

Article

“God Has Not Died, He Became Government”: Use-of-Oneself and Immanence in Giorgio Agamben’s Work

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Abstract: This article delves into the theme of the death of God in Giorgio Agamben’s work from a political perspective, seeking to interpret the notion of “God” in Agamben through the concepts of “government” and “transcendence”. Although Agamben does not extensively address the theme of the death of God, my hypothesis is that by continually dealing with the ethical and political legacy of Western theology, it is possible to conceive the death of God as an unconsummated political horizon, but that it is yet to come. In this sense, the first two sections of the text provide a review of the theme of governance of men and governance of oneself in Agamben’s work, engaging in dialogue with Schmitt, Peterson, Heidegger, Foucault, and Plato, as well as the concepts of transcendence *oikonomia*, technology, and care. The last two sections of the text explore Agamben’s response to this diagnosis. Agamben’s philosophical proposal is presented through a dialogue with Spinoza and Stoicism, with the central concept being the idea of use of oneself, which is linked to the notions of immanence, Ungovernable, and anarchy.

Keywords: death of God; governance of oneself; use of oneself; political theology; economic theology; transcendence; immanence



Citation: Brum Neto, B. “God Has Not Died, He Became Government”: Use-of-Oneself and Immanence in Giorgio Agamben’s Work. *Philosophies* **2024**, *9*, 112. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies9040112>

Academic Editor: Lissa McCullough

Received: 29 March 2024

Revised: 22 July 2024

Accepted: 24 July 2024

Published: 27 July 2024



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1. Introduction

In a famous interview granted to Peppe Salvà, published by Ragusa News in 2012, Agamben asserts: “*Dio non è morto, è diventato Denaro*” (God has not died, he became Money) [1].

The context of this statement is the invocation of the concept of “state of necessity” by the Monti government as the only possible solution to overcome the financial crisis and other corruptions of political power in Italy. Agamben, explicitly inspired by Walter Benjamin, argues that contemporary capitalism has normalized crisis, so that the strategy of exception is constantly invoked to save the economy, the people, the state, jobs, and stability. In this context, capitalism consists of the “most fierce, relentless, and irrational religion that has ever existed” and “whose liturgy is work and whose object is money”.

One aspect of Agamben’s work highlighted in this interview is that, for him, as for Nietzsche, God has not died once and for all, but “remains (*bleibt*) and continues to cast his shadow over Europe” [2]. In this sense, there is still much to be done to free our ethical, political, and artistic thoughts from the divine shadow¹. All of Agamben’s genealogical work on theology focuses on the secularized forms of the sacred in the contemporary world, as well as on the forms of maintenance of this divine power, that is, on liturgy. In Agamben’s vocabulary, this transformation of something divine or sacred, such as God, into something profane, such as money, without losing the theological signature, wherein the theological effects remain intact and operative, is designated by the concept of secularization. The only strategy envisaged by Agamben to combat the continuity of the divine in the world is that of profanation, which, unlike secularization, liberates things and practices for common use.

With that in mind, I will argue in this text that although Agamben says that God has not died, but became money, the idea that “God has not died, he has become government” is

also compatible with his philosophy². I intend to extract from this reasoning the thesis that, for Agamben, the destitution of government, both in its objective form of the governance of men and in its subjective form of governance of oneself, is the only way to achieve the effective death of God, constituting, in this sense, an aspect of the ethics and politics to come, thinkable for Agamben through the notion of use. That is, profanation can be accomplished only through restitution to use.

To do so, I will undertake an archaeological journey within the Agambenian corpus, aiming to show two registers in which the theme of government and, therefore, of the survival of God, appears: on the one hand, the governance of men; on the other hand, governance of oneself. The first aspect will involve a confrontation with the way Agamben thinks about the institution of secular forms of governance of men in a dialogue with Carl Schmitt, Erik Peterson, Heidegger, and Foucault, with the main source being the volume *The Kingdom and the Glory*. The second point will be discussed through a debate with Foucault and Plato, with sources being the books *The Highest Poverty* and *The Use of Bodies*. In conclusion, I will propose that for Agamben, the destitution of governance of men and governance of oneself is only possible through the recovery of Spinoza's "atheistic" conception of God. Also important will be Agamben's take on Stoicism in formulating the idea of the use of oneself. In this sense, it is only through an idea of the Ungovernable that the death of God could come along.

2. Governance of Men: From *Oikonomia* to Technology

We begin our journey with a genealogy of what I have called the objective face of government, which is that of the governance of men. We will see that the governance of men is linked to a specific notion of transcendence, developed within theological discussions about *oikonomia* and the possibility of political theology. Furthermore, we will also see how this transcendence maintains its effectiveness in the governance of men through the functioning of technology.

It is within the series *Homo Sacer* itself that Agamben begins the project of a theological genealogy of economy and government. Unlike in *The Sovereign Power and Bare Life* and *State of Exception*, where the emphasis is on the exception apparatus, that is, on the particular form of the presence of the law (or its effects), which "is in force without signifying" [4] (p. 46), in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, it is a matter of investigating the apparatuses that sustain the governmental machine. In this volume, "the double structure of the governmental machine, which in the *State of Exception* appeared in the correlation between *auctoritas* and *potestas*, here takes the form of the articulation between Kingdom and Government" [4]³; it is also here that Agamben surprises us with the meaning of exception acquired by the term *oikonomia* over the sixth century, especially in the context of the canon law of the Byzantine Church [4] (p. 415).

