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Research Master Thesis

Part 1: “The Notion of Paradigm in Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* Corpus: Its Methodological Significance.”

(Publishable Article)

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I hereby declare and assure that I, Alphée Clay Sorel Mpassi, have drafted this thesis independently, that no other sources and/or means other than those mentioned have been used and that the passages of which the text content or meaning originates in other works – including electronic media – have been identified and the sources clearly stated.

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Part 1 – Publishable Article

Article Title: “The Notion of Paradigm in Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* Corpus: Its Methodological Significance”

Abstract

The aim of this article is to shed light on the notion of paradigm in Giorgio Agamben’s thought. It claims that the notion of paradigm in the philosophy of Agamben is a methodological issue. First, the article examines the state of the art with regard to the notion of paradigm. This section concludes that no study so far has clearly dealt with this issue from a methodological perspective. Second, the article elaborates on the meaning Agamben attributes to the concept of paradigm. Third, through a critical reading and an interpretation of the first chapter of *The Signature of All Things*, the article examines and elucidates the role and function of the notion of paradigm in Agamben’s work. In the fourth and last part of the article, the author assesses Agamben’s conception of the paradigm from the perspective of the hermeneutic circle.

Keywords: Giorgio Agamben, paradigm, model, example, hermeneutic circle.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to investigate the methodological significance of the notion of paradigm in Giorgio Agamben's thought. In recent years, Agamben's work has had a great influence on contemporary political philosophy. An extensive study of the secondary literature on his thought shows that since the publication and translation of his *Homo Sacer*, many scholars have commented and interpreted his work with particular reference to its implications and significance in biopolitics.

However, none of those scholars has extensively and clearly discussed the status and function of the notion of paradigm in Agamben from a methodological perspective. They have mostly focused on examining the notion of paradigm in Agamben from the viewpoint of the camp – that is, they only examined the meaning and the consequences of Agamben's major thesis that it is the camp that is the paradigm of modern biopolitics. However, they do not adequately demonstrate that the camp itself in Agamben functions as a paradigm. On the contrary, this study intends to suggest that the notion of paradigm in Agamben is a methodological issue. Agamben uses paradigms as tools in order to elaborate on the reality of modern politics. In order to examine and clarify the methodological significance of the idea of paradigm in Agamben's philosophy, the article will be organised around four points.

First, I will describe and discuss the state of the art as far as the notion of paradigm in Agamben is concerned. In the second section, I will examine the meaning Agamben attributes to the concept of paradigm in his *Homo Sacer* series. Through an analysis and interpretation of some passages where the word appears, the focal point will be to know whether or not he ascribes one or more meanings to the notion in question. It will be suggested that in Agamben a paradigm can be understood interchangeably as a conceptual framework, a model, and an example. The third section will discuss the methodological status of paradigm in Agamben. This will be done based on a critical reading and interpretation of the first chapter of *The Signature of All Things: On Method*. It is in this part of the book that Agamben explicitly thematises the methodological meaning of paradigm. And in the last section, I will evaluate Agamben's methodology by discussing the relation between

paradigm and singularity. I will claim that Agamben misinterprets his own concept. In fact, contrary to Agamben, who argues that a paradigm moves from the particular to the particular, or the singular to the singular, I will contend that a paradigm rather operates through the logic that relates the particular to the general and the singular to the universal. The conclusion will present a summary of the findings.

1. The Status Quaestionis

A survey study of secondary literature on Agamben's notion of paradigm demonstrates that scholars have discussed it mostly from the perspective of the example of the concentration camp. They have reacted either for or against Agamben's thesis that it is the camp that is the most essential characteristic of modern politics.¹ For instance, Andrew Norris argues that Agamben's choice and definition of the camp as the matrix of modern politics is philosophically unacceptable. For Norris, a negative historical event such as the concentration camp cannot stand as a basis for a philosophical elaboration on the nature of politics.² In the same perspective, Richard Ek stipulates that though Agamben's thesis aims at elucidating the implicit continuous relation between past totalitarian states and modern democracies, it is "difficult to digest."³ Arguing in the same line, Dominick LaCapra radicalises the criticism against Agamben. For him, Agamben's use of the example of the camp is nothing but an "indignant and outrageous" philosophical elaboration over the past.⁴

Despite their efforts to point out the political relevance of Agamben's work, these scholars have not however satisfactorily delineated the meaning of the notion of paradigm in Agamben, of which the concentration camp is just but one instance. An attempt to explain this notion in Agamben seems to intervene with René ten Bos.⁵ Focusing also on the paradigm of the camp, Ten Bos argues that through the figure of the camp, Agamben aims to demonstrate that modern politics implicitly creates conditions that jeopardize human life, which it is supposed to protect. Against this background, the camp is meant to stress the sovereign power over individual life. In a similar manner, Catherine Mills posits that Agamben's paradigm of camp is used as a conceptual framework to reflect on modern politics. For this reason, Mills submits that the notion of paradigm in Agamben assumes a theoretical and

¹ Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, 97, 102 and 141.

² Norris, "The Exemplary Exception," 262-83.

³ Ek, "Giorgio Agamben and the Spatialities of the Camp," 363-86.

⁴ LaCapra, "Approaching Limits Events," 126-62.

⁵ Ten Bos, "Giorgio Agamben and the Community," 16-29.

methodological status.⁶ Nonetheless, Mills does not give a full account of the methodological significance of paradigm in Agamben.

Unlike Mills, Leland de la Durantaye tries to explicate the methodological essence of the notion of paradigm in Agamben. He argues that it aims at making intelligible broader historical and philosophical problematics of our time. De la Durantaye posits that through paradigms Agamben meditates on the essential features of modern politics.⁷ However, he does not fully explain how a paradigm works in Agamben and what it entails philosophically. On the contrary, DeCaroli examines Agamben's notion of paradigm from the viewpoint of the figure of *homo sacer*. He argues that the image of *homo sacer*, which Agamben uses in his book, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, is a paradigm aimed at discussing the nature of sovereignty and examining the biopolitical logic of politics. DeCaroli defines paradigm in Agamben as an example.⁸ But one may ask, are paradigm and example synonymous in Agamben? As will be shown later in the second section, this is not plausible on a close reading of Agamben. He establishes few nuances between paradigm and example.

