The dialectics of Paul: on exception, grace, and use in Badiou and Agamben

Gert-Jan van der Heiden

To cite this article: Gert-Jan van der Heiden (2016) The dialectics of Paul: on exception, grace, and use in Badiou and Agamben, International Journal of Philosophy and Theology, 77:3, 171-190, DOI: 10.1080/21692327.2016.1231620

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2016.1231620

© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 04 Nov 2016.

Article views: 165

View related articles

View Crossmark data
The dialectics of Paul: on exception, grace, and use in Badiou and Agamben

Gert-Jan van der Heiden
Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies, Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT
The remarkable philosophical present-day turn to Paul pays a lot of attention to the particular role played by the famous distinctions that structure Paul’s rhetoric such as the distinction between faith and law, life and death, and spirit and flesh. These distinctions lead to the question of whether Paul (or the philosophers’ Paul) endorses a dualism or not. In this essay, the author investigates Badiou’s and Agamben’s readings of Paul and asks whether one cannot find a form of dialectics rather than dualism in these readings. The concept of the exception seems to corroborate this suggestion. To examine whether this suggestion makes sense, the author first discusses Badiou’s focus on the antidialectics of death and resurrection as well as the dialectical remnants in Badiou’s reading of Paul. Subsequently, the author analyses Agamben’s dialectical account of the Pauline terms katargein (to deactivate), chrēsis (use) and charis (grace).

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 19 June 2016
Accepted 30 August 2016

KEYWORDS
Paul; Agamben; Badiou; dialectics; dualism; exception; grace; use

1. Introduction: dualism or dialectics?
In an intriguing comment in Saint Paul, Alain Badiou suspends, if only for one moment, his critical attitude to the work of Martin Heidegger. He suggests that the latter’s notion of onto-theology captures what is truly at stake in the present-day philosophical turn to Paul:

One must, in Paul’s logic, go so far as to say that the Christ-event testifies that God is not the god of Being, is not Being. Paul prescribes an anticipatory critique of what Heidegger calls onto-theology, wherein God is thought as supreme being, and hence as the measure for what being as such is capable of⁴.

For Paul, as Badiou suggests, the heart of the matter is the proclamation that God is not the God of onto-theology. The latter God is described as ‘supreme being’ and as ‘the measure for what being as such is capable of.’ Paul’s God, by contrast, concerns something that being – or in Paul’s vocabulary of 1 Corinthians, the present form of the world, to schēma tou kosmou toutou (1 Cor. 7:31) – is not capable of. Badiou names this ‘something’ the event. In Paul’s case, he speaks of the Christ-event, the resurrection. We need not agree with Badiou’s specific speculative framework of being and event to be intrigued by the thrust of his analysis and to see that it is characteristic of at least one basic motive in the present-day philosophical turn to Paul’s letter: Paul’s proclamation that God is not .
is concerned with something the present world is not capable of and which is an exception to the present form of the world (to schēma tou kosmou toutou; 1 Cor. 7:31).

Simon Critchley argues that this motive is part of a ‘meontology’ at the heart of the Paul-readings of Heidegger, Badiou, and Agamben. To a certain extent, the name ‘meontology’ is quite aptly chosen: Badiou’s above quote is part of a comment on 1 Corinthians 1 in which God and the exception are indeed concerned with ta mē onta rather than ta onta: ‘God chose what is base and despised in the world, and even things that are not (ta mē onta), to bring to nought (katargeō) things that are (ta onta) …’ In this verse, Paul proclaims that the things that are not, ta mē onta – i.e. the things that are considered to be of no value in the world – are as chosen by God over the things that are, ta onta. If this passage supports the idea of Paul’s anticipatory critique of onto-theology, should one not argue that Paul’s alternative is indeed a meontology – an ontology that departs from what is not(hing)? Critchley connects this philosophical preference for what is not to the Gnostic or Marcionic temptation that lures Paul’s letter. By emphasizing those passages in which Paul prefers what is not over what actually is in our earthly world, the philosophers give in to this temptation. It would not be difficult to see in such an analysis a repetition of Nietzsche’s claim that the Christianity founded by Paul is nihilistic to its core. The term ‘meontology’ suggests as much. Moreover, it implies that the famous distinctions that structure Paul’s rhetoric – pistis versus nomos or faith versus law, zōē versus thanatos or life versus death, and pneuma versus sarx or spirit versus flesh – express a distinct dualism. Following Nietzsche’s analysis, this dualism is a nihilism: it is introduced so that the actual world can be rejected.

