

The Work of Man

Giorgio Agamben

Translated by Kevin Attell

In the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1097b, 22 ff.), Aristotle poses the problem of defining the “work [*opera*] of man” (*to ergon tou anthrōpou*). The context of this definition is the determination of the highest good as the object of *epistēmē politikē*, political science, to which the treatise on ethics represents a sort of introduction. This highest good is happiness. And it is precisely in order to define happiness that Aristotle begins his inquiry into the work of man.

Just as for a flute player, a sculptor, or any artisan (*tekhnitē*), and, in general, for all those who have a certain kind of work (*ergon*) and an activity (*praxis*), the good (*tagathon*) and the “well” (*to eu*) seem [to consist] in this work, so it should also be for man, if indeed there is for him something like a certain work (*ti ergon*). Or [must we say] that there is a certain work and an activity for the carpenter and the shoemaker, and for man there is none, that he is born with no work (*argos*)?¹

Ergon in Greek means “labor,” “work.” Yet, in the passage in question, the meaning of the term is complicated because of the close relation that links it to one of the fundamental concepts of Aristotle’s thought: *energeia* (lit. “being at work”). The term was, in all probability, created by Aristotle, who uses it in functional opposition to *dunamis* (“potentiality”).

The adjective *energos* ("working," "active"), from which Aristotle takes it, is already found in Herodotus. The opposite term *argos* (from *aergos*, "not working," "lacking *ergon*"; cf. *argia*, "inactivity") already occurs in Homer. That the work of man, therefore, does not, in this context, simply mean "work," but rather that which defines the *energeia*, the activity, the being-in-act that is proper to man, is proved by the fact that a few lines later Aristotle will define happiness as *psukhēs energēia . . . kat' aretēn*, the being-at-work of the soul in accordance with excellence (1098a, 16). The question concerning the work or absence of work of man therefore has a decisive strategic importance, for on it depends the possibility not only of assigning him a proper nature and essence, but also, as we have seen, of defining his happiness and his politics.

The question is not simply a rhetorical one. In opposing four types of artisans—the flute player, the maker of *agalmata*, the carpenter, and the shoemaker—to man in general, Aristotle intentionally employs figures in which the work (and the being-at-work) can be identified without difficulty. But the choice of such, so to speak, "menial" examples does not mean that the list could not be continued upward (a few lines earlier, he had mentioned the doctor, the architect, and the strategist). That is to say, the problem has a broader meaning, and involves the very possibility of identifying the *energeia*, the being-at-work of man as man, independently of and beyond the concrete social figures that he can assume. Even if in the form of a paradoxical question, the idea of an *argia*, of an essential inactivity [*inoperosità*] of man with respect to his concrete occupations and functions [*operazioni*] is unequivocally put forward. The modern (or, rather, postmodern) problem of a fulfilled realization of human work and thus of a possible *désœuvre* (*désœuvre* corresponds perfectly to *argos*) of man at the end of history here has its logical-metaphysical foundation. The *voyou désœuvré* in Queneau, the *shabbat* of man in Kojève, and the "inoperative community" in Nancy would then be the posthistorical figure corresponding to the absence of a truly human work. More generally, however, what is at issue in this question is the very nature of man, who appears as the living being that has no work, that is, the living being that has no specific nature and vocation. If he were to lack an *ergon* of his own, man would not even have an *energeia*, a being in act that could define his essence: he would be, that is, a being of pure potentiality, which no identity and no work could exhaust.

That this hypothesis must not have appeared as out of the question to Aristotle is shown by the fact that, in *De anima*, at the moment when he is defining *nous*, human intellect, he asserts that, "it has no other nature than being in potentiality" (429a, 21). For this reason even when it passes into act, thought "remains in some way still in potentiality . . . and is thus able to think of itself" (429b, 9). Moreover, in Greek the vocabulary of inactivity, to which *argos* as well as *skholē* belong, has no negative connotations at all. From the perspective of Aristotle's Christian commentators, however, the hypothesis of an essential inactivity of man could not have appeared as anything but scandalous. For this reason, in his commentary on the passage in question from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Thomas is careful to specify that "it is impossible that man be by nature idle, as if he had no proper function [impossibile est, quod sit naturaliter otiosus, quasi non habens propriam operationem]" (*Sententia libri ethicorum*, I.10.4).