Because it is constructed around the use of paradigms (such as the camp, *homo sacer*, etc.), Alison Ross contends that Agamben's political philosophy is unique in the sense that, based on those paradigms, it is intended to illustrate his ideas about the biopolitical nature of Western politics.⁹ For this reason, Brayton Polka argues that Agamben's notion of paradigm gives an ontological dimension to his philosophy.¹⁰

Taking into consideration the above mentioned works, one might wonder why there should be another research on the notion of paradigm in Agamben's thought. The present work takes a perspective which is different from the previous studies. It seeks to thematise the methodological nature of the notion of paradigm in Agamben. Though the studies cited above have dealt with the notion of paradigm in Agamben in one way or another, none of

⁶ Mills, *The Philosophy of Agamben*, 84-6.

⁷ De la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, 218.

⁸ DeCaroli, "Paradigm/Example," 144-47.

⁹ Ross, "Agamben's Political Paradigm," 412-34.

¹⁰ Polka, "The Ontology of Historical Practice," 237-41.

them has fully devoted attention to its methodological significance. As has been demonstrated, the focus has rather been examining the paradigm from the perspective of the camp.

This inquiry will not only bring forth the necessary keys that will guarantee a fairer interpretation and understanding of Agamben's philosophy, but will also help understand what Agamben means when he states for instance that "the camp is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West."¹¹ Without those tools, it will be difficult and perhaps impossible to have an adequate understanding of what is at stake in Agamben's corpus. Not that Agamben's works are intrinsically obscure or unfathomable, but because his method of philosophizing is *sui generis* and challenges many readers.

Having said that, this essay wants to discuss the following problems: 1) What is the status and function of paradigms in Agamben's thought? 2) How is the notion of paradigm related to that of example and model in Agamben? Are these notions synonymous and to which extent? This will ultimately shed light on Agamben's assumptions. As noted earlier, while most of commentators have criticised Agamben's use of historical cases, I will suggest that they are to be seen as methodological tools which Agamben uses in order to reflect on the philosophical and implicit features of modern politics. So, a paradigm in this perspective should be understood as philosophical use of concrete historical instances to make some statements on the political.

2. Threefold Description of the Notion of Paradigm in Agamben

The aim of this section is to define the notion of paradigm in Agamben's *Homo Sacer* series. It is worth noting that nowhere in the whole of his *Homo Sacer* corpus does Agamben explicitly provide a definition of paradigm. Accordingly, an attempt to explain its meaning is only possible as an interpretation based on the context in which he employs the word. This task

¹¹ Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, 148.

of interpretation draws on a methodological principle which Agamben adopts from Ludwig Feuerbach.

The principle in question is the capacity of elaboration or development, *Entwicklungsfähigkeit*, proper to any philosophical work. It consists in making explicit what is implicit in every philosophical work.¹² Thus, our definition of paradigm in Agamben is a development from his usage of the word. Based on this methodological principle and through a critical reading and examination of some parts of the *Homo Sacer* corpus, I will suggest that the notion of paradigm in Agamben is multivocal. From the way he uses it, it can be understood as a conceptual framework, a model and an example. As will be shown, all of these notions are related to one another.

2.1. Paradigm as a Conceptual Framework

The first basic meaning of the notion of paradigm in Agamben is conceptual framework, that is, a particular way of understanding a phenomenon. It refers to a specific set of ideas an individual or a community of individuals has about a reality. Paradigm thus construed is implied in many passages of Agamben's *Homo Sacer* corpus. For instance, in *The Kingdom and The Glory*, Agamben uses the notion of paradigm understood as a conceptual framework when he discusses the meaning of *oikonomia*, that is, economy in ancient Greek tradition.¹³ According to him, the concept "economy" in ancient Greek tradition, especially in Aristotle and Xenophon, refers to the "administration of the house" as opposed to the city.¹⁴ He continues that unlike in today's parlance, whereby the word "house" usually refers to a single-family, in ancient Greek it implies intricate relations which Aristotle categorises into three groups:

- a. despotic relations, that is, relations between the master and his slaves,

¹² Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 7-8.

¹³ Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, 387.

¹⁴ Ibid.

- b. parental relations, that is, relations between parents and their children, and
- c. gamic relations which concern the relations between the husband and his wife.

After this exposition, Agamben states that “these ‘economic’ relations (Aristotle emphasizes their diversity) are linked by a paradigm that we could define as ‘administrative,’ and not epistemic: in other words, it is a matter of an activity that is not bound to a system of rules, and does not constitute a science of in the proper sense but to a certain way of being.”¹⁵

In this passage, emphasis should put on the word “paradigm.” In this context, it entails a way of understanding; a way of conceptualizing the various relations involved in the management of the house in ancient Greek. And this understanding, according to Agamben, could be called administrative. Further, he submits that “this ‘administrative’ paradigm defines the semantic sphere of the term *oikonomia* [...]”¹⁶ Here also, the word “paradigm” means a conceptual framework for understanding the nature of economic relations of the house. If this supposition is correct, Agamben’s declaration can therefore be reformulated as follows: this administrative understanding (of *oikonomia*) is the framework in which the term *oikonomia* is understood.¹⁷ However, note that understanding does not exhaust the meaning that can be associated with the notion of paradigm in Agamben. As will be discussed in the following, this notion can also be construed as model.

2.2. Paradigm as Model

The second basic meaning which can be attributed to the notion of paradigm in Agamben’s thought is model. Model here (from Latin “modellus” which means “measure”) is construed in its broader sense as that which is/or can be imitated, that which is taken as standard.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 388.