Yet, what such a reading forgets is that the rejection of the world need not necessarily be without qualification. It might be a qualified rejection. Taubes understands Paul’s struggle in exactly this way: ‘And it’s a different matter whether one decides, in whatever way, to understand the cosmos as immanent and governed by laws, or whether one thinks the miracle is possible, the exception.’ Instead of another world, Taubes argues that Paul is concerned with an exception and its possibility. An exception is never without relation to what it is the exception to. Given the philosophical heritage of this notion, one might expect that a reflection on Paul that stresses this sense of the exception adopts a specific dialectical for, rather than a dualist one. It is the goal of the present article to examine whether it makes sense to consider Badiou’s and Agamben’s philosophical readings of Paul in terms of a dialectics of the exception rather than as a dualism or a meontology: in terms of the oppositions mentioned above, this would imply that, for instance, pistis would thus not appear as the mere opposite of nomos, but in its distinction with nomos it would appear as an exception and a surplus to nomos. My examination is thus inspired by the hypothesis that the fundamental distinctions at work in Paul’s letters attest to a more complicated, dialectical structure rather than a sheer dualist one.

I have chosen Badiou and Agamben because their readings go in different directions exactly concerning the question of Paul’s dialectics. In fact, it is even rather doubtful whether we can find a dialectics at all in Badiou’s reading given his straightforward rejection of dialectics in his emphasis on the ‘antidialectic of death and resurrection.’ Moreover, both Agamben and Badiou problematize, albeit in different ways, any attempt to seek Paul’s alternative to dualism in a Hegelian dialectics. This heritage
of Paul’s alternative to a Hegelian dialectics does not only mark their readings of Paul but also strongly mark their work after their respective readings of Paul.

2. Paul’s antidialectics and the exception

For Badiou, the Christ-event of the resurrection is an exception to what he terms the situation in which Paul lives. The *ta onta*, the things that are, refer in the first place to those elements that make up the situation, such as the Roman legal order of the world, the form of the cosmos in which Paul lives, and the particular identities or discourses in this situation, which Badiou identifies by the two names of Jew and Greek. It is in this situation that Paul proclaims an exception. Badiou’s comments on dialectics and antidialectics in Paul are no asides but belong to the core of his reflection on the (non-)relation of situation and event. Let us therefore consider some of the basic passages in which he speaks on this issue and rejects the dialectical Paul.

First, when Badiou argues that Paul’s conversion should not be understood as a ‘dialectical reversal’ but rather as a ‘thunderbolt’ and ‘caesura,’ he aims to show that this conversion (like the event to which it is faithful), cannot be understood as dialectical negation of Paul’s past, the particular circumstances of his Jewishness or his past as Pharisee. As Badiou writes: ‘Just as the Resurrection remains totally incalculable and it is from there that one must begin, Paul’s faith is that from which he begins as a subject, and nothing leads up to it.’ Both faith and event are ex nihilo and truly new – but both of these terms have to be read in relation to the situation. There is nothing in the situation which can account for either the resurrection or Paul’s faith. Both of them are pure grace. The dismissal of the term ‘dialectical’ shows that apparently for Badiou there is a danger in conceiving of event and faith in terms of dialectics because it would make them the dialectical *consequence* of the old. This also shows that Badiou’s usage of the word dialectics is determined by its Hegelian sense in which the dialectical process of negation and negation of the negation realizes new levels in reality. That it is indeed this concern for the newness of the event and the subject that inspires Badiou’s dismissal of the term ‘dialectics,’ is affirmed by other examples.

Second, when invoking Paul’s dispute with the ‘Judea-Christian faction,’ that is, with the faction that thinks that the rituals of Judaism are also of importance in the Christian communities, Badiou describes this faction as follows: ‘Its conception of the subject is dialectical. It is not a question of denying the power of the event. It is a question of asserting that its novelty conserves and sublates the traditional site of faith, that it incorporates it by exceeding it.’ The problem with the Judea-Christian faction is not that it denies the resurrection but rather that it conceives of it dialectically. The quote specifies dialectics in terms of Hegel’s *Aufhebung*, that is, as the movement that conserves and sublates the old and thus constitutes the new. The type of newness that the Hegelian dialectic logic allows us to think, expressed in the quote by ‘exceeding it,’ is not enough to capture the newness as pure *indifference* to the old. This indifference to the old social relations and customs does not only show that the event does not give them a new meaning but also that the event and the subject cannot be bothered to annihilate the old structures. If there is a nihilism in Paul, it is not concerned with destruction but rather with indifference to what is.
Third, one should also understand Badiou’s insistence on the antidialectics of the resurrection in these terms. Once more, it is Hegel’s version of dialectics to which antidialectics is opposed. Referring to Hegel’s account of the resurrection as the result of a dialectical process in which life is first negated in death and subsequently overcome by the subsequent negation of death in a synthesis of both life and death, Badiou insists that the resurrection in Paul’s letters is devoid of any reference to the gospels’ narration of the passion of the Christ. Paul does not offer such a dialectical relation to Christ’s history in his account of the resurrection. Consequently, death, suffering, or martyrdom do not add anything to the event of the resurrection. By contrast, a dialectic conception of the resurrection would lead to the conclusion that death and suffering ‘possess an intrinsically redemptive function,’ as Badiou writes, ‘which, it has to be said, corresponds to a Christian imagery that has been omnipresent for centuries.’