Despite this continuity, which can be seen throughout the volumes of the series, there is no doubt that there are many novelties in *The Kingdom and the Glory*. Agamben does not intend to ask what sovereignty is, or what government is, but rather to apprehend the polarities that translate the constitution of political power in the West and to question them in their mutual intelligibility, in their reciprocal elucidation. This also means that Agamben does not intend to conduct a properly theological investigation, but, following in the footsteps of Carl Schmitt, to investigate the pragmatics, operation, and effectiveness of concepts that have emerged or that have been densified in the theological sphere, and that persist as secularized concepts in Western tradition and are, therefore, important for understanding the political-legal phenomenon in the West. These technicized concepts in the theological sphere are those that, in contemporary secularized societies, even in a non-theological context, carry with them theological signatures [5], that is, marks of the presence and survival of God [6].

One of the main theses present in the theological genealogy undertaken by Agamben is that announced already at the beginning of *The Kingdom and the Glory*:

One of the theses that we shall try to demonstrate is that two broadly speaking political paradigms, antinomical but functionally related to one another, are derived from Christian theology: political theology, which finds the transcendence of sovereign power on the single God, and economic theology, which replaces this transcendence with the idea of an *oikonomia*, conceived as an immanent ordering—domestic and not political in a strict sense—of both divine and human life. Political philosophy and the modern theory of sovereignty derive from the first paradigm; modern biopolitics up to the current triumph of economy and government over every other aspect of social life derive from the second paradigm [4] (p. 373).

Following Schmitt's reasoning, it may seem quite logical that, subsequent to his investigations into the state of exception, Agamben dedicated himself to a theological genealogy. There would be, after all, a structural analogy between theology and jurisprudence, between miracle and exception. However, Agamben's thesis goes beyond Schmitt's proposal, as he undertakes an archaeological study to understand the reasons why one of the essential paradigms of Christian thought has been relegated to oblivion. According to Agamben, Christianity does indeed have a political sense, but, perhaps more fundamentally, it has an economic-governing sense.

The importance of the economic-governing paradigm originating from Christian theology becomes quite evident when Agamben proposes a reinterpretation of the history of Western thought with theology as its guiding thread. Positioning himself in a debate with Blumenberg, Löwith, Marquard, and Schmitt, primarily focused on the notion of secularization [7], Agamben expands Löwith's thesis in his 1953 book, *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen* according to which "both German idealism's philosophy of history and the Enlightenment's idea of progress are nothing but secularization of the theology of history and Christian eschatology" [4] (p. 376). From this even broader key of interpretation, Agamben asserts that the true understanding of the moments that culminated in German idealism and the Enlightenment is indebted to the notion of divine *oikonomia*, that is, the conception of how God acts in the world. This debate, in turn, is ancient and concerns the notion of Providence⁴.

The contribution of Agamben's studies of Foucault will be fruitful in this regard: contrary to Erik Peterson, he reaffirms the political nature of Christianity; against Schmitt, he emphasizes the necessity of advancing beyond sovereignty towards the governmental and biopolitical aspect of Christianity. Indeed, Agamben adds to the political theology that has always served to legitimize the powers of the sovereign the economic theology, which turns to the governance of men and things. The government then appears as the central problem of Western politics, as its point is still not sufficiently clarified, as the pole of the governmental machine whose history still lacks interrogations. It is in this way that Agamben intends to complement Foucault's history of governmentality, indicating the structural continuity between the governance of the world and the governance of men, Providence, and management.

Despite the undeniable presence of biopolitical themes throughout the *Homo Sacer* tetralogy, the same cannot be said of the notion of governance. This concept began to appear more prominently from 2006 onwards, the year of the publication of *What is an apparatus?* [9], where the fundamental premises developed in *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2007) can be found. Among the novelties of the book is the redefinition of the concepts of biopolitics and sovereignty. They no longer appear as two sides of the same coin, as was the case in *Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben reinstates a distinction between sovereignty and biopolitics worth noting. They appear as expressions of two theological traditions, political theology and economic theology. Instead of the image of the sides of a coin, as if they were merely two faces of the same thing, sovereignty, and biopolitics then appear as "antinomical but functionally related" poles of the same governmental machine. Between these poles, there is only a field of forces responsible for making the machine spin in a void, without there being a fundamental identity between them. This means that in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, the critique of sovereignty is never com-

pletely abandoned by Agamben, however, gives way to a relevant space, possibly that of the protagonist, for the critique of the governance of men, a displacement that, as in Foucault's thought, is determinant of the rest of Agamben's critical-philosophical production.

In this sense, one of the fundamental argumentative steps is found in Chapter 5 of the book, dedicated to the "providential machine". In paragraph 5.1, the genealogy of *oikonomia* advanced in this book leads Agamben to a "correction" of the genealogy of governmentality proposed by Foucault in *Security, Territory, Population*. Taking seriously the theological implications of the term *oikonomia*, Agamben details and corrects Foucault's historical-chronological exposition. This time, the retreat goes "to God": Agamben identifies in the elaboration of the Trinitarian paradigm, the origin of the notion of an economic governance of men. Both Trinitarian *oikonomia* and providence appear, for Agamben, as confirmations of the theoretical core of Foucault's genealogy, but in a theological domain. As Agamben reports, the limitation of Foucault's investigation of governmentality is due to the absence of a connection between the question of the governance of men and the question of the governance of the world. That is, what Foucault missed was precisely the consideration of the elaborations of the notion of providence in the constitution of the essential elements of a theory of government. In this sense, more than a consideration of Thomas Aquinas' *De Regno*, Foucault should have sought in *De Gubernatione Mundi* the constitution of the notion of government.