¹⁷ See also *ibid.*, 205, 433-34, 446, 519, 670-71, 687, 689 and 698.

¹⁸ See Dubus, “Modèle,” 676.

This meaning can be inferred from passages in Agamben. Let us for instance consider one of the passages of *The Kingdom and The Glory* in which he analyses the relation between government and kingdom, that is to say, God's power over the world and the King's administration of his kingdom.¹⁹ Agamben contends that God's power over the world can be understood from the perspective of the king's power over his kingdom. The latter, according to him, governs his kingdom through an administrative apparatus. In other words, he has servants who carry out his commands and orders, while he himself is seated on his throne. In like manner, Agamben posits that God, who actually resides in the heavens, extends his power through the whole universe. In this way Agamben concludes that "the administrative apparatus through which the sovereigns of the earth preserve their kingdom becomes the paradigm of the divine government of the world."²⁰ In other words, the way the king governs his kingdom becomes the model for understanding God's government of the world. It is therefore clear that the word "paradigm" in this context means nothing else than model.

The same meaning also appears in his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, when Agamben outlines the goal of his book. He says that he wants to examine the figure of *homo sacer* in ancient Roman law in order to see how it can illustrate the essential features of modern politics. In this context, he states that he uses *homo sacer* as "the first paradigm of the political realm of the West."²¹ In other words, Agamben is not interested in the historicity of *homo sacer*. Rather, he wants to describe it as a model for modern politics. This is so much so that many times throughout his *Homo Sacer* corpus Agamben uses the term "model" in lieu of paradigm.²²

From this perspective, model can be understood as that which can be taken as an example as will discussed in the followings with particular reference to the relation between the two concepts.

¹⁹ Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, 432-38.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 435.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

²² See *ibid.*, 102, 168, 201, 316, 436-37, 480, 519, 897, and 1120.

2.3. Paradigm as Example

The third meaning which can be assigned to the notion of paradigm in Agamben is example. The word “example” comes from the Latin word “exemplum” which literally means a “sample.”²³ Broadly speaking, an example could be understood as an item extracted from a set so that it becomes both a representation and an explanation of that set. Conceived in this sense, the example is closely associated with the notion of model as explained above. In fact, as Laurent Gerbier affirms, the example is taken out from the set so that it stands and serves as a model for all the items of the group it belongs to.²⁴ In other words, the example assumes the function and status of a guide, which others can follow or imitate. In the same way, it stands as that which sheds light on the set of things it exemplifies.

This meaning can be ascertained from Agamben’s use of the notion of paradigm in the first chapter, “The Paradox of Sovereignty,” of his *Homo Sacer* book, when he discusses the meaning of word “example.” Agamben argues that the example is something that is separated from the general set of things so that it becomes that which makes plain the features of the set. Although taken out from the group which it belongs to, the example still maintains a relation with the group.²⁵ In his *The Coming Community*, Agamben defines the example in a similar way. In his words, “the example is characterized by the fact that it holds for all cases of the same type, and, at the same time, it is included among these. It is one singularity among others, which, however, stands for each of them and serves for all.”²⁶

Accordingly, in Agamben’s opinion, “the example is truly a *paradigm* in the etymological sense: it is what is ‘shown beside.’”²⁷ It is therefore evident that the term “paradigm” in Agamben is closely related to that of example. Understood as an example, a paradigm is that which stands besides something in order to bring out the most essential features of the general

²³ Gerbier, “Exemple,” 398.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, 21-22.

²⁶ Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 8-9.

²⁷ Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, 22.

group. Agamben frequently uses the word “paradigm” in the sense of example.²⁸

However, contrary to DeCaroli, “paradigm” and “example” in Agamben are not synonymous terms.²⁹ Despite the fact that paradigm could be read as example, there are some nuances between both notions. Foremost, example, as has been seen, only has one meaning. It means that which stands alongside a group; it is a singular thing that stands as the explanation for the rest of the group. Paradigm however has a more general meaning. In fact, at the same time it can mean an example, a model or a framework in which a phenomenon is understood.

But to what extent does the notion of model and example relate to each other? Note that Agamben himself is not explicit on this issue. It should only be noted that he uses these two notions interchangeably throughout his *Homo Sacer* corpus.³⁰ From this perspective, they may be construed as synonyms used to describe the nature of paradigm. Both refer to something, an item or element that can be imitated and which may stand as the explanatory factor of a set of things.

3. Methodological Significance of the Notion of Paradigm in Agamben

In the previous section, I have shown that Agamben’s notion of paradigm is multivocal. This multivocality challenges and supplements accounts that interpret the notion of paradigm only from the perspective of the camp.³¹ In this part, I want to elaborate on the methodological significance of paradigm in Agamben. In other words, I intend to demonstrate that the word “paradigm” in Agamben denotes not only a notion, but also a method, that is to say, a particular way of carrying out a research.

²⁸ See *ibid.*, 167, 172-73, 193, 206, 416-14, 790, and 1031-33.

²⁹ DeCaroli, “Paradigm/Example,” 144.

³⁰ See Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, 259, 480, 519, 531, and 688.

³¹ See Norris, “The Exemplary Exception,” Ten Bos, “Giorgio Agamben and the Community,” and LaCapra, “Approaching Limits Events.”

As a matter of fact, Agamben's elaboration on his methodology is an after-thought. In other words, it comes as an addendum, whose aim is to shed light on the assumptions that guide his analyses of modern politics. Agamben himself speaks of this method as "a matter of ultimate, or penultimate thought."³² But one may ask, why does Agamben devote a book discussing the method at work in his philosophical analyses? In fact, Agamben responds to criticisms and misunderstandings against his usage of some historical figures and events (such as *homo sacer*, the concentration camp, etc.) as basis for his philosophical examination of modern politics.³³ He is for example labelled as a "bad historian,"³⁴ that is to say, one who misuses historical data by positing them as the framework to understanding politics. Accordingly, he is portrayed as a "naïve philosopher" and an "inept philologist."³⁵ Because of these attacks, Agamben decides to expatiate upon the methodology he employs in his work, namely the place and function of paradigms, "whose role was to constitute and make intelligible a broader historical-problematic context."³⁶ We will come back later to this point in the subsequent lines.