For Badiou’s Paul, life and death are not connected in any organic, dialectical unity, but opposed to each other as two different modes of living, as the path of spirit and the path of flesh. Thus, these terms are but names for the two different attitudes to the resurrection. Whereas faith, life, and spirit name the fidelity to the resurrection, law, death, and flesh name the human refusal to be faithful to the event.

The fourth and last example of Paul’s antidialectics can be found in the conclusion of Saint Paul. There, Badiou writes:

Paul, we have insisted, is not a dialectician. The universal is not the negation of particularity. It is the measured advance across a distance relative to perpetually subsisting particularity. Every particularity is a conformation, a conformism. It is a question of maintaining a nonconformity with regard to that which is always conforming us. … Far from fleeing from the century, one must live with it, but without letting oneself be shaped, conformed. … Only what is in immanent exception is universal.

Once more, Badiou explains dialectics in terms of negation. For Paul, the universal is not the negation of the particular, that is, the universal is not brought into being out of a process in which the particular plays a role. Thus, we see that the Hegelian scheme is crossed out as a model to understand Paul.

Does this not imply that it makes no sense to speak of dialectics in the case of Badiou? Strictly speaking, it only means that it makes no sense to speak of a Hegelian dialectics. Hence, there is some space for other forms of dialectics. This is why we have to return to the above quote because it is not only a summary of what we already discussed above but also it offers a number of other indications. They show that Badiou’s alternative to dialectics is more complex than the terms that we have offered so far to explain it and that may very well fit in with a dualism (namely the terms ‘indifference’ and ‘antidialectics’). First, he writes that particularities will always subsist as indifferent particularities. As soon as we realize that the notion of the law represents for Badiou a particularity – it is the law of a people, a tradition, a nation – we see that the usual connection between universal and law is broken in this quote. Particularity means for Badiou conformism and identification with the existing social structures expressed in and defended by the law. Second, the universal is understood as ‘immanent exception,’ which in this quote refers to a mode of living that does not flee away from the present in which we live, but rather lives in the present in a particular way. Exception thus corresponds to an attitude of nonconformity.
By introducing the concept of the exception, Badiou complicates his account of Paul’s antdialectics, although he does not address this specific complication in his argumentation. Basically, this complication consists in the fact that an exception is always a dialectical relation in which a rule, law, or universal is presupposed with respect to which the exception is an exception. In order to explicate how this peculiar relation plays a role in Badiou’s Saint Paul, I will proceed in three steps.

(1) First, although one might be tempted to argue that what Badiou calls antdialectics is simply a form of dualism – of event and situation, of spirit and flesh, and so on – it is important to see in which sense Paul’s antdialectics is, for Badiou, not another version of the dualism and nihilism that Nietzsche so heavily criticized in Paul. Badiou quotes the passage of § 42 of The Antichrist, § 42, where Nietzsche writes:

Paul simply shifted the centre of gravity of that entire existence beyond this existence – into the lie of the ‘resurrected’ Jesus. In fact, he could make no use at all of the redeemer’s life – he needed the death on the Cross and something in addition.  

For Nietzsche, the resurrection belongs to the surreal, to what does not belong to the existence proper. Paul, in Nietzsche’s account, has no interest in Christ’s life, but only in his death and ‘something in addition,’ that is, the lie of the resurrection. We have already noted that for Badiou the non-reference to Christ’s life is part of the proof that Paul’s account of Christ’s resurrection is not dialectical. Yet, this argument alone can very well be interpreted in line with Nietzsche’s idea of Paul’s nihilism. Therefore, Badiou adds that the resurrection is not so much concerned with something beyond this existence. Rather, resurrection is the name for an intensification of life, here and now. Resurrection is not only concerned with the resurrection of the Christ but also with the believers who are resurrected to a new form of life with Christ. To indicate the similarity between Nietzsche’s and Paul’s project, Badiou refers to Nietzsche’s Übermensch when he calls this intensification of life surexistence or ‘overexistence.’

Contradicting Nietzsche’s claim that Paul would be concerned with an (illusionary) existence beyond this existence and puts ‘the centre of gravity beyond this existence,’ Badiou insists that the difference between the paths of the spirit and of the flesh can only be understood if we see that it concerns existence here and now: ‘for [Paul] it is here and now that life takes revenges on death, here and now that we can live affirmatively, according to the spirit, rather than negatively, according to the flesh, which is the thought of death.’ Thus, the exception is not concerned with something beyond existence, but with ‘overexistence.’

