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The Omnibus Homo Sacer; What is Philosophy?

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Book Note

The Omnibus Homo Sacer

Giorgio Agamben. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017. 1336pp.

What is Philosophy?

Giorgio Agamben. Translated by Lorenzo Chiesa. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018. 114pp.

Sotiris Mitralaxis*

The Omnibus Homo Sacer brings together in 1336 pages all volumes of the twenty-year *Homo Sacer* project by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, written between 1990 and 2015, starting with *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* and concluding with *The Use of Bodies*. In line with Agamben's division of the project, the *Omnibus* edition is divided into four parts (Part 1: *Homo Sacer*; Part 2: *State of Exception, Stasis, The Sacrament of Language, The Kingdom and the Glory & Opus Dei*; Part 3: *Remnants of Auschwitz*; and Part 4: *The Highest Poverty & The Use of Bodies*). Since the volumes

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comprising the *Omnibus* edition have already been published in English and are either already considered as contemporary classics (particularly *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, which has arguably occupied the position of a classic in political philosophy a mere two decades since its publication) or find themselves *en route* to becoming so, it would make little sense to refer to the project's *substance* in this book note or to describe the main characteristics of Agamben's thought; I will restrain myself to commenting on the book as such.

This is a very elegantly executed *Omnibus* edition, with attention to detail, and is highly legible from a practical perspective. It is fortunate that there are no new prefaces and introductions to this *Omnibus* edition but just the volumes comprising a monumental project, as such new material would be rather superfluous and, potentially, soon outdated; this choice seems to betray Stanford University Press' conviction that both the project encapsulated in the book and the present edition as such are classics-to-be. The fact that this *Omnibus* edition is not the work of one translator but of numerous ones (given that, naturally, not all previously published individual volumes have the same translator from Italian into English) entails that terminology is not always uniform throughout the volume. This is arguably unavoidable, and indeed better than the alternative, i.e., retrospective, post-factum correctives with the aim of terminological homogeneity, which however would produce texts differing from their previously published versions. It would have been very helpful to have *some* indication of the original pagination of the first English editions of individual volumes; thus, the scholar or student possessing only the *Omnibus* edition and attempting to trace references to particular pages of individual volumes throughout the secondary literature on Agamben would find her way in the book. It is rather unfortunate that such a provision has not been made—and there is no readily obvious reason for such a provision *not* to be made. One would wish for a paperback, and thus more modestly priced, edition to be forthcoming. Currently there are eBook versions available, although they are not priced more modestly than the cloth edition. Bottom line is, this is a very welcome and properly executed *Omnibus* edition that is destined to become the standard reference for the *Homo Sacer* project as a unified whole in the English language.

As is well-known, the *Homo Sacer* project is merely *one* aspect of Agamben's prolific output, with quite a few of his books not forming part thereof. However, the reader would do well to read his earlier *The Coming Community* together or before studying the *Homo Sacer* project, in order to put the project into the perspective of some of Agamben's

wider theoretical and (theologico-)politico-philosophical explorations apart from the critique he masterfully attempts in *Homo Sacer*.

What Is Philosophy?, translated from Italian into English by Lorenzo Chiesas and also published in the *Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics* series of Stanford University Press, offers five collected texts from the 80s till the present day, focusing on notions of importance for Agamben's thought: the Voice, the Sayable, the Demand, the Proem, and the Muse/Music. The titular question is indirectly addressed through close examinations of particular *words* and their archaeology, always in dialogue with ancient philosophy—particularly Plato and Aristotle—and a contemporary voice. It is via these analyses, in Agamben's characteristic style of focusing on minute nuances and evolving them, that a definition of philosophy is circumscribed (or rather, purposefully avoided). This collection of essays is a welcome addition to Agamben's *corpus* in English, particularly after the publication of *The Omnibus Homo Sacer* by the same academic publisher; it is addressed to those already familiar with Agamben's thought and with the literature he invokes. It is certainly *not* meant as an "introduction to philosophy" (... and might come as a considerable shock to those picking it up to that end, since it is not for the faint at heart); rather than that, it complements one's reading of Agamben's work and, within that context, provides an approach to the elusive, upon close inspection, notion of philosophy—and philosophical *writing* in particular.