The next volumes of the tetralogy confirm this focal shift from sovereignty to government. Already in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, we are introduced to the Ungovernable, as "that which can never assume the form of an *oikonomia*" [4] (p. 429). It is given this Ungovernable that Agamben will formulate the guiding onto-messianic concepts of the fourth volume of the tetralogy, which contains the most propositional moments of Agamben's philosophical project. In this sense, it should be emphasized the importance of the notions of use and form of life.

In the last aleph of the final chapter of *The Kingdom and the Glory*, entitled *Archaeology of Glory*, just before the threshold and the appendix, Agamben concludes the book with a visceral critique of Heidegger. According to Agamben, "Heidegger cannot resolve the problem of technology because he was unable to restore it to its political locus" [4] (p. 601). For Agamben, to think of technique in its political locus, that is, to think of the politics of technique—if indeed it constitutes politics—translates into the idea of considering the technologies of governance of men. It is through an expansion of Foucault's and Heidegger's perspectives that the question of technology and government meet in Agamben, not only as matters of men but also concerning shadows (or excessive blinding light) of God. And this encounter does not take place anywhere: *The Kingdom and the Glory* and *Opus Dei* are written to show that theology was, in the West, the privileged site of ethical-political-institutional inventions. It is within the realm of theology—and ontology⁵ created and perpetuated in the hands of theologians—that the most elementary notions of governance of men would have been forged through terminological strategies [4] (p. 714).

On the other hand, Foucault and Heidegger do not seem to be entirely blind to this fact. The relationship between pastoral power and government in Foucault is evidence of this [10]. In Heidegger's case, on the other hand, Agamben criticizes his adherence precisely to the theological creationist paradigm of the Christian tradition to think about the history of being. The privileging of the concept of "pro-duction" in Heidegger, through which he thinks the work of art in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, would, according to Agamben, be linked to this privileging of the creationist paradigm.

Concluding the second chapter of *Opus Dei*, dedicated to the history of the development of Christian ontology, Agamben explains how his investigations in this book "reconstruct a missing chapter in the history of the transformation of *energeia* into *actualitas*" [4] (p. 698) a history present in the text *Metaphysics as History of Being* in Heidegger's *Nietzsche* in the *Gesamtausgabe* (1961).

One can ask to what extent this reconstruction of the determinate influence of Christian theology on the history of being is indebted to the privilege accorded to the creationist

paradigm. It is by virtue of this model that Heidegger could think of the essence of technology as production and disposition and the *Gestell* as the securing of the real in the mode of availability. But precisely for this reason he was not able to see what has today become perfectly obvious, and that is that one cannot understand the metaphysics of technology if one understands it only in the form of production. It is just as much and above all governance and *oikonomia*, which in the last analysis can even provisionally put causal production between parentheses in the name of a more refined and diffuse form of management of human beings and of things. And it is this peculiar praxis whose characteristics we have sought to define through our analysis of liturgy [4] (p. 699).

Technology as governance becomes the central point of Agamben's investigation, serving as the guiding thread until the "abandonment" of the *Homo Sacer* project. Reinterpreting *Gestell* in light of governance (of *oikonomia*), Agamben states that "the term *Ge-stell* corresponds perfectly (not only in its form: the German *stellen* is equivalent to *ponere*, that is, *to place*) to the Latin term *dispositio*, which translates the Greek *oikonomia*" [4] (p. 600). Agamben's interpretation of technology in Heidegger aims to show that it becomes the law (*Gesetz*) of the administration and governance of men. This means that Agamben criticizes this phenomenon of becoming *Ge-setz* of *Ge-stell*, that is, the becoming the law of the technology. The endings "*stell*" and "*setz*" refer to the German verbs "*stellen*" and "*setzen*", which mean the operation of "putting" or "placing." *Ge-setz* and *Ge-stell* also refer to the state of being "put" or "placed", or even "positivized". This reading is possible from the prefix "*ge*", which in German is used in the construction of the participle. "*Gesetzt*" and "*gestellt*" mean, respectively, the "placed", the "defined", the "set", the "inscribed", the "provided", and the "made available." In one word, the instituted. In this sense, the direction of the critique of Agamben's concept of destituent power (*potere destituent*), formulated in the Epilogue of *The Use of Bodies*, becomes clearer. If technique becomes the law, if this institution of technology as the governance of men is the problem, the solution, for Agamben, consists in its destitution. Thus, *Ge-stell* designates, for Agamben, the continuous "operative state" of a single, same, and incessant law of orderability and disposition, analogous to the idea of God's constant and permanent intervention in the world, in the face of which his proposal consists of its *Ent-setzung* (Destitution)⁶.

3. Governance of Oneself and the Need to Surmount Care

Continuing along the suggested trajectory, let us now delve into governance in its subjective dimension, known as governance of oneself. The concept of transcendence remains effective and relevant here, particularly through the notion of subjectivity, which relies on the idea of a soul governing the body.