(2) Second, it is not surprising that these remarks on Nietzsche are found in a chapter entitled ‘the division of the subject,’ a theme which is also highly significant in the following chapter entitled ‘the antdialectic of the resurrection.’ The subject is marked by a division because the subject, on the one hand, is part of the situation and its particular identities and, on the other hand, is called on by the event that transcends these identities. For Badiou, this division is contrasted to the undivided figure of subjectivity represented by the particular (collective) identities of Jew or Greek. These collective identities and their particular discourse ‘lay claim to the perpetuation of a full or undivided subject, whose particular predicates it would be possible to enumerate: genealogy, origin, territory, rituals, and so on.’
It is the division of the subject that explains why the event comes equipped with two paths. One might perhaps say that the event is, for the subject, its bifurcation point in which the unitary figure offered by its communal identity bifurcates into two different paths: one of the flesh, which adheres to this communal identity and which becomes the path of death only in and through the event (since, after all, without the event the communal identity is the only available one in Badiou’s logic), and one of the spirit ‘as fidelity to the event,’ that is, fidelity to the exception to particular identities.21

(3) Third, this means that for the subject there actually is a certain dialectics at work here: the particularities are there in the subject as suspended. It is intriguing to see that the final sentences of Badiou’s chapter on Paul’s antidialectics confirm this other hidden form of dialectics:

However, although resurrection is not the ‘Calvary of the Absolute,’ although it mobilizes no dialectic of the incarnation of Spirit, it is nevertheless true that it suspends [relève] differences for the benefit of a radical universality, and that the event is addressed to all without exception, or definitively divides every subject.22

The noun relève of the verb relever, which Badiou chooses here and that is translated as ‘to suspend,’ is Derrida’s famous suggestion to translate Hegel’s notion of Aufhebung and the accompanying verb aufheben.23 To read in Badiou’s usage of this verb, a transformed version of this dialectical relation is, given the structure of Badiou’s sentence, not too far-fetched. In fact, one might say that the path of spirit, that is, the path of a persevering fidelity to the event is nothing but a continuous effort on the part of the subject to suspend the differences that mark it, so that it is indeed faithful to what is an exception to the structure of particular differences.

This effort or work that takes place in and by the subject to suspend differences is most clearly visible in another Pauline structure that reflects a non-Hegelian dialectical relation. In reference to Romans 6:14, where Paul writes ‘for you are not under the law, but under grace,’ Badiou interrogates the ‘not …, but …’ that structures this passage. For him, this structure mirrors the two paths open to the subject (since he identifies law with death and flesh and he places grace on the same level as faith, life, and spirit).24 The negation of the law, expressed by the ‘not …,’ is once more described as a suspension (this time in the original: suspense and suspendu) of the path of the flesh. Second, the supplementary ‘but …’ refers to the path of the spirit. These two aspects mark the very division of the subject, as Badiou writes:

The subject of the new epoch is a ‘not … but.’ The event is at once the suspension of the path of the flesh through a problematic ‘not,’ and the affirmation of the path of the spirit through a ‘but’ of exception. Law and grace are for the subject the name of the constituting weave through which he is related to the situation as it is and to the effects of the event as they have to become.25

The suspension of the differences is thus supplemented by the exception as grace: the suspension of the ‘not’ encounters in the ‘but’ an unexpected and unforeseen grace that cannot be accounted for in terms of the negation or the suspension of the differences as such, but which is also not unrelated to it. Thus, this suspension is not a Hegelian Aufhebung because this suspension is not productive in the way Hegel’s Aufhebung is; grace is the exception and the properly positive and productive moment in this structure that offers to the subject the possibility of faith and fidelity. Thus, the subject
always remains marked by a tension, an immanent dialectical battle in which the two sides are never reconciled.

Combining these three steps by which Badiou’s account of Paul’s antidialectics is complicated by a sense of the ‘immanent exception,’ let us consider the following quote from Badiou’s *Saint Paul* that summarizes, first, how this antidialectics opposes Hegel’s dialectics and, second, how the exception introduces another version of dialectics that we will develop further in discussion of Agamben’s reading of Paul:

I shall maintain that Paul’s position is antidialectical, and that for it death is in no way the obligatory exercise of the negative’s immanent power. Grace, consequently, is not a ‘moment’ of the Absolute. It is affirmation without preliminary negation; it is what comes upon us in caesura of the law. It is pure and simple encounter.²⁶

Once more, we see that the ‘immanent power’ of the negative is not the driving force in Paul’s thought. Moreover, the opposition between grace and death is not taken up in a reconciliation. In exactly this sense, this opposition is not dialectical in a Hegelian sense: grace is not a moment of the Absolute, as Badiou writes, since such an account would imply the ultimate identity of grace and death in the Absolute. Instead, grace is a positivity or an incalculable, non-derivable surplus with respect to death and its negation. At the same time, grace happens in and as the interruption of the law: the negation of the law is the site where the encounter with this surplus is to be found. By describing grace as ‘pure and simple encounter,’ Badiou suggests that we are dealing here not so much with a Hegelian dialectic, but rather with one in which the moment is not the moment in a more general dialectical development, but in which it is rather the intensified present of a dialectical battle. In this battle, the exception affirms itself in the subject in its opposition to what is called death, law, and flesh in Paul’s letters.