In order to elaborate on the methodological status of paradigm, Agamben draws on Foucault, a scholar from whom he has learned a lot.³⁷ Agamben argues that Foucault's method is characterised by the use of paradigms. In other words, for Agamben paradigms play a significant role in Foucault's philosophical enterprise.³⁸ In his 2002 presentation at the European Graduate School, Agamben made it clear that he follows the methodology used by Foucault.³⁹ Since Agamben relates his method to Foucault's, it is important to understand and briefly examine first Foucault's use of paradigms. This analysis will enable us to better understand the meaning of paradigm for Agamben himself and how he uses it following Foucault.

³² Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 7.

³³ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁴ Watkin, "The Signature of All Things," 139-42.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 9.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁹ Agamben, "What is a Paradigm?."

3.1. Foucault and Paradigm

According to Agamben, Foucault utilizes the word “paradigm,” but never defines it.⁴⁰ Why does Foucault not provide a precise definition for the term “paradigm”? Agamben remains silent on this. However, on closer inspection, it could be argued that the meaning of the notion of paradigm in Foucault should be derived and interpreted from the way he uses it.⁴¹

The “panopticon” is a prominent paradigm used by Foucault in his work.⁴² It suffices here to say that the panopticon is a concrete historical reality which existed in the eighteenth century. It was first described by Jeremy Bentham as an inspection house to keep prisoners in constant control without them knowing.⁴³ The panopticon for Foucault is not only a historical phenomenon meant for surveillance of individuals detained therein. Further, it is a figure that represents the way political power functions and controls individual lives in society. In other words, it explains how the disciplinary apparatus of state power is implicitly at work in all aspects of individual lives. This is exactly what Foucault means when he states that “the panopticon functions as a kind of laboratory of power. Thanks to its mechanisms of observation, it gains in efficiency and in the ability to penetrate into men’s behaviour.” It “must be understood as a generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men.”⁴⁴

Important in this passage from Foucault is the syntagma “generalizable model of functioning.” It means that the panopticon can be universal; far from limiting itself to prison systems, it can be applied to any sphere of human existence in society. Foucault himself says that the panopticon can apply to a madman, a patient, a prisoner, a worker or a schoolboy.⁴⁵ All these refer to various aspects of social and individual life in which political power can be exercised directly or indirectly. If this hypothesis is correct, it means that for Foucault the panopticon stands as a description of the essence of political

⁴⁰ Ibid., 9. See also Agamben, “What is a Paradigm?”

⁴¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment*, 200-28.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid. See also Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 16.

⁴⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment*, 204-5.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 200.

power which, according to him, is geared essentially towards controlling not only the society, but more importantly individual lives.

Following the above observations, it can be said that the panopticon for Foucault works as a paradigm of disciplinary power. On this basis, de la Durantaye is right in affirming that in Foucault the use of a paradigm consists in elevating a single historical phenomenon so that it becomes and stands as a representative of its genre.⁴⁶ Continuing de la Durantaye's analysis, it could be emphasised that the single historical phenomenon in question is the panopticon. The genre it represents is the political system and power. In this way, what is at stake in Foucault's use of the panopticon is to demonstrate how modern politics works in society. It is therefore "an emblematic figure for a new age of disciplinary power and governmental control."⁴⁷

Drawing from this Foucauldian use of paradigms, Agamben ascribes a methodological status to the notion of paradigm. This will be discussed in the next section. I will also attempt to show what is at stake in Agamben's use of paradigms by briefly analysing his most controversial paradigm, the concentration camp.

3.2. Agamben and Paradigm as a Method

Agamben's conception of the essence and function of paradigm in philosophy follows Foucault's insight. The most fundamental thing to note is that for Agamben, a paradigm has a double nature. First, it is a concrete historical phenomenon or event. Second, that historical event or figure is elevated to the level of a conceptual framework which aims at intelligibility. This dual nature of paradigm in Agamben is evident in the opening lines of his book, *The Signature of All Things*. He writes,

"In the course of my research, I have written on certain figures such as *homo sacer*, the *Muselmann*, the state of exception, and the concentration camp. While these are all actual historical phenomena, I nonetheless treated them as

⁴⁶ De la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, 215-16.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

paradigms whose role was to constitute and make intelligible a broader historical-problematic context.”⁴⁸

The most crucial terms in this passage are “to constitute and make intelligible.” What does it mean that a paradigm constitutes and renders intelligible a wider set of problems? In simple terms, what Agamben means here is that a paradigm defines and establishes a class of things to which it is related. It operates as a lens through which things should be seen and read. This is the meaning of the verb “to constitute” in the above passage. It is from this perspective that a paradigm in Agamben could be understood as a conceptual framework. A paradigm aims at intelligibility, that is to say, its main function is to bring forth the essential features of the class of things it belongs to.

In other words, in Agamben a paradigm is characterised as an object extracted from a group of things and functions as that which delineates and explains the group. In his words, “it is a singular object that, standing equally for all others of the same class, defines the intelligibility of the group of which it is part and which, at the same time, it constitutes.”⁴⁹ Take for example a class of items called “As” constituted by A₁, A₂, and A₃. A₁ is said a paradigm of the class of “As” in as much as through A₁ one comes to know and understand the constituting features of all the As. By so doing, A₁ shows forth its own particularity as well.