In Chapter 3 of the first part of *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben once again turns to Foucault's writings to problematize the issue of government. However, this time, Agamben's target is not what we call objective or external government. In *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben focuses on the governance of oneself. Agamben favors Foucault's reading in *Hermeneutics of the Subject* of Plato's *First Alcibiades*, where Foucault effectively discusses the form and meaning of the verb *chrestai* (to use). The problem, for Agamben, is that in discussing the verb *chrestai*, Foucault's central theme is not use, but *epimeleia heautou*—that is, "care of the self" or "occupation with oneself", *souci de soi*.

Agamben's disagreement with Foucault arises when the notion of *chresis* is integrated into the history of care of the self. Thus, although Foucault addresses *chresis*, he remains within the realm of care of oneself, which makes reflections on the use of oneself secondary and insufficient. What is decisive here is Foucault's emphasis on care over use, which touches the root of the distinction between ethics and politics in the West and is interpreted by Agamben as a kind of continuity of the Platonic gesture. That is, although Foucault reads the *First Alcibiades* only as a kind of paradigm capable of shedding light on the tradition of Western thought that thematizes care, and even though Foucault seeks, for example, to distance himself from the tradition that emphasized the epistemological character of care of

oneself, identified with the Delphic precept “know thyself” (*gnóthi seautón*) [13]⁷, Agamben still places Foucault within the Socratic–Platonic tradition of the primacy of care over use.

The relation of use, which constitutes precisely the primary dimension in which subjectivity is constituted, thus remains in the shadows and gives way to a primacy of care over use that seems to repeat the Platonic gesture in which *chresis* was resolved into care (*epimeleia*) and command (*archè*) [4] (p. 1058).

According to Foucault, the dialogue *First Alcibiades* deepens the precept of care of oneself in two ways: first, it seeks to understand how the discussion between Socrates and Alcibiades progressed from “‘what is my self’—to the answer—‘I am my soul’”; second, it aims to specify what is meant by care. Foucault’s genealogy of the soul subject is emblematic here. In our philosophical tradition, especially in Plato, the soul has always appeared as belonging to a privileged metaphysical realm, making possible the knowledge of forms (ideas), even in life in the case of the philosopher, as we read in Plato’s *Phaedo*. Agamben hints at the thematization of the soul as the essence of what I am, which enables me to use things as instruments, right at the beginning of the first part of his book. This reference to Alcibiades 130a1 becomes clearer as we progress through the text and recognize that Agamben is addressing a Platonic legacy that reaches Foucault through the prioritization of care over use—an idea also relevant to Heidegger, another thinker focused on care⁸. That is, even though Foucault tries to distance himself from Plato and the epistemological reading of care of oneself, he still thematizes the subject’s relationship with itself and with others from the perspective of care. By archaeologically delving into the question of the soul, Agamben sheds light on the extensively discussed and still predominant relationship of command in the Western tradition. Care and command, it turns out, are much more intricately intertwined than previously assumed. This refusal to prioritize the care of the soul, which serves the framework of governance of oneself and, consequently, of governance of others, underpins the significance that Agamben assigns to the use of the body in the final volume of the tetralogy. It is necessary, then, to proceed with a critique not only of the conception of the soul-subject but also of the notion present in Plato of a “use” understood instrumentally, as a “making use of”, which is analogous to command.

For Agamben, according to the tradition handed down by Plato, the *use* of hands, the *use* of eyes, and the *use* of the body correspond to *making use of* the hands by the soul, *making use of* the eyes by the soul, and *making use of* the body by the soul. Plato establishes an analogical relationship between external instruments, which are usually handled by artisans, and internal instruments (parts of the body). This means that, for Plato, both a tool and a body part perform a comparable function before the subject who commands them. The problem, according to Agamben, is that this relationship between soul and government, care-of-the-self and governmentality, is always on the verge of becoming governance of oneself and governance of others due to the transcendence inherent in the soul-subject’s relationship with the body that paradigmatically underlies it. Governance of oneself is the primary purpose of the institution of the soul-subject, enabling, at a later stage, the governance of others.

Thus, for Agamben, Plato employs the term *chresis* (use) instrumentally. Plato’s use of use turns it into an apparatus that differentiates and articulates what commands from what is commanded. Once distinguished, *use* takes on the form of *making use of*. In Plato, use is a transitive verb, both grammatically and ontologically. Thus, if we can locate a point of emergence of a despotic concept of subject in the West, Agamben’s reading seems to indicate this relationship between the soul and parts of the body in Plato as paradigmatic and elucidative of all subsequent ones. If this is the case, the despotic relationship would have as its point of emergence—or at least as its point of refinement and reinforcement—this Socratic–Platonic inheritance, which understands the soul as that which holds a primary instrumental relationship (making use of, a commanding) to the body and its body parts—even under the sign of care. This way of conceiving this relationship is extended as a model to other relations effectively mediated by instruments, such as the classic examples of shoemaking, carpentry, etc.

But we can go even further. The decisive contours of Agamben's critique of the care tradition appear when we reclaim the political pillar of the argumentation present in Alcibiades, where it becomes clear that "care of the self is an imperative proposed to those who want to govern others, and in response to the question 'how does one govern?' Caring for oneself is a privilege of rulers and, at the same time, a duty of rulers, because they have to govern" [16]⁹. There is no doubt that Agamben's intended deviation from care veers into politics bound to the parameters of governmentality. After all, in this context, care concerns the question of becoming master and ruler.