If we return to our introductory concerns about the meontological nature of the present-day turn to Paul, we now know better of how the emphasis on the nothing should and should not be understood in the case of Badiou. When he quotes Paul that the things that are, are brought to nothing, this does not mean that they are annihilated or destroyed and it also does not mean that Badiou prefers the things that are merely not over the things that are. Rather, the things that are and the reigning discourses that determine the place, law, and meaning of the things that are, are confronted and repositioned by the exception. One might say that Badiou repeats Kierkegaard’s affirmation of the exception as he does in *Repetition*: ‘There are exceptions.’²⁷ This affirmation, as Kierkegaard demonstrates, implies a dialectical battle between what he calls the universal and the exception: every attempt of the universal to subsume the exception under its reign, fails in this battle and thus the attempt of the abstract universal to become concrete fails, but this failure is nothing but the encounter with the resistance and the nonconformity of the exception.²⁸ In this Kierkegaardian framework, the encounter with the exception is not a moment in a more encompassing development of the Absolute, but rather the intensified present itself in which the exception affirms itself as exception. With such a framework in mind, the claim that readings such as Badiou’s are basically meontological, gnostic, or Marcionist, is actually claiming that the exception is simply nothing and belongs to another world – and this is identical to claiming that, in Badiou’s vocabulary, the discourses that mark the present situation, are indeed all there is. The whole point, however, is that the things that are
not and that are chosen by God are not nothing; they are of the order of the exception: they are not of another time, another existence or another world; they are immanent exceptions and are in need of the present, of the here and now, as the time of their affirmation, as the time to show what the exception, in contrast to the world and its discourses and laws, is capable of.

That it makes sense to speak of a dialectics of the exception might not be so straightforward in light of Badiou’s *Saint Paul*, which belongs systematically to the period of *Being and Time* in which he prefers to describe his own thought as an antidialectic, to emphasize the difference with Hegel. Yet, it becomes more convincing when seen in light of Badiou’s own development. In *Logics of Worlds*, he does adopt the term ‘dialectic’ for his own position: he describes it as ‘materialist dialectic.’ The characteristic statement that captures this dialectic point of view is the following:

> It is then legitimate to counter democratic materialism – this sovereignty of the Two (bodies and languages) – with a materialist dialectic, if by ‘materialist dialectic’ we understand the following statement, in which the Three supplements the reality of the Two: There are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths.

... 

It’s worth paying attention to the syntax, which sets the axiom of the materialist dialectic apart from that of democratic materialism – namely the ‘except that.’

The English translation of *sinon que* as ‘except that’ is even more favorable to my argument than the French original. It shows in its wording how the notion of the exception – here formulated in Badiou’s concept of truth – marks his version of dialectics. The exception marked by the *sinon que* is the third term, next to bodies and languages, that constitutes the dialectic *par excellence* for Badiou.

In a recent text on ‘affirmative dialectics,’ Badiou connects this new appraisal of dialectics to his reading of Paul and makes clear that, indeed, his insistence on the antidialectic or ‘non-dialectical’ Paul is meant in the first place as dismissal of Hegel’s version of dialectics, and he repeats that he is still in agreement with his old self. Yet, this dismissal also opens up the possibility of another version of dialectics in which the negation is not productive, as in Hegel, but is rather to be understood in light of a preceding affirmation. In terms of his *Saint Paul*, he describes this preceding affirmation and its relation to negation as follows:

> you create something absolutely new [Paul’s event, GJvdH], not in the form of a negation of what exists but in the form of the newness inside of what exists. And so we no longer have negation, on the one hand, and affirmation, on the other. Instead, there is affirmation and division, or the creation that grounds the independence of new subject from within the situation of the old.

Negation is thus not the engine of development and change but rather the derivative and consequence of a preceding affirmation. This relation between negation and affirmation is seen in the structure of the division of the subject, as Badiou affirms here once more. As discussed above, this division is the subject’s struggle and negation of the ‘situation of the old’ from which it stems. These later reflections on dialectics show, first, that Badiou acknowledges that his antidialectic from *Saint Paul* can be understood and, in fact, need to be understood, in terms of a dialectics of the exception.
And, second, they show that his reading of Paul offers the exemplary example of this dialectics.

3. Paul’s exception and suspension

The reference to Kierkegaard in the previous section does not only help us to understand Badiou’s work in terms of dialectics but also allows us to move forward to Agamben. The passages on the exception from *Repetition* are famously quoted by Carl Schmitt and, via him, found its way into the present-day philosophical discussion on Paul and in particular into Taubes’ *The Political Theology of Paul* and Agamben’s *The Time That Remains*. In light of the discussion we are engaged in this essay, this reference to the exception is of crucial importance. The exception is not what lies beyond this world. With respect to the exception, the basic question is whether it has the possibility to affirm and manifest itself in this world, as an immanent exception of the world. The exception offers something that the world as such is incapable of and which therefore deserves the name of grace. In relation to the exception, we get a better view of the logic of nothingness and the things that are not that Paul develops in his letters. What is considered nothing from the viewpoint of the world is, fact, not nothing but rather an exception. This is the primary meaning of Paul’s alleged ‘nihilism’: the first nothing we encounter is of a world that does not allow the exception to exist. The world’s ‘there are no exceptions’ is the first negation that tries to negate the exception. Out of this negation, the other ones are born: when Paul writes that the world is coming to nothing and identifies himself with the refuse of the world, these are qualified and determined negations. They mean that the present form of the world is nothing but only *inssofar* as it considers the exception to be nothing and *insofar* as it does not count with the exception. For Paul, world and exception are thus engaged in a dialectical battle to affirm and assert the existence of the exception.