It follows that for Agamben a paradigm involves a relation of exclusion and inclusion with regard to the group. On the one hand, it is set apart from the set of things which it belongs to and becomes the framework in which that group is understood. On the other hand, though separated from the group it is still part of it and relates to it. Agamben emphasises this exclusion/inclusion nature of paradigm in his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, where he describes a paradigm as an example from the perspective of linguistics. He states that:

“The example functions as an *exclusive inclusion*. Take the case of the grammatical example: the paradox here is that a single utterance in no way distinguished from others of its

⁴⁸ Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 9 and 17.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

kind is isolated from them precisely insofar as it belongs to them. What the example shows is its belonging to a class, but for this very reason the example steps out of its class in the very moment in which it exhibits and delimits it. The example is thus excluded from the normal case not because it does not belong to it but, on the contrary, because it exhibits its own belonging to it. The example is truly a *paradigm* in the etymological sense.”⁵⁰

Stressing still the same point in *The Signature of Things*, Agamben argues that something taken as a paradigm is “deactivated” from its day-to-day use in order that it becomes representative of a wider context.⁵¹ In simple terms, a paradigm is at the same time outside and inside the group for which it is the paradigm. From this perspective, de la Durantaye rightly points out that a paradigm in Agamben is akin to the sovereign in relation to the state of exception.⁵² As the one who can decide to establish the exception—that is, to suspend the normal law and institute a specific law—the sovereign is both inside and outside the law.⁵³

Agamben himself emphasises the above point in his book, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, when he examines the paradoxical nature of sovereignty. The paradox in question lies in the fact that the sovereign is simultaneously “outside and inside the juridical order.”⁵⁴ In other words, the sovereign is concomitantly subjected to the law as any other citizen in society and yet is above it in the sense that he can decide to suspend it. This same logic applies also to the figure of *homo sacer*, which Agamben uses as the paradigm of modern western politics. He says that due to his crimes against the society, *homo sacer* is at the same time excluded from the jurisdiction of community and yet is included in it but without any right.⁵⁵

Because a paradigm is thus related to a class of things in an exclusive-inclusive relation—like is the sovereign to the juridical order, and *homo sacer* to the society—it can be concluded that a paradigm refers to a phenomenon which is at the same time out and part of a class. Thus, a paradigm cannot be

⁵⁰ Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, 22.

⁵¹ Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 18.

⁵² De la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, 218.

⁵³ Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, 17.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ See *ibid.*, 10-13.

fully separated from the group; though extracted from the group, it still maintains a relationship with it in that it brings out the intelligibility of that group.

If the above observations are correct, it is now possible to understand what Agamben means when he says that he uses paradigms as a methodological approach to problems.⁵⁶ In fact, he uses paradigms as a specific way to reflect on, and to analyse, a set of problems of modernity. In this way, a paradigm in Agamben could be understood as a pointer to something which is beyond itself and to which it is essentially related. For this reason, we can understand why Agamben affirms that a paradigm is both an *exemplar*, that is, a figure that can be or stand as a model and can be imitated, and an *exemplum*, that is, that which goes beyond its historical context and becomes a conceptual framework.⁵⁷

On account of the above considerations, Agamben submits that a paradigm follows not the logic of metaphor, but of analogy. He argues that the former consists in transferring the meaning from the signifier to the signified. In other words, the meaning of item A is transferred to item B. On the contrary, in the logic of analogy, which is for him the same as the logic of paradigm/example,⁵⁸ the meaning of item A is not transferred to item B. Rather, item A sheds light upon item B, without item A losing its singularity.⁵⁹ To illustrate this, Agamben resorts to the Latin language whereby grammatically one word such as ‘rose’ is suspended, without losing its singularity, from its normal use and becomes that which explains the nature and declension of all feminine nouns of the first declension.⁶⁰

Agamben traces back this analogous characteristic of paradigm to Aristotle’s *Prior Analytics*, which he considers as the source of the classical epistemological definition of paradigm. According to Agamben, Aristotle defines paradigm in the framework of the logical opposition between induction and deduction. The former proceeds from the particular to the

⁵⁶ Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 7 and 17.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵⁸ See section 2.3 above.

⁵⁹ Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 18.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

universal and the latter moves from the universal to the particular. The paradigm on the contrary follows neither of these dualistic relations. Rather, it obeys the logic that moves from the particular to the particular or the singular to the singular.⁶¹ This relation outlined by Aristotle is what guides Agamben's use of paradigms.

Understanding the use of paradigms from this perspective has some epistemological implications. The most fundamental is that it challenges the traditional logical dualism of deduction and induction which is considered as the general framework for knowledge. Knowledge does no longer proceed from generalisation of particular hypotheses or particularisation of general hypotheses. But it proceeds from the particular to the particular, that is, each element, each phenomenon is considered in its own singularity. Agamben expresses this idea when he states that "paradigm entails a movement that goes from singularity to singularity and, without ever leaving singularity, transforms every singular case into an *exemplar* of a general rule that can never be stated a priori."⁶² The crucial term in the passage is "singularity." Note that Agamben himself does not define what this term means. However, on closer inspection, it can be said that singularity here refers to a single or one figure taken out of a set in order that it explains a single event. If such is the case, how does singularity change into a general rule? What is in fact the relation between the singular figure and the general phenomenon? How does a singular fact become a model of a universal phenomenon? Agamben leaves questions unaddressed. We will come back to them in the final section of this article.

For the moment, let us briefly investigate what is at stake in Agamben's special choice of his paradigms. In other words, what does he aim to achieve for instance with the paradigm of the concentration camp? Note that the focus on the paradigm of the concentration camp here wants to demonstrate that Agamben uses such phenomena not as an historian (this is one of the criticisms raised against him⁶³), but as a philosopher. In other words, he

⁶¹ Ibid., 19.

⁶² Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 22.

⁶³ Watkin, "The Signature of All Things," 139-42.

analyses them not as mere historical facts, but rather he seeks to explain the essence and functioning of modern politics. In this way, the example of the concentration camp in this context can help us to understand how paradigms operate in Agamben's works and how one should read them.