4. Use of Oneself: Toward Immanence

Thus far, we have examined the governance of men and governance of oneself as diagnosed by Agamben. Our goal was to illustrate that both entail a notion of transcendence. Even when conceived immanently (of men by men, rather than by a personal God), governance of men remains akin to the providential theological model of governance of the world by God. Governance of oneself, conversely, relies on a transcendent soul-subject capable of governing itself and its components. Moving forward, we will explore Agamben's responses to this diagnosis. We will discover that overcoming this governmental conception of politics becomes feasible only through embracing purely immanent politics. In this regard, I posit that Spinoza—that is, Agamben's Spinoza¹⁰—could be a pivotal figure for Agamben in critiquing the governing schemes that dictate our lives. Spinoza offers Agamben an ontological-messianic¹¹ framework to render all forms of government untenable. We will delve deeper into this, commencing with the objective aspect: governance of men.

The diagnosis of divine governance of the world undergoes significant scrutiny in Agamben's exploration of Christian liturgy, which endeavors to preserve, to some degree, the presence of God in a secularized manner akin to the governance of men, framed as an economic theology. Agamben challenges this notion through a unique appropriation of Spinoza's thought, which is simultaneously messianic and ontological. This represents Agamben's pivotal interpretive move to position Spinoza as a theorist of destitution, targeting both governance of men and governance of oneself¹².

This argumentative step is carried out by Agamben based on an interpretation of the scholium of Proposition 36 of Book V and Proposition 52 of Book IV of Spinoza's *Ethics*¹³. Agamben explicitly delves into this passage in 8.26 of *The Kingdom and the Glory*, in the chapter dedicated to the *Archaeology of Glory*, just before formulating the "visceral critique" of Heidegger discussed above. At this point in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben asserts that the Spinozist concept of glory "condenses in a few vertiginous lines the theological motifs of Jewish *kabod* and Christian *doxa*." [4] (p. 598). The decisive point here is that Agamben detects in these passages "the sabbatical connection between glory and inoperativeness... Inoperativeness and glory are, in fact, the same thing: '*acquiescentia* [...] *revera a gloria* [...] *non distinguitur*' " [4] (p. 598)¹⁴.

In *Opus Dei*, developing a kind of archaeology of the predominant ethical-ontological legacy in our Latin-Christian tradition, Agamben shows how Spinozism posed a problem for those who do not give up the need for a divine governance of the world. In this sense, both Leibniz and Pufendorf are invoked as representatives of the criticism of Spinozism, especially because Spinoza's conception of God is refractory to the idea of providential transcendence, which presupposes the notion of a personal God. For them, for the sake of government, God cannot die. According to Agamben, in accusing Spinoza of atheism, Leibniz did not mean to say that Spinoza does not believe in the existence of God: "atheist, in the philosophical discourse of the time, does not designate those who deny the existence of God, but those who deny the divine governance of the world, that is, providence." [4] (p. 737). Similarly, Pufendorf "has need not only of a God but of a transcendent God who governs the world with his providence." [4] (p. 738). Faced with these offensives, Agamben asserts the following:

There is therefore a connection between the critique of Spinozism and putting forth duty as a fundamental category of ethics: it is a matter, in both cases, of affirming the solidarity between divine governance of the world and imputability of human actions. The threefold division of duties into duties toward God, toward oneself, and toward others confirms this solidarity. Situated on the hinge between human *socialitas* and divine providence, the officium renders governance possible and guarantees its effectiveness [4] (p. 738).

From the critiques of Spinozism highlighted by Agamben, it can be inferred that they only served to pique his interest in Spinoza as a theorist opposed to the tradition of governance. Consequently, Spinoza emerges in Agamben's work as an alternative to the dominant ethical-political-onto-theo-logical thought in the Western tradition. One could argue that Spinoza—or Stoicism—belongs to the canon of the Western philosophical tradition, which would make it impossible for Agamben to draw from him a way out of this tradition. It is not Agamben's intention, however, to think outside of the Western tradition; rather, his philosophy could be defined as a sustained challenge to the thought that hegemonically constitutes our way of conceiving ethics, politics, ontology, etc. from an immanent reading of this tradition.

Agamben concludes the Epilogue of *The Use of Bodies* by revisiting his interpretation of the *Ethics* advanced in *The Kingdom and the Glory*. At this moment, Agamben revisits the image of contemplating the power to act. The concept of contemplation gains singular prominence here; it appears as a metaphysical operator for liberating the protagonism of *energeia* and action. Agamben makes his Spinoza the quintessential author of what I have called in my recent works *vitam destituere*, meaning, this philosophy committed to the constitution of a state of contemplation and inoperativeness of human works, marked by the destitution of the social, biological, material, linguistic, historical, and political determinations attributed to humans, responsible for their governmental subjectivation. It is as if the messianic–ontological interpretation of Spinoza's concept of glory serves as a springboard for Agamben to think, against tradition, a doctrine of the use of life, which consists of an ethical doctrine irreducible to the one that hegemonically imposes itself and governs us.

Regarding the subjective conception of government, the care of oneself leading to the governance of oneself, Spinoza appears to offer a useful paradigm for Agamben to consider not only its destitution but also the formulation of its competing syntagma: the use of oneself. In 1996, referring to the *Compendium of the Hebrew Language*, Agamben recovers Spinoza's observations on the reflexive verbal form as an expression of an immanent cause, that is, a cause in which there is a coincidence between agent and patient in the same person. Spinoza uses a Ladino verb to provide an example of this verbal form: *pasearse*. Agamben takes this verb as the paradigm of a specific type of action (which will become, within Agamben's thought, a paradigm to use), in which “potentiality coincides with actuality and inoperativeness with the work [...] [describing] the infinite movement of self-constitution and self-manifestation of Being” [23]. Agamben then relates Spinoza's concern to a Stoic theme that understands modes and events as immanent to substance. A confrontation with Stoic thought, therefore, becomes imperative¹⁵.