Whereas Badiou’s account of this battle is located in the subject, which sometimes gives the impression that he leaves the dualism of situation and event somewhat unresolved, Agamben’s reading of Paul offers a more elaborate version of the type of non-Hegelian dialectics of the exception that one may encounter in Paul. It might be tempting at this point to engage with Agamben’s extensively discussed and heavily debated interpretation of Schmitt’s state of exception, through which Agamben somehow adopts Kierkegaard’s notion of the exception, but I will take another route in order to focus fully on the question of a dialectics in Paul. Against the background of our reading of Badiou, I will bring out three notions in Agamben’s reading, (1) *katargein*, (2) *chrēsis*, and (3) *charis*, in order to show how Agamben’s reading of Paul leads to a real dialectics of the exception. Especially the first two notions are core concepts in other works of Agamben as well.

(1) *Katargein*. To this end, I will first turn to 1 Corinthians 1:28, which is not only the source of inspiration for the name ‘meontology’ but also plays a basic role in Badiou’s conception of Paul as we have seen. Yet, there is one aspect of this verse that we did not discuss. Paul uses a particular verb, *katargein*, to express what happens to the things that are, and this verb is translated as ‘to bring to nought.’ It is Agamben who draws our attention to the importance of the verb *katargein* and its noun *katargēsis*. Whereas the translation ‘to bring to nought’ might remind us of ‘to
annihilate,’ ‘to destruct,’ or ‘to reduce to nothing,’ Agamben argues that it actually means ‘to render inoperative.’ As he points out, *katargein* is not the antonym of *poiein* but rather of *energein*, so it is not a form of destruction but as the antonym of to activate, to realize (as in the German *verwirklichen*), or to be at work, it means to deactivate, to derealize and to suspend. To deactivate a machine or to render inoperative a law is not the same as destroying them; it is rather an operation by which the machine no longer functions as it is supposed to function and the law no longer applies as it usually applies. If we carry this meaning of *katargein* over to 1 Corinthians 1:28, we see that the *katargēsis* of the things that are, captures the sense of the secondary expressions that Paul uses to account for the nothingness of the form of the world and the things that are. The type of nothingness is a deactivation and its goal is clear: to deactivate and suspend the primary world’s declarations of the nothingness of the exception so that the exception may affirm itself. This suspension shows that the present order of the world is not a necessary one. There is room for the possibility of an exception to the laws and values of which this order is composed. Thus, read in light of Agamben’s account of *katargein*, the discussion in 1 Corinthians 1:28 is not about the opposition between what is and what is not, but rather about a reinterpretation of to-be-not(hing). In this sense, the reflection on *katargein* is part of philosophical problem comparable to the one Plato addresses in the *Sophist* when reinterpreting being-nothing as being-different or being-otherwise and to the one Aristotle addresses in the *Metaphysics* when reinterpreting being-nothing as being-potential (*dunamis*). Both Plato and Aristotle distinguish these forms of being-nothing from sheer nothingness. *Katargēsis* belongs to this group of philosophical concepts, such as the Other and potentiality, that show how the suspension of what counts as being (as being-identical or being-the-same and being-actual) gives space to the exception to these modes of being so that it can now show itself to be not nothing.

To capture the dialectical lineage of *katargein*, Agamben argues that there is an intrinsic link between Hegel’s concept of *Aufhebung* and Paul’s *katargēsis*, a link which according to him is established by Luther’s translation of *katargein* as *aufheben*, especially in Romans 3:31. This lineage concerns for Agamben the genealogy of the Pauline *katargein*. In such a genealogy, one can not only find certain kinships between the meaning and the usage of the words involved but also encounter some crucial differences. Especially in light of Badiou’s insistence on the antidialectics of Paul and given the fact that Agamben responds to Badiou’s reading of Paul in his own reading, this genealogy offers a support as well as a critique of Badiou’s insistence on the difference between Paul’s and Hegel’s dialectics. What Badiou fails to account for is why Hegel’s interpretation of Christianity in terms of the dialectical scheme has always been so successful, given that Paul is one of the founders of the intellectual and theological heritage of Christianity: Badiou disagrees with Hegel. He acknowledges that Hegel’s reading has been very successful, but he does not explain why Hegel’s reading has been so successful. Hence, he can also not explain in which sense his correction of Hegel can be seen as coming out of a genuine Pauline motive that Hegel did not and perhaps could not have seen. So how would Agamben respond to these issues?