3.3. The Concentration Camp: A Paradigm That Challenges Modern Politics

As he affirms himself, Agamben is often criticised for using factual figures and events—such as *homo sacer*, the state of exception, *the Muselmann* and the concentration camp—as basis for his philosophical thoughts.⁶⁴ Such criticisms prescind from the fact that Agamben uses these figures not as mere historical facts, but as general frameworks for exploring and deciphering the nature of today's politics. As stated in the previous section, for Agamben these events work as paradigms. In this vein, when using the figure of the camp, Agamben is not foremost interested in its historicity. Nor does he deny the atrocity of what happened therein. Rather he focuses on its exemplarity in politics in our age, that is, he intends to understand and demonstrate how it can shed light upon the functioning of today's politics. This conception of the camp becomes apparent in many passages of his works.⁶⁵ This remark is equally applicable to the figure of *homo sacer*.⁶⁶ Thus, when at the end of his *Homo Sacer* book he describes the camp as the fundamental paradigm of today's politics,⁶⁷ Agamben means more than talking about the camp as a mere political space.

A full discussion of the significance of Agamben's foregoing thesis (that is, the camp is the paradigm of modern politics) being beyond the scope of this article, in the following we are going to outline briefly three philosophical meanings imbedded in Agamben's choice and use of the concentration camp in relation to the essence of politics.

⁶⁴ Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 9.

⁶⁵ Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, 137. See also Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 9, 17, and 31.

⁶⁶ Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, 10.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

1. Through the paradigm of the camp, Agamben aims to challenge the idea of the historical progress and discontinuity in politics. In other words, he intends to demonstrate that there is “an inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism.”⁶⁸ In simple terms, modern democracies implicitly functions like totalitarian regimes of the past century.
2. The camp is the expression of the sovereign power over law and individual lives. It presents the sovereign as the one who can decide to suspend the juridical order and create a state of exception. In this way, the example of the camp actualises the paradox of sovereignty.⁶⁹
3. The figure of the camp expresses the biopolitical nature of modern politics. It is the place where human life in its biological and natural form is directly faced by politics.⁷⁰ Human life becomes, therefore, an important subject for politics which seeks to control and dominate it in every detail. Agamben even asserts that we are today living in the situation whereby human life is politicized.⁷¹

As the above brief considerations show, the reality of the camp for Agamben transcends its factual significance. It stands as a conceptual framework for understanding the essence of politics in our days. Having said this, let us now put in form of theses the conclusions that emerge so far from our discussion on the place and function of paradigm in Agamben’s philosophy:

1. The notion of paradigm occupies a pride of place in Agamben’s philosophy. It serves as a methodological device on which his entire philosophy is built.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 12, 100-01. For further details and its relevance for our age, see de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, 227; Ek, “Giorgio Agamben and the Spatialities of the Camp,” 363.

⁶⁹ Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, 137-47. See also Ten Bos, “Giorgio Agamben and the Community,” 17.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 141-43.

⁷¹ Ibid., 99-104. See also Ek, “Giorgio Agamben and the Spatialities of the Camp,” 368-69; Ten Bos, “Giorgio Agamben and the Community,” 17.

2. Agamben discusses his methodology, the function of paradigm, as an after-thought in response to misunderstandings and criticisms against his choice and use of examples.
3. His methodology follows the course and insight outlined by Foucault. However, contrary to Foucault, Agamben offers a more systematic and explicit account of the meaning of paradigm.
4. For Agamben a paradigm has a dual nature: it is at the same time a concrete historical fact and is elevated to the status of a conceptual framework in order to understand and explain a set of problems of our time.
5. A paradigm functions as an example—that is, as something taken out of a class/group of things in order that it becomes that which constitutes and defines that group. It aims at intelligibility and relates to the group in an exclusive-inclusive relation.
6. Understood as an example, a paradigm obeys the logic of analogy, which moves from the singular to the singular. Thus, it breaks the logic of deduction and induction.

On the basis of these conclusions, we could understand Alison Ross's remark that Agamben's way of approaching and elaborating on political philosophy is *sui generis*.⁷² Its specificity, it could be argued, consists in using historical facts and giving them a philosophical significance. Instead of focusing on formal and traditional notions such as liberty or human rights, which are at the heart of political discussions, Agamben proceeds from the analysis of extreme cases and postulates them as the lenses through which the nature of today's politics is to be understood. Thus, his methodology could be termed as a "revolutionary hermeneutics,"⁷³ that is, an interpretation of the present political reality in a relation with the past.

This method is very compelling in as much as it brings to our consciousness the hidden aspects of politics. This notwithstanding, it seems problematic to reconcile the vocation of a paradigm functioning from singularity to singularity and its intent to stand as a framework for explaining

⁷² Ross, "Agamben's Political Paradigm," 421.

⁷³ Walkin, "The Signature of All Things," 141.

broader philosophical context, as Agamben himself says.⁷⁴ The next section will elaborate on and attempt to resolve this tension.

4. Reassessment of Agamben's Definition of Paradigm

In the preceding part of this article I discussed the methodological significance of the notion of paradigm in Agamben. The merit of the Italian philosopher is that he explicitly thematises the role and function of paradigm in philosophy. He demonstrates that the notion of paradigm works as a methodological tool for the articulation and analysis of the nature of politics of our time. Through it, Agamben is able to examine and draw attention to hidden, but essential features of modern politics.