Nevertheless, in the subsequent passage, Aristotle seems to back away from the hypothesis that there is no work of man as man, and, with a sudden turn, he seeks man's *ergon* in the sphere of life.

Or as the eye, the hand, the foot, and each of the parts of the body seem to have their work, must we then suppose that alongside (*para*) all of these man similarly has a certain work? And what then might this be? The simple fact of living (*to zēn*) seems to be common even to plants, but we are seeking something that is proper to man. We must therefore set aside (*aphoristeon*) nutritive life and the life of growth (*tēn threptikēn kai auxētikēn zōēn*). Next would be a form of sensitive life (*aisthētikē tis*). But even this seems to be common to the horse, the ox, and every living thing. There remains (*leipetai*) the form of practical life (*praktikē tis*) of a being who has *logos*. But since this has two meanings, we must consider life in accordance with being-at-work (*kat' energēian*), which is the more proper sense of the term.

This analogy between the relation of individual *erga* to the work of man and that of the individual parts of the body to the body in its totality strategically serves to prepare for the passage to the sphere of life. Indeed, this passage is not obvious. If individual human activities (playing the lyre, making shoes, sculpting images) cannot exhaust the work proper to man as such, this does not mean that it must necessarily be sought in the sphere of life. That the work of man (on the individuation of which depends the individuation of the end of "political science") is defined as a certain form of life bears witness to the fact that the nexus between politics and life belongs, from the beginning, to the way the Greeks think of the *polis*.

In a typically Aristotelian gesture, the individuation of the *ergon* of man comes about by working a series of caesurae in the *continuum* of life. This *continuum* is divided into nutritive, sensitive, and practical-rational life. The articulation of the concept of life in a series of functions had already been carried out in *De anima*. Here Aristotle had isolated, from among the various senses of the term “to live,” the most general and separable one:

It is through life that what has soul in it differs from what has not. Now this term “to live” has more than one sense, and provided any one alone of these is found in a thing, we say that the thing is living—viz. thinking, sensation, local movement and rest, or movement in the sense of nutrition, decay, and growth. Hence we think of all species of plants also as living, for they are observed to possess in themselves a principle and potentiality through which they grow and decay. . . . This principle can be separated from the others, but not they from it—in mortal beings at least. The fact is obvious in plants; for it is the only psychic potentiality they possess. Thus, it is through this principle that life belongs to living things. . . . By nutritive power we mean that part of the soul which is common also to plants. (413a, 20 ff.)

It is important to observe that Aristotle in no way defines what life is: he limits himself to breaking it down, by isolating the nutritive function, in order then to rearticulate it in a series of distinct and correlated faculties (nutrition, sensation, thought). In *De anima*, as well as in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*, nutritive life (or vegetative life, as it will be called as early as the ancient commentators, on the basis of that peculiar, obscure status as absolutely separated from *logos* that plants constantly have in Aristotle’s thought) is that on the exclusion of which the definition of man, that is, of the living being that has *logos*, is founded.

The determination of the work of man is achieved, then, by means of the segregation of vegetative and sensitive life, which leaves life in accordance with *logos* as the only possible “remainder.” And, since this life in accordance with *logos* can also be seen as in accordance with its pure potentiality, Aristotle is careful to specify that the work of man cannot be a mere potentiality or faculty, but only the *energeia* and the exercise of this faculty.

If, therefore, the work of man is the being at work of the soul in accordance with *logos*, or not without *logos*, and if we say that the work of this particular individual and this particular good individual is the same in kind (e.g., a lyre player and a good lyre player, and similarly in all cases), eminence in respect of excellence being

added to the work (for the work of a lyre player is to play the lyre, and that of a good lyre player is to do so well); if this is the case, we must suppose that the work of man is a certain kind of life (*zōēn tina*) and that this is the being-at-work of the soul and a praxis in accordance with *logos*, and that the work of the good man is these same things, performed well and in a beautiful way, each act in accordance with its own excellence; if this is the case, human good turns out to be the being-at-work of the soul in accordance with excellence, and if there are more than one excellence, in accordance with the best and most perfect.