The kinship between *katargēsis* and *Aufhebung* can be found in Agamben’s following explication:
In each case what is presupposed by the *Aufhebung* is that what has been lifted is not completely eliminated, but rather persists somehow and can thus be preserved (*Was sich aufhebt, wird dadurch nicht zu Nichts*, 'What is sublated, is not thereby reduced to nothing' ...). 40

What both notions have in common is the not-being-reduced-to-nothing of, in the case of *katargēsis*, the *ta onta*. As in Badiou’s subject, the things that are, the communal identities and discourses, are somehow still preserved. Yet, *Aufhebung* implies that this preservation is taken up in a new identity, a new unitary figure of the subject, and it is exactly this aspect that Badiou rejects. Although Agamben might accept this latter dimension of Badiou’s resistance to Hegel’s dialectics – we are indeed not dealing with another identity similar to the preceding ones – his reading also suggests that he would problematize the way in which Badiou treats this preservation. For Badiou’s subject, the old identity is either that with which one fights in one’s effort to remain faithful to the Christ-event or that which is completely indifferent in the new situation. Yet, this twofold attitude towards given identities or callings does not properly explain, for Agamben, in which sense these identities and callings are preserved in and given back to the subject. In a certain sense, as one might reconstruct a debate between Agamben and Badiou, Badiou remains too much on the side of the opposition: he adheres to the opposition of the path of the spirit and the path of the flesh according to which given identities are to be fought against; and he adheres to the opposition of the universal and the differences that do not matter for the universal. What Badiou does not think is a third, dialectical term that establishes a new relation between the two opposed terms. This is not a third term that encompasses and reconciles the other two, but one that shows the fertility and usefulness of the deactivated identity and the revoked vocation (*klēsis*). 41

(2) *Chrēsis*. According to Agamben, Paul does offer such a third term, namely *chrēsis* or use: the old or given identities and vocations are not only fought against but by their deactivation they are also given back to the subject for free use. In this sense, for Agamben, the Pauline exception is not opposed to the old identities and vocations, but is the very deactivation or *katargēsis* of these identities and vocations so that they are given free to be used. 42

Above, I have discussed Badiou’s attention to the ‘not ..., but ...’-structure. In a certain sense, this structure reminds us of the *hōs mē*, ‘as not’-structure analyzed by Agamben. This latter structure is used in 1 Corinthians 7 in which Paul writes that one should be married as not being married, weep as not weeping and rejoice as not rejoicing. 43 The reason why the ‘not ..., but ...’-structure may remind us of the ‘as not’-structure is due to one striking resemblance: both express the basic indifference of the faithful ones to what is deemed significant in the present form of the world and, at the same time, both express the necessity of a battle to remain faithful to the exception and not to conform to the present form of the world. Yet, for Agamben, these three terms – opposition, battle, and indifference – do not capture the full sense of the *hōs mē*. This tension (or ‘tensor’ as Agamben terms the ‘as not’ linguistically) finds its truth in a third term that mediates the opposed terms. Again, the mediating term is ‘use’ since *chrēsis* is the very definition of the mode of life expressed by *hōs mē*, as Agamben argues: ‘Use: this is the definition Paul gives to messianic life in the form of the *as not*. To live messianically means’ to use *‘klēsis*; conversely, messianic *klēsis* is something to use, not
to possess.\textsuperscript{144} This quote beautifully demonstrates the distance to both Badiou and Hegel; to Badiou because there is a third term besides law and grace that are put in contrast by the ‘not ..., but ...’; to Hegel because the third term is not a form of appropriation but only of use.\textsuperscript{45} Thus, one may conclude, this form of dialectics does not, as Hegel’s one aims to do, offer a solution to the tension and the opposition by appropriating the opposed terms in a higher unity. Yet, it also does not absolutize the opposition or tension as Badiou runs the risk of doing. Rather, for Agamben, Paul’s dialectics of the exception offers a form of life: it is in human praxis as the use of identities, discourses, and vocations that the tension of spirit and flesh, of spirit and letter is mediated, and the deactivation of the order of the world allows the world to become a new creation. Bringing all these elements together in a very dense passage, Agamben writes:

The ḥōsmē therefore does not only have a negative content; rather, for Paul, this is the only possible use of worldly situations. The messianic vocation ... is a generic potentiality [potenza] that can be used without ever being owned ... This expropriation does not, however, found a new identity; the ‘new creature’ is none other than the use and messianic vocation of the old.\textsuperscript{46}

The ‘as not’ is not only the negativity of an opposition but also its positive content is use, and this use does not derive from an ownership or an identity but from the messianic vocation, which is the revocation of every vocation, that is, an expropriation of our identity and our property (or properties). This messianic vocation is thus ‘a generic potentiality’: katargein does not destroy what is, but rather returns what is actualized to its original, generic potentiality for use. This, for Agamben, is the ‘new creature’ of which Paul speaks in 2 Corinthians 5:17. These dense phrases bring us to the core of Agamben’s reading of Paul, and probably to his philosophy as such.\textsuperscript{47}