Reacting to the practical-theoretical determinations of the Socratic–Platonic tradition of care and soul-subject, in I.1.5 of *The Use of Bodies*, entitled *Use of oneself*, Agamben advances his attempt to emancipate the concept of use. We have seen above that, according to the Italian philosopher, a good portion of Western tradition has obscured the doctrine of use by resorting to the relationship between the soul and the body parts of the human body as a paradigm. This tradition was not invented by Plato, but his theoretical investigation in the Platonic dialogue on *epimeleia heautou* was interpreted by both Foucault and Agamben as a decisive moment in the conclusion of the history of care and, incidentally, of the concept of use. As observed, the relationship between the soul and the body parts has a despotic nature, and its fate is connected to Plato's doctrine of self-care (and, therefore, of

self-knowledge). It is in this context that we must measure the importance of Agamben's mention of Stoicism as a "doctrine of the use of life" [4] (p. 1073).

Agamben will argue that in Stoicism there is a shift in the paradigmatic relationship from which the doctrine of use can be conceived. The first and most evident displacement made by the Stoics consists of a decentering man in favor of the living being. The examples mentioned by Agamben do not start from man or his soul as the first element; rather, they speak of the "living being", so that the relationship of the living being with its body parts can also be thought of by resorting to the relationship of animals with their body parts. Thus, what initially may appear as a mere deviation from the tradition of care achieves a deviation from many other foundational aspects of Western thought; among them, a decentering of man and the soul as the starting point—a deviation from the anthropological determination that characterizes the current concept of technique according to Heidegger. In this way, if what we might call the "Platonic tradition" thinks, as we said, the *use* of hands, the *use* of eyes, and the *use* of the body as correlates of a "making use of" (of making use of hands by the soul, of making use of eyes by the soul, or of making use of the body by the soul), the alternative philosophy to Platonism, which extends to Lucretius, according to Agamben, radically enacts the doctrine of use. The use of hands, the use of eyes, the use of the body, but also the use of ears, the use of the trunk, the use of the snout, the use of antennae, the use of claws, the use of wings, and the use of the tongue; uses that are posterior to the existence of the body parts and concomitant with the invention of the function they perform: "no organ was created for the sake of an end, neither the eyes for vision, nor the ears for hearing, nor the tongue for speech." [26]. Thus, the "making use of" indicates a teleology reprojected as immanent to the nature of things, which, according to Agamben, was exposed in all its problematic nature by Lucretius, by taking the Epicurean doctrine of the destruction of all teleology to its ultimate consequences [4] (p. 1075) [26].

With this reference to Lucretius, we can also unmistakably associate the materialist and immanent sense of the privilege of bodies implied in Agamben's notion of use—which Agamben highlighted in the epigraph of *The Highest Poverty* taken from Lucretius, where we read "life is not given as property to anyone, but for the use of all" (*vitaque mancipio nulli datur, omnibus usu*). In *The Highest Poverty*, we can find another important point of communication that aligns with the deactivation of the anthropological determination: by choosing a life of poverty and, therefore, renouncing property, the Franciscans intended to live like animals, in that the use of things does not make them owners. The example cited by Agamben is that of the horse, which, when eating grass, does not make the grass its property.

In this context, Agamben's return to the Stoics becomes understandable, as it leads him to endorse and build upon Thomas Bénatouil's thesis presented in his book *Faire usage: la pratique du stoïcisme* [27]. Agamben proposes that the doctrine of *oikeiosis*, understood as "the beginning and foundation of Stoic ethics"¹⁶, should be read in light of the doctrine of the use of oneself. For Agamben, "the familiarity, the *oikeiosis* of the living being with itself is dissolved without remainder into its self-perception, and this latter coincides in turn with the capacity of the living being to use its own body parts and its own constitution" [4] (p. 1075). Thus, *oikeiosis* and use of oneself must be thought of in light of their co-constitutive nexus.

This Agambenian privilege of a certain Stoic tradition emerges from an interest in deviating from the tradition that articulates "care-knowledge-property-government"; it consists, therefore, in attempting to seek eclipsed roots of ethics and politics that allow us to reclaim an alternative legacy to the technicized outcomes achieved by the lexicon of law, theology, and epistemology, widely disseminated in our tradition. Instead of this first and hegemonic chaining, we can say that Agamben suggests its replacement by another, that of "familiarity-sensation/constitution and use of oneself". This new chaining, thought in light not of anthropological determination (*anthropologische Bestimmung*), but of the living being, dispenses any instruction, although in practice it appears with such "dexterity", "ease", "agility", and "gracefulness" that it is as if it had been instructed. The mystery,

for Agamben, surrounding this cosmological relationship he strives to describe, consists precisely in understanding this “uninstructed”, “irresponsible”, and “unconscious” use enjoyed by the animal, which prevents its acts or gestures from being understood as “works”. We do not delay in recognizing here the elements that may constitute the notion of subjectivity desired by Agamben when the subject is a life outside of the law, a form of life. The abdication of instruction, responsibility, and consciousness must be read as renunciation of a model of technical and despotic subjectivity, widely disseminated in Western ontology, law, politics, and theology. To this model, Agamben proposes that we should start from the use of oneself, which, “contrary to the prestige of consciousness in our culture” [4] (p. 1086), begins with “the familiarity and sensation of oneself, spoken of by the Stoics”, that is, a starting point that does not presuppose “a rational knowledge”, “a subject of knowledge”, or “a subject-soul”. Use of oneself starts from those parts that are obscure and immanent to the use of oneself, and that is articulated in a zone of non-consciousness [4] (p. 1086). In Agamben’s reasoning, neither the *epimeleia heautou* nor the *gnôthi seautón* should be privileged over use.

