

73rd Lecture at the Gramsci Monument, The Bronx, NYC: 11th September 2013
THE ABYSS OF NEGATIVITY
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1. In all his books, Giorgio Agamben has reconstructed the zone of conflict between presence and absence or being and withdrawal in order simultaneously to refer to the fact that the insistence on the irreducible trace (on the *arché-trace*, the *gramma* in Derrida's thinking) or on being as withdrawal (in Heidegger's as well as Blanchot's thinking) is part of the ethos of the metaphysical legacy in thinking: "From this viewpoint we can assess the acuity of Derrida's critique of the metaphysical tradition, and also become aware of its limits. Without question, along with Derrida, we have to appraise those philosophers who, unfolding Levinas' concept of the trace and Heidegger's concept of difference, have brought to light most decisively the originary position assumed by the *gramma* and the significant in our culture. However, in this way he believed that he had opened up a path to overcome metaphysics whereas in fact he had only brought its fundamental problem to the light of day. Metaphysics, namely, is not simply the primacy of the voice over the *gramma*. If metaphysics is that thinking which posits the voice as origin, then it is so only because, from the outset, this voice is thought as sublated, as *VOICE*. To discern the horizon of metaphysics merely in the predominance of *phoné* and consequently to believe that it can be transcended with the aid of *gramma* means thinking metaphysics without the negativity that is equally part of its essence. Metaphysics is always already grammatology, and grammatology is *fundamental ontology* insofar as the function of the negative ontological ground can be attributed to the *gramma* (the *VOICE*)."¹

2. The thinking of irreducible difference (whether it be articulated as a thinking of *writing* in Derrida's sense, i.e. as a thinking that inscribes in phonocentrism a resistance that cannot be integrated, or as a thinking of the *abyssal ground* or the *grounding abyss* in Heidegger's sense) is already part of the tradition of metaphysical thinking since, for Agamben, "the term metaphysics refers to that tradition of thinking which thinks the self-grounding of being as a negative ground".²

3. Metaphysics would be the opening of the thinking subject to the unthinkable in the dynamic of self-grounding that recognizes itself as a hovering architecture.

4. The subject of this dynamic mediates itself with itself by starting to put its trust in the limit of the self; trust which has to be radical, anti-illusory practice by exchanging the illusion of pure self-grounding for itself.

5. Instead of surrendering itself to the naivety of ultimate self-control, metaphysics would be the knowledge that cannot cease knowing that knowledge is not everything.

6. Without therefore deviating into religiosity, metaphysical thinking would be a thinking of the unthinkable beyond religious self-elimination, a thinking which as thinking drives its concepts to their implicit limit, a thinking that sharpens its vocabulary on the impossible, a thinking which, as Theodor W. Adorno puts it, is the effort to get beyond the concept with the aid of the concept.

7. This is an effort or an exertion that inscribes difference into the concept itself instead of localizing it beyond the concept and its reductive, identifying violence.

8. The concept, thinking in concepts includes stretching for what is outside concepts, for the implicit impossibility of a conceptual grasping of being and the world.

9. The concept is bounded by the domain of the non-conceptual. It exists only in the form of this touching of the limit; it exists only as excess — as excess and hyperbolism, as the exteriority of a form that opens itself to the formlessness of pre-conceptual entities.

10. The dimension of the pre-conceptual can also be designated as the order of the pre-synthetic trace, as the domain of *gramma* or, in Agamben's terminology, of *Voice*, as the dimension of a difference or limit that is inscribed in conceptual desire as a resistance that has always already been inscribed.

11. I call this space the domain of the incommensurable where it is indispensable to insist on the fact that the incommensurable does not mean any sublime beyond, but this cleft in the concept itself that marks difference in identity — a difference which accompanies identifying thinking from its beginnings and never ceases to afflict it.

12. It is this presence of difference in the thinking of presence called metaphysics which makes a simple distinguishing of metaphysical thinking from trans-metaphysical (deconstructed, etc.) thinking, as Derrida himself would say, infinitely complicated — *infinitely* in the sense of the meaning of infinity evoked by Maurice Blanchot that aims at inconclusiveness and unceasingness.

13. *Complicated* in the sense of the impossibility of a satisfactory classification of conceptual thinking in binary models whose simplifications can be boundless.

14. The relationship between presence and absence, identity and difference, concept and non-concept will not bend to any hierarchical structure that causes the one element to be subjugated to the other through a kind of conceptual injustice for the sake of its classification.

15. On this conceptual injustice, on the *injustice of the concept*, Adorno and Derrida, along with many others, have said what is most necessary to say.

16. Agamben then rightly insists that so-called metaphysical thinking, instead of being simply the name of this injustice, cannot itself be sacrificed to it because it itself is more complicated and more complex than injustice wants it to be.

17. Metaphysical thinking already includes this self-extension of the concept to its dark ground which Agamben describes as the abyss of negativity.

1 Giorgio Agamben *Die Sprache und der Tod. Ein Seminar über den Ort der Negativität*, Frankfurt/M. 2007, p. 72.

2 Ibid., p. 14, note.