At this point, Aristotle can proceed to the definition of the “work of man.” As was implicit in the immediately preceding passage, this is a form of living, a “certain kind of life” (*zōē tis*), life that is in act in accordance with *logos*. This means that Aristotle determines the highest good—which the entire treatise was aimed at identifying and which also constitutes the end of politics—through the relation to a certain kind of *ergon*, a certain kind of activity or being-at-work. This activity consists, as we have seen, in the actualization of the vital rational potentiality (and not, therefore, of the nutritive or sensitive potentiality). Consequently, human ethics and politics will be defined by the participation in this function, in general and in accordance with excellence (playing the lyre and playing it well, living and living well, in accordance with *logos*). We should not be surprised if, consistently with these premises, Aristotle’s definition of the *polis*, that is, of the perfect political community, is articulated through the difference between living (*zēn*) and living well (*eu zēn*): “originating for the sake of life, but existing for living well” (*Politics* 1252b, 30).

Aristotle’s determination of the work of man entails, therefore, two theses on politics:

1. Insofar as it is defined in relation to an *ergon*, politics is a politics of activity [*operosità*] and not of inactivity [*inoperosità*], of the act and not of potentiality.
2. This *ergon*, however, is ultimately a “certain kind of life,” which is defined above all through the exclusion of the simple fact of living, of bare life.

This is the legacy that Aristotle’s thought has left to Western politics. An aporetic legacy, (1) because it binds the destiny of politics to a kind of work, which remains unassignable with respect to individual human activities (playing the lyre, making statues, producing shoes), and

(2) because its single determination is ultimately biopolitical, insofar as it rests on a division and articulation of *zoe*. The political, as the work of man as man, is drawn out of the living being through the exclusion—as unpolitical—of a part of its vital activity.

In the modern era, Western politics has consequently been conceived as the collective assumption of a historical task (of a “work”) on the part of a people or a nation. This political task coincided with a metaphysical task, that is, the realization of man as rational living being. The problematicity inherent in the determination of this “political” task with respect to the concrete figures of labor, action, and, ultimately, human life has gradually grown. From this perspective, the thought of Marx, which seeks the realization of man as a generic being (*Gattungswesen*), represents a renewal and a radicalization of the Aristotelian project. Hence the two aporias implicit in this renewal: (1) the subject of the work of man must necessarily be an unassignable class, which destroys itself insofar as it represents a particular activity (for example, the working class); (2) the activity of man in the classless society is impossible or, in any case, extremely difficult to define (hence the hesitations of Marx concerning the destiny of labor in the classless society and the right to laziness claimed by Lafargue and Malevich).

And when, beginning with the end of World War I, the paradigm of the work enters into crisis and it becomes clear for the nation-states that there no longer are historical tasks that can be assigned, a reformulation of the biopolitical legacy of classical political philosophy becomes the extreme outcome of Western politics. In the impossibility of defining a new “work of man,” it is now a question of taking on biological life itself as the last and decisive historical task. The “work” of the living being in accordance with *logos* is the assumption and the care of that nutritive and sensitive life on whose exclusion Aristotelian politics had defined the *ergon tou anthrōpou*.

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However, a different reading of this passage from Aristotle is possible. This reading is contained in two heterogeneous, though not unrelated, texts. The first is Averroes’ commentary on Plato’s *Republic*, which has been preserved for us only in a Hebrew translation. The second is Dante’s *Monarchy*. Both begin with the Aristotelian determination of human perfection as the actualization of the rational potentiality; both

take up the Aristotelian opposition between man on the one hand and plants and animals on the other. However, both, as we will see, emphasize the moment of potentiality as the specific characteristic of man. Indeed, for both Averroes and Dante, animals in some way participate in rational activity (“many animals,” writes Averroes, “have this part in common with men”); what specifically characterizes human *logos*, however, is that it is not always already in act, but exists, first and foremost, only in potentiality (“since the rational part,” writes Averroes, “does not exist in us from the beginning in its ultimate perfection and in act, its existence in us is only potential”). But let us read Dante’s text (*Monarchy* 1.3), which is articulated as an undeclared commentary on Aristotle’s determination of the work of man in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the lexicon and argumentation of which it takes up:

We must therefore now see what is the end of human society as a whole. . . . And to throw light on the matter we are inquiring into, it should be borne in mind that, just as there is an end for which nature produces the thumb, and a different one for which she produces the whole hand, and again an end different from both of these for which she produces the arm, and an end different from all these for which she produces the whole person; in the same way there is an end for which the individual person is designed, another for the household, another for the village, yet another for the city, and another for the kingdom; and finally the best end of all is the one for which God Everlasting with his art, which is nature, brings into being the whole of humankind (*universaliter genus humanum*).²

Here Dante takes up Aristotle’s example of the relation between the individual parts of the body and the whole person (*totus homo*); but the accent is shifted from the plurality of human activities to the multiplicity of the forms of community (added to the family, the village, and the city, which are already in Aristotle’s *Politics*, are the kingdom and the end, for the moment unnamed, which corresponds to the universality of humankind). It is at this point that Dante reformulates the Aristotelian question concerning the work of man.

Consequently the first thing to bear in mind is that God and nature make nothing that is idle (*nil otiosum facit*); on the contrary, all things come into being to perform some function (*ad aliquam operationem*). For in the intention of its creator *qua* creator no created essence is an ultimate end in itself; the end is rather the function which is proper to that essence; and so it is that the function does not exist for the sake of the essence, but the essence for the sake of the function. There

is therefore some function proper to humankind as a whole (*humane universitatis*), for which it is designed in such a great multitude (*in tanta multitudine ordinatur*), and no single man, or individual household, or village, or city, or individual kingdom can fully realize it.

Operatio is the Latin term that corresponds to *ergon* in the Latin translation of the *Ethics* that both Thomas and Dante had before them. Thus in Thomas's commentary we read: "Si igitur hominis est aliqua operatio propria, necesse est quod in eius operatione propria consistat finale bonum ipsius [If then man has some proper function, his final good must consist in this function]" (1.10.2). Like Thomas, Dante takes up (and, as we will see, modifies) the Aristotelian motif of the act's superiority over the essence (or potentiality); but for him the determination of this "work" of humankind as such immediately entails the introduction of the figure of the multitude. And just as in Aristotle no single concrete activity of man could exhaust the *ergon* of man as such, in Dante the actualization of the *operatio humane universitatis* transcends the limits of individual men and individual communities.

What this function is will become clear once we clarify what is the highest potentiality of the whole of humanity. . . . The highest potentiality in man is not simply to be, because the elements too share in this; nor is it to be in compound form, for that is found in minerals; nor is it to be an animate thing, for plants too share in that; nor is it to be a creature who apprehends, for that is also shared by the animals; but it is to be a creature who apprehends by means of the possible intellect (*esse apprehensivum per intellectum possibilem*), which belongs to no creature (whether higher or lower) other than man. For while there are indeed other essences who are endowed with intellect, nonetheless their intellect is not "possible" in the way that man's is, since such essences exist only as intelligences and nothing else, and their very being is simply the act of understanding that which they are; and this occurs without interruption (*sine interpolatione*), otherwise they would not be eternal. It is thus clear that the highest potentiality of humankind is its intellectual potentiality or faculty. And since that potentiality cannot be fully and all at once reduced in act through any one individual or any one of the particular communities enumerated above, there must needs be a multitude in humankind, through whom the whole of this potentiality can be actualized, just as there must be a multitude of things which can be generated so that the whole potentiality of prime matter lies under the act (*sub actu*); otherwise there would be a separate potentiality, which is impossible.