Against the scholastic tradition, of which Heidegger would still retain some traces, Agamben restores to its habitual character. Throwing us back behind the division of being between *dynamis* (potentiality) and *energeia* (act), Agamben intends to destitute the apparatus of the governmental machine operating as a “sovereign element”, in both the objective and subjective realms, of the governance of men and governance of oneself respectively. While remaining unscathed by the Aristotelian division between potentiality and actuality, ‘use’ corresponds to a conception of potency independent of an operation or passage that confers upon it the status of reality/actuality/effectiveness. ‘Use’, thus, corresponds to what Agamben denominates in the Epilogue of *The Use of Bodies* as destituent power, precisely to the extent that it never integrates the oscillatory and dialectical movement of ontology founded on the distinction between potentiality and act. Agamben’s destituent power consists in translating use into a formulation that is not merely inert or merely passive, but that shifts the emphasis away from the operativeness of the instituting subject. As potency is liberated from the pragmatic imprisonment established by the Aristotelian division of being into act and potency, use emerges as a political starting point outside the onto-theo-logical-political-governing parameters that incessantly seek to articulate being and praxis, *auctoritas*, and *potestas*, based on the fiction of their division. The theological-political apparatus creates and feeds off bipolar divisions and keeps men under the yoke of government.

5. Ungovernable and An-Archy

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben employs the term “Ungovernable” only twice. However, despite its limited usage, the concept is undoubtedly central to Agamben’s reflection. If governance of men and governance of oneself can be seen as linked to an idea of transcendence and the politics of the survival of God, then the Ungovernable must be understood as the politics of pure immanence, namely, the politics after the death of God.

The first occurrence is in *The Kingdom and the Glory* and the second in *The Use of Bodies*. In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, the concept appears at the end of the section *Being and Acting*, which corresponds to the end of the third chapter of the book, just before the beginning of the threshold separating it from the next chapter, dedicated to the genealogy of the concept of government, an endeavor that demands from Agamben a meticulous work on the destinies of Aristotle’s reception in the debate between Schmitt and Peterson, through the paradigmatic scholastic reading made by Thomas Aquinas. In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, we read: “This does not mean that, beyond government and anarchy, an Ungovernable, is not possible to think an Ungovernable [*un Ingovernabile*], that is, something that could never assume the form of an *oikonomia*” [4] (p. 429). In *The Use of Bodies*, the Ungovernable appears in the form of a polemic with the author of *Security, Territory, Population*:

What Foucault does not seem to see, despite the fact that antiquity would seem to offer an example in some way, is the possibility of a relation with the self and a form of life that

never assumes the figure of a free subject. This implies, if power relations necessarily refer to a subject, the existence of a zone of ethics entirely subtracted from strategic relationships, of an Ungovernable that is situated beyond states of domination and power relations [4] (p. 1125).

In both cases, the Ungovernable emerges as that which escapes the administration, the “management”, of the economy, that is, of government. However, this does not mean that the figure of the Ungovernable is anti-political or apolitical. If our reading thus far holds true, it means that the Ungovernable consists of the space of politics that opens up once the onto-theo-logical-providential apparatus of government is subtracted. The retrieval of the notion of use and its elevation by Agamben as the central concept of his onto-messianic-political proposal points to his effort to address our traditional way of thinking about politics from its limits and extremities, thus enabling a kind of critical retreat. Not surprisingly, then, the Ungovernable appears in a confrontation with Foucault not only regarding the governance of men but also the notion of self-governing subjectivity. By revisiting the theme of the slave in *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben confronts Foucault with his alleged limits, which converge for Agamben in the pursuit of a conception of a free subject. The allied apparatus of the governmental model denounced by Agamben, ultimately, is none other than the very freedom of the subject. The Ungovernable aims for a conception of subjectivity beyond the practices of freedom relative to the subject. We are here in the realm of free use, which, to paraphrase Hölderlin, “is the most difficult” [28].

The distinction between a free subject and free use may appear insignificant, but it is not. By asserting the freedom of use over that of the subject, Agamben introduces an ethical and political framework that diverges radically from the hegemonic conceptions prevalent in our tradition, which often equate freedom with ownership. In the ethics and politics of use, the subject is conceived as originally rooted in the world, in a kind of fundamental *contact* with it. There is a freedom that precedes the freedom of subjects, but it differs from that freedom of the state of nature fictitiously conceived by Hobbes to justify the absolute concentration of power in the hands of the sovereign.