This notwithstanding, one aspect of his definition of paradigm is arguable. Resorting to Aristotle and Kant, Agamben contends that paradigm does not obey the dual and dichotomous logic of deduction and induction. Rather it follows a movement that goes from the singular to the singular. In his words, “while induction proceeds from the particular to the universal and deduction from the universal to the particular, the paradigm is defined by a third and paradoxical type of movement, which goes from the particular to the particular.”⁷⁵ A few paragraphs further, he continues that a “paradigm implies the total abandonment of the particular-general couple as the model of logical inference.”⁷⁶

The crucial point in the passages above is that Agamben establishes a differentiation between a paradigm and an induction. For him, the functioning of a paradigm is different from the logic of induction. Yet at the same time, he asserts that a paradigm (which, as mentioned above, proceeds from the particular to the particular) stands as a general framework in which broader problems should be explained and understood.⁷⁷ In other words, a paradigm as a single figure taken out of a class of things or events becomes that which constitutes and brings out the intelligibility of the group of things it belongs

⁷⁴ Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 9 and 17.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 9 and 17.

to. If such is the case indeed, how does a singular paradigm transform itself and become a general framework for explaining broader problems? In other words, how does a single phenomenon such as *homo sacer* or the camp become the lens through which a more universal phenomenon such as Western politics should be understood? What is the relation between singularity and universality? How does singularity explain and constitute universality?

The Italian philosopher does not address these questions. Nevertheless, this tension between singularity and universality can only be resolved if the paradigm is replaced and redefined in the framework of the logic of induction. Thus, the crucial point here is to demonstrate that the difference that Agamben establishes between paradigm and induction is just theoretical. But in practice, his use of paradigms does exactly follow the logic of induction in which the particular defines and constitutes the universal. Instead of proceeding from a movement that goes from singularity to singularity, and yet explains general problems, I would suggest that a paradigm, as defined and used by Agamben, goes from the particular to the universal. It thus functions truly as an induction. The word “particular” or “singular” here refers to a single event, figure or an item which serves as an example that is taken out of a class of things of the same nature. And the term “universal” alludes to the whole class of things of which the particular shows forth the intelligibility. Though Agamben does deny this logic, it is nonetheless at work in all the examples he analyses while discussing the essence of paradigm.

Take for instance the example of the noun ‘rose’ in Latin grammar. Agamben argues that in Latin, the noun ‘rose,’ which belongs to “the group of feminine nouns of the first declension,”⁷⁸ is separated from its group. Note that the noun ‘rose’ in this case represents a singular or a particular phenomenon standing on its own. And the group of feminine nouns is a general or universal phenomenon referring to all the feminine nouns of Latin without exclusion. Through its separation from the group of feminine nouns, the particular noun ‘rose’ becomes that which not only represents, but

⁷⁸ Ibid., 24.

foremost defines and constitutes the intelligibility of all the nouns belonging to the feminine nouns of the first declension. If this consideration is plausible, we therefore see here a relation between singularity and universality, between a part and a whole. The example of the noun ‘rose’ in Latin grammar in this case is informative of the fact that a paradigm, though being originally a singularity, is related to universality and can only be understood from the perspective of the logic of induction as explained above.

This logic is also applicable to Agamben’s analysis of the status of “*regula*”⁷⁹ in the history of monastic orders at their early stage. Agamben contends that the life of the founder of a monastic order, which is itself a replicate of the life of Jesus as described in the Gospels, is “envisaged as *forma vitae* – that is as an example to be followed.”⁸⁰ Although Agamben does not explicitly say it, it could be assumed within this context that the *forma vitae* of the founder in question should be followed by all the monks who belong to his monastery. This becomes even more evident in the following lines when Agamben asserts that with the development of monastic orders and the growing influence of the Rome over them, the *regula* became a written text containing the prescriptions of the monastic life, which all the monks without exception should follow individually. Like with the case of the noun ‘rose’ in Latin grammar, here too we see that a single person or phenomenon (the life of the founder) assumes the form of the paradigm of the life of all the monks of the monastery. If such is the case, then there is also a relation between singularity (the founder’s life) and universality (the life of all the monks individually). It is only from this perspective that Agamben’s own statement that paradigm “transforms every singular case into an *exemplar* of a general rule that can never be stated a priori”⁸¹ can be meaningful and understandable. Otherwise, if the particular is not related to the general, or the singular to the universal and if paradigm does not follow this logic of induction, how does the transformation from a singular into a general rule, of which Agamben speaks here, happen?

⁷⁹ Ibid., 21: “*regula* simply means *conversatio fratrum*, the monk’s way of life in a given monastery.”

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 22.

The same logic is obtainable considering the figure of *homo sacer*, which Agamben uses as “the protagonist” of his book and through which the “the sacred texts of sovereignty, but also the very codes of political power will unveil their mysteries.”⁸² In other words, Agamben utilizes *homo sacer* as the paradigm, that is, the framework in which political power and the essence of sovereignty in modernity should be understood. In his words, “this ancient meaning of the term *sacer* presents us with the enigma of a figure of the sacred that, before or beyond the religious, constitutes the first paradigm of the political realm of the West.”⁸³ Note that the figure of *homo sacer* refers to a single phenomenon in ancient Roman law. Yet in Agamben this phenomenon is elevated to the rank of the paradigm of a more global phenomenon: the political power and biopolitical nature of western politics.

If these observations are plausible, it can hence be concluded that paradigm, rather than following the movement of singularity to singularity as Agamben postulates, obeys the logic of induction which moves from the particular to the universal. In other words, it goes from the part to the whole and vice versa. It is from this perspective that the notion of paradigm as defined by Agamben—that is, the methodological tool or framework for making sense of broader set of problems—can acquire its full meaning and can easily be understandable. This logic is at work in the hermeneutical circle, which plays a significant role for the phenomenon of understanding in the human sciences. Agamben himself speaks of the hermeneutical circle in his book. However, twisting a little bit its meaning he interprets it from the perspective of his description of paradigm: moving from the singular to the singular.⁸⁴

Put very succinctly, the hermeneutical circle stipulates that we understand a phenomenon as a whole based on our understanding of its parts. And the full knowledge of the parts is enlightened by the understanding of the whole. It presupposes, therefore, a constant back and forth relation between the part and the whole and vice versa. In other words, the part sheds

⁸² Agamben, *The Omnibus Homo Sacer*, 10-11.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸⁴ Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 26-8.