At this point Dante defines the work proper to humankind as such. And he does it by broadening, with respect to Aristotle, the context of the definition of human specificity: not only plants and animals but also inanimate beings (the elements and minerals) and supernatural creatures (the angels). From this perspective, rational activity is no longer enough to identify the proper characteristic of man, since he shares it with the *bruta* and the angels. In keeping with the fundamental motif of Averroes' interpretation of Aristotle's *De anima*, what defines human rationality is now its potential—that is, its contingent and discontinuous—character. While the intelligence of the angels is perpetually in act without interruption (*sine interpolatione*) and that of the animals is inscribed naturally in each individual, human thought is constitutively exposed to the possibility of its own lack and inactivity: that is to say, it is, in the terms of the Aristotelian tradition, *nous dunatos, intellectus possibilis*. This is why, insofar as it is essentially potentiality and can be in act only beginning from an "interpolation" (which, in the Averroist tradition, coincides with the imagination), the work of man requires a multitude, and indeed makes the multitude (and not a people, a city, or a particular community) the true subject of politics.

The motif of the *multitudo* in Dante takes up Averroes' theory of the eternity of humankind as a correlative to the oneness of the possible intellect. Since, according to Averroes, the perfection of man's potential to think is bound essentially to the species and accidentally to single individuals, there will always be at least one individual—a philosopher—who realizes in act the potentiality of thought. According to the formulation in one of the theses condemned by Etienne Tempier in 1277, the numerically singular possible intellect, though separate from this or that individual body, is never separate from any body.

Dante develops and radicalizes this theory, making the *multitudo* the subject of both thought and political life. The *multitudo* is not simply idle, because it is not, like the individual, essentially separated from the one intellect; on the other hand, it is not solely active [*operosa*], because the passage to the act always depends contingently on this or that individual. *The multitude, then, is the generic form of existence of potentiality*, which in this way always maintains itself in an essential proximity to the act (*sub actu* not *in actu*). The expression *sub actu* is not an invention of Dante's. We find it used in contemporary texts (for example, in Dietrich of Freiberg, whose

treatise *De intellectu et intellegibili* Dante could have read) to express the mode of being of prime matter, which can never be completely separate from some form and therefore stands *sub actu*. But while Dietrich explicitly opposes the possible intellect, which is wholly separate from the act, to prime matter, Dante sets up an analogy between the mode of being of the intellect in potentiality and that of matter. Though it can suffer “interpolations” with respect to thought in act, the potentiality of thought is not entirely separate from it, and the multitude is this existence of potentiality *sub actu*, that is, in proximity to the act.

Dante conceives a politics that corresponds to the inactivity of man, one which is determined, that is, not simply and absolutely beginning from the being-at-work of human rationality, but from a working that exposes and contains in itself the possibility of its own non existing, of its own inactivity. From this inactivity, Dante deduces the necessity of the multitude as the subject of politics that exceeds every particular community, and of the Monarchy or the Empire as the regulating principle corresponding to this excess. What other consequences thought can draw from the awareness of its own essential inactivity, and whether, in general, there is a politics possible today that is equal to the absence of a work of man, and will not simply fall back into the assumption of a biopolitical task—this must for now remain in suspense. What is certain, however, is that it will be necessary to put aside the emphasis on labor and production and to attempt to think of the multitude as a figure, if not of inaction, at least of a working that in every act realizes its own *shabbat* and in every work is capable of exposing its own inactivity and its own potentiality.

Bare Life or Social Indeterminacy?

Ernesto Laclau

I have great admiration for the work of Giorgio Agamben. I particularly appreciate his dazzling classical erudition, his skill—both intuitive and analytical—in dealing with theoretical categories, and his ability to relate systems of thought whose connections are not immediately obvious. This appreciation does not go, however, without some deep reservations concerning his theoretical conclusions, and these reservations are what I want to elaborate upon here. If I had to put them in a nutshell, I would assert that Agamben has—inverting the usual saying—the vices of his virtues. Reading his texts, one often has the feeling that he jumps too quickly from having established the *genealogy* of a term, a concept or an institution, to determine its actual working in a contemporary context, that in some sense the *origin* has a secret determining priority over what follows from it. I am not, of course, claiming that Agamben makes the naïve mistake of assuming that etymology provides the cipher or clue to what follows from it, but, I would argue, many times his discourse remains uneasily undecided between genealogical and structural explanation. Let us take an example from Saussurean linguistics: the Latin term *necare* (to kill) has become in modern French *noyer* (to drown), and we can examine as much as we want this diachronic change in the relation between signifier and