For Agamben, use is primarily about destitution. Destitution without abdication, as the Pauline formula reminds us¹⁷. The relationship between use and destituent power becomes clear when Agamben reveals the deponent sense of certain verbs, as read by Latin grammarians. Deponent verbs are those that cannot easily be situated on either the side of active verbs or passive ones, akin to Spinoza’s *pasearse*. In Agamben’s words, deponent verbs “do not express an operation, but depose it, neutralize it, and render it inoperative, and in this, way they expose it” [4] (p. 1277). *Pasearse*, thus, expresses “an action of the self on the self, in which agent and patient enter into a threshold of absolute indistinction” [4] (p. 1054). Retrieving the deponent sense in use is important because it allows us to understand Agamben’s destituent power beyond the constitutional-legal debate. Use, as *pasearse*, presupposes a deposition of the individual’s own subjectivity upon themselves. What is deposited by use in the Agambenian sense is the very command relationship of the soul–subject with its body. By focusing on use, Agamben destitute despotic command, which serves as the basis for the ethical–political relations mapped out by him since classical antiquity. Instead of the subject, Agamben bets on the use of oneself as the starting point for a politics of immanence¹⁸.

This does not mean that there are no subjects for Agamben. What changes is the starting point of the ethics and politics to come. Not the subject, but use itself as a fundamental political category, as the starting point of an ontology of potentiality. By the philosophy of use, we should understand, following contemporary critiques of the subjectivity model supported by the *subjectum*, a conception of subject alternative to those hegemonically available. Once the difference between thinking of the free subject and the free use is clarified, we can then establish two conceptions of the subject in question: on one hand, the “subject of use”; on the other hand, the subject of care. The “subject of use” differs from the subject of care in that it does not establish with itself, with others, or with the world a relationship of command or appropriation. The “subject of use” does not make use

of its body parts but rather uses them. The body parts, or the body itself, are not organs aimed at pre-established functions, as if they were tools or instruments created by nature to perform predefined functions. The soul of the subject of use does not relate to the body parts of a puppet master. In the realm of the philosophy of use, the soul is not conceived as a sovereign or a despot. The philosophy of use coincides with the foregrounding of a conception of a subject that does not play the game of governmentality and that is not captured essentially, substantially, and determinatively by biopolitical devices. By deviating from the tradition that privileges care—a tradition culminating in a kind of secret solidarity among Plato, Foucault, and Heidegger—Agamben finds in the philosophy of use the occasion to contemplate the Ungovernable subject, a subject without command (that is, an *an-archic* subject) [33].

In conclusion, as we have seen throughout the text, for Agamben, since God has not died, but became government, the death of God must necessarily entail the destitution of all forms of governance, whether it be the governance of men or the governance of oneself. To destitute government in Agamben's work means to depose all traces of transcendence and to bet exclusively on the immanence of the use of oneself.

Funding: This article was funded by Fundação Carlos Chagas Filho de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, no âmbito do Programa Pós-Doutorado Nota 10-2021, da FAPERJ. Nº DO PROCESSO E26/204.406/2021. Nº DE MATRÍCULA 2021.01576.3.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ In this sense, and only in this sense, I disagree with Lemm's (2021) suggestion in her insightful article on Agamben's interpretation of the death of God within the scope of his theory of creativity. In contrast to Nietzsche, Lemm understands that Agamben proposes the that "abandonment of the artistic machine to its destiny" is something like mere abandonment, implying that for Agamben, an inaction or inertia of the human—an indifference—would be sufficient for the overcoming of God, thus concluding that for Nietzsche there are things that need to be continuously done (work) for God to be overcome. While Agamben indeed does not rely on work, his reliance on inoperativeness does not imply mere abandonment. It is, rather, as I will argue, about considering a different way of acting. The theory of destitution is therefore not merely abandoning oneself to fate. And perhaps this becomes clearer when we transplant the issue from the realm of art to that of politics. As we will see throughout this text, overcoming God implies overcoming governance. And this is only possible through the recovery of an ontology not committed to the Christian God.
- ² On the relationship between theology and philosophy in Agamben's work, see [3].
- ³ From now on, I'll quote this volume as "*Homo sacer*..." following the respective page.
- ⁴ See [8] Reese's (2021) definition of Providence: "Providence has reference to that care, and preservation, and government which God exercises over all things that He created, so that they will accomplish the purposes for which they were created" (p. 2476).
- ⁵ Agamben's concept of ontology can be found in the introduction of part two of *An archeology of Ontology in The Use of Bodies*. See [4] p. 1127.
- ⁶ See [11]. For the original German text see [12]
- ⁷ See 124b and 129a.
- ⁸ See [14], especially chapter 8; See also [15]
- ⁹ I translated this passage to English.
- ¹⁰ For a different interpretation of Spinoza in the opposite sense of Agamben, see [17]. For an account of the ontology of neoliberal governance in relation to the *Italian theory*, see [18].
- ¹¹ As Roggero correctly puts it: "Agamben will make use of the model of messianic community to postulate a new and coherent ontology of potentiality – an ontology that prioritizes potentiality over act, possibility over realization – which in turn constitutes a political proposal" (p. 95). [19].
- ¹² On the relation between Spinoza and Heidegger in contemporary philosophy, see [20].
- ¹³ For a critique of Agamben's reading of Spinoza, see [21].

- 14 See also [22].
- 15 In order to better understand Agamben's approach to Stoicism, as well as the connection between Agamben's ontology and his concept of immanence, see [24]. See also chapters 11 and 12 from [25].
- 16 Pholenz, quoted in [4] p. 1074.
- 17 More on this subject in [29]. See also [30].
- 18 For a critique of the so-called politics of immanence, see [31,32].

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