and reactions. Those that regularly take a walk through the same forest or the same garden will notice plants reacting to light sources, water sources, insects and animals, and of course each other. The more intense the engagement is, the more the semiotic processes that

the vegetative life engages in can be witnessed. Those that garden or have many plants to take care of will notice the way in which they react to different conditions and events, like a heatwave or accidentally giving too much water. Phototropism is one of the clearest examples in this case: over the course of time, one can witness the plant standing in front of the window turn its leaves towards the sunlight, and when the plant is turned around, it will also slowly adjust the angle of its leaves. Or etiolation: «prolonged growth in the absence of light that results in the development of etioplasts in tissue that would have chloroplasts if subjected to light»⁴⁵. That is, etiolation concerns a set of responses when a plant is grown in the dark or under very low light, like long stems and small and underdeveloped leaves.

While activities such as taking a walk through the forest or gardening might seem trivial and unrelated to an experience of subjectivity and (im)potentiality, this interpretation is still governed by the dualism between mind and matter, meaning and life, nature and culture, for which trees, grass, bees, spiders, mushrooms, and moss are all missing out on meaning. Instead, following the biosemiotic ontology, I argue that these activities hold a special importance for the contemplative way of life whose locus is the *experimentum semioseos*, the experience of semiosis as such. This experience replaces the dichotomy between meaning and life by an immanent continuity. Just as in the *EL* concerning language, the *ES* encompasses an awareness of how our subjectivity, our 'self' is constituted in and by semiosis. The *ES*, much more than the *EL*, is therefore an experience of kinship: my idea of self and the limits and possibilities of my thinking and acting, produced in language, are constituted by processes that are ontologically similar to those that constitute plant and

⁴⁵ T. Armarego-Marriott, O. Sandoval-Ibañez, Ł. Kowaleska, *Beyond the darkness: recent lessons from etiolation and de-etiolation studies*, in «Journal of Experimental Botany», Volume LXXI, Issue 4, pp. 1215-1225, p. 1215.

animal life. They all belong to the ontological category of semiosis, of matter that has learned, to different degrees, to interpret and create signs.

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that a dialogue between biosemiotics and Giorgio Agamben's philosophy can be philosophically fruitful, and I have illustrated this through a biosemiotic extension of Agamben's *experimentum linguae*. I have argued and discussed how Agamben and biosemiotics are similar, namely in their criticism of the dichotomy between biological life and meaning. I have also discussed that these two discourses differ strongly in the alternative that they offer, and the manner in which they do so. So much so that a worthwhile dialogue between the two might seem impossible. Specifically, in presenting Agamben's idea of an *experimentum linguae*, I have discussed how his radical philosophy of impotentiality and suspension seems to exclude the possibility of formulating any positive theory without also repeating the repressive structures of biopolitics that are responsible for the conceptual divide between nature and culture. In response to these similarities, the intuition that a dialogue between the two could be philosophically enriching, and the obstruction in question, I have offered a specific interpretation of Agamben's work that stresses the implicit influence of non-biosemiotic philosophy, biology, and linguistics on his thinking, including the *experimentum linguae*. Recognizing this influence explicitly opened the possibility to move towards a biosemiotic ontology instead of one defined by non-biosemiotic linguistics and biology, thereby opening up the possibility of dialogue between the two discourses. Lastly, in the attempt to demonstrate the potential value of this dialogue, I have formulated the idea of the *experimentum semioseos*. This experience of semiosis as such is similar to Agamben's *experimentum* but differs from it in two

ways. First, it allows for a theorization of what is experienced in it. Second, because semiosis is a more general phenomenon than language (linguistic semiosis), and therefore also includes plants, animals, etcetera, the *experimentum semioseos* can consist of other practices than just the suspension of linguistic meaning, particularly the long-term observation of vegetative life. As such, I postulated that activities such as gardening and walking through spaces filled with vegetative life, like forests, are practices that occupy a privileged position for analogically recognizing and contemplating semiosis as such, and hence for the *experimentum semioseos*.

From the line of thought I have presented in this article follow a few major consequences and further opportunities which are worth mentioning. It offers a (further) scientific ground for Agamben's philosophy, specifically his takes on language, which grants his philosophy more credibility while also contributing to the larger project of overcoming the divide between the humanities and the natural sciences. Furthermore, connecting Agamben's work to biosemiotics can help to further understand and articulate the philosophical, ethical, and political implications of the biosemiotic ontology, since Agamben not only criticizes the sharp distinction between life and language, matter and meaning, but also shows how this distinction is constitutive of the dominant ethical ideals and political structures of modernity. Lastly, by emphasizing the importance of vegetative life for a (life of) contemplation of semiosis and the philosophical consequences connected to it, I have introduced a new way in which vegetative life can be relevant for philosophical, ethical, and political debates.

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