light on the whole, and the whole enables a better comprehension of the part. As Gadamer notes, originally the hermeneutical circle applied only to ancient rhetoric and concerned the art of speaking.⁸⁵ In this case, the comprehension of a discourse was anticipated in that of its parts, which in return were determined by the whole, that is, the discourse taken as a whole. The circle here was seen as the condition for the coherence of the discourse. It exposes the unity of the discourse despite its multiple parts. Later, modern hermeneutics extended and applied this principle not only to the art of understanding texts, but also to all human experience in the world as long as it involves understanding. Gadamer for instance holds that the hermeneutical circle is also at work in the process of learning foreign languages. He states that

“We learn that we can only try to understand the parts of a sentence in their linguistic meaning when we have parsed or construed the sentence. But the process of parsing is itself guided by an expectation of meaning arising from the preceding context. Thus the movement of understanding always runs from whole to part and back to whole.”⁸⁶

Following Gadamer, Jean Grondin defines the hermeneutical circle in the following terms: “the circle is that of the whole and its parts: we can only understand the parts of a text, or any body of meaning, out of a general idea of its whole, yet we can only gain this understanding of the whole by understanding its parts.”⁸⁷ In this passage from Grondin, two things need to be highlighted. First, according to the hermeneutical circle, there is an uninterrupted reciprocation between the whole and its parts. This interplay is the *condition sine qua non* for understanding a phenomenon; that without which a full grasp of a phenomenon is impossible. Second, the principle of the hermeneutical circle is primarily applicable to the understanding of texts. Nonetheless, it can be applied to any situation or event in which meaning is involved. Grondin says that it concerns “any body of meaning.”⁸⁸ By this he means that it is a universal phenomenon. The most crucial point here is the emphasis on the back and forth relation between the part and the whole. It is

⁸⁵ Gadamer, “On the Circle of Understanding,” 68.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Grondin, “What is the Hermeneutical Circle?,” 299.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

this movement that constitutes the circularity of the hermeneutical circle. The part as a singular aspect of a whole guides the understanding of that whole, while in return the whole enables a deeper and adequate understanding of the part.

Like the hermeneutical circle, paradigm, as the analysis of the examples above shows, proceeds from this back and forth movement between the singular and the universal. In the case of the paradigm, the singular figure such as *homo sacer* relates to the universal phenomenon such as modern politics as the part of a text relates to its whole in the case of the hermeneutical circle. Thus, the singular figure of *homo sacer*, standing as the paradigm of modern politics which it exemplifies, sheds light on the nature and the functioning of the universal phenomenon—that is, modern politics. In the same manner, in order to understand how all the feminine nouns in Latin grammar work, one needs to look at how the particular example of the noun ‘rose’ works. As mentioned above, the term ‘rose’ stands as the paradigm of all the feminine nouns of the first declination in Latin because it brings out all their essential features. Thus, the singular word ‘rose’ constitutes the whole group and the whole group is understood in the light of the singular term ‘rose.’ There is, therefore, an interplay between the singular and the universal.

It is only from this perspective that Agamben’s characterisation of a paradigm as a philosophical method and his choice of paradigms could be meaningful. Otherwise, it would be incomprehensible how and why single phenomena—such as *homo sacer*, the camp and even the state of exception—could be the frameworks for describing and analysing western politics as a whole. It can therefore be argued that paradigm is a varied version of the hermeneutical circle.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, the aim of this article was to examine and discuss the general meaning and methodological import of the notion of paradigm in Agamben's thought. For this reason, through the analysis of some of its sections, I have focused on how the Italian philosopher makes use of it throughout his *Homo Sacer* series and his *The Signature of All Things* (where he clearly thematises it) in order to find out how that notion can best be understood.

I discussed in the first section the state of the art as far as this subject is concerned. In the second part, I analysed the possible meaning of the notion of paradigm in Agamben based on the interpretation of some key passages. This interpretative chapter was followed by a thorough discussion on the methodological significance of paradigm as the main subject of the third section. Finally, Agamben's conception of paradigm was assessed by way of proposing its re-definition so that it becomes easily comprehensible.

Six theses emerge as conclusions from the above examination of the notion of paradigm functioning as a methodology in Agamben:

1. No secondary literature has clearly thematised the methodological status of the notion of paradigm in Agamben's philosophy. Attempts to do so have only discussed it from the perspective of the camp trying to explain what the camp means in Agamben and its possible consequences.
2. In the context of his *Homo Sacer* series, Agamben does not provide a straightforward definition of the notion in question. Nonetheless, on closer inspection, it could be understood as a conceptual framework, an example and a model. Far from excluding one another, all these meanings are interrelated and shed light on the notion of paradigm as a whole.
3. Agamben develops his understanding and conception of paradigm following the insight led out by Foucault. Unlike Foucault however, Agamben offers a more explicit and comprehensible account of the place and function of paradigm in philosophy.

4. In Agamben, paradigm is to be interpreted as a methodological device, whose fundamental aim is to constitute, analyse and bring out the intelligibility of wider set of problems inherent in today's politics.
5. For Agamben, a paradigm transcends and obeys not the logic of deduction or induction; it rather follows the logic that moves from singularity to singularity, or from particularity to particularity.
6. For Agamben's definition of paradigm as a methodology of philosophy to be meaningful and easily understandable, it must be replaced and reinterpreted from the perspective of the logic of induction (moving from particularity to universality) in a similar way as the logic of the hermeneutical circle.

All things considered, the notion of paradigm plays a very important role in Agamben's works. He uses it not only as a simple notion, but more remarkably as a methodology which makes possible the understanding of what is at stake in his analyses and what he wants to achieve, which is deciphering the essence of modern politics of the West. Unless this methodological nature of the notion of paradigm is taken into consideration while discussing Agamben's works, one runs the risk of misconstruing his theses.

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