(3) Charis. This analysis of chrēsis is mirrored in Agamben’s analysis of charis or grace. In light of our quest to capture the particular dialectics of the exception at work in Paul’s letters, it is once more helpful to discuss Agamben’s conception of grace in light of Badiou’s one. For the latter, the term of grace belongs on the same level as the event. For the subject, grace is nothing but the grace of the path of the spirit, of life, and of faith. In this sense, grace fits perfectly in the conception of the Two of the subject and the two paths that go hand in hand with it. Agamben, however, argues that grace is a more complicated term that one should understand out of Paul’s particular conception of the difference between pīstis and nomos, between faith and law. So, let us briefly follow Agamben’s analysis of this relation and subsequently address its specific significance for the main line of inquiry, which is the dialectics of the exception we aim to find in Paul.

For Agamben, it is not a given that pīstis and nomos are separated.\textsuperscript{48} In fact, if one considers Paul’s considerations about the covenant or pact of God with his people, it is obvious that such a legal-like construction does not function without a reference to pīstis: the pact depends on the trustworthiness of, first, God and, second, the people. In this sense, one might argue that trustworthiness and pact, pīstis and nomos, go hand in hand in the original covenant made with Abraham: they do not only not exist without each other but are also intrinsically mixed up with each other. It is only later, in the articulation of a proper law in the commandments, represented for Paul by the figure of
Moses, that a distinction can be made and that the trustworthiness of the people is transformed into obedience to the law. By proclaiming the crisis of the law – nobody is capable of obeying the law – Paul interferes in this original co-belonging of pistis and nomos and takes them apart, as Agamben argues. Paul’s retrieve of the covenant of God and Abraham as being more original than the covenant of God with Moses. In this way, he shows how pistis – and not the nomos of Moses’ commandments – is constitutive of the original covenant. Hence, Paul’s analysis indeed introduces an opposition. Yet, where does this opposition leave us? According to Agamben, and one might read this is an implicit critique of Badiou who tends to leave law and faith in their opposition, this opposition only marks the beginning of Paul’s thought of faith and law. Since pistis and nomos were not always opposed but rather intrinsically connected and mixed up, the opposition is not the last word about their relation, but only Paul’s rhetoric point of departure, as Agamben writes: ‘It is not a matter of opposing two heterogeneous principles and excluding works in favor of faith, but of coming to terms with the aporia that emerges from this rupture.’

In the letter to the Romans, Paul proclaims the crisis of the law when stating that the law has become unobservable. This crisis grows into a fracture of pistis and nomos (Rom. 3, 4) but this fracture discloses another term responding to this aporia and reconnecting or mediating faith and law. This mediating, third term is grace. Grace, according to Agamben, is the name for the exceptional and excessive nature of faith. These two adjectives, exceptional and excessive, need to be understood out of the original relation of faith and law. Faith, and its promise of trustworthiness, can never be completely fulfilled in or as counterservice, as Agamben writes:

The promise exceeds any claim that could supposedly ground itself in it, just as faith surpasses any obligation whatsoever of counterservice. Grace is that excess which, while it always divides the two elements of prelaw and prevents them from coinciding, does not even allow them to completely break apart.

As use (chrēsis) is the third term in relation in the ‘as not’ (hōs mē), grace is the third term between faith and law that describes their dialectic relation: it not only ‘prevents them from coinciding’ but also ‘does not … allow them to completely break apart.’ To do justice to this excess of faith, another conception of the covenant is necessary for Paul, not as a newly written covenant, but in particular forms of life, as Agamben insists, referring to the passage in which Paul describes the Corinthians as his written letter (2 Cor. 3:2). This means that grace is not opposed to good works, but grants a certain autarcheia to the capacity to do good works (in reference to 2 Cor. 9:7–8):

What should be obvious is that autarkeia does not signify a sufficient disposition of goods (as some translations suggest), but the sovereign capacity to gratuitously carry out good works independently of the law.

Thus, the capacity to do good works is no longer anchored in a written law that obligates but in a ‘sovereign capacity.’ Perhaps, one might capture the difference between Schmitt’s sense of sovereignty and the one Agamben finds here in Paul, as follows. For Schmitt, the sovereign is the one who has the power to proclaim the state of exception. This suspension of the law opens up a realm of decisionism: the decisional power of the sovereign is all that is left when the law is suspended. For Paul, however,
the suspension of the law opens up the original sphere that made the law possible in the
first place and of which the law is the expression, namely the sphere of promise of
righteousness (and not of power or decision alone). Grace is, for Paul, nothing but
this promise of righteousness. At this point, the similarity and the difference between
Agamben and Badiou is once more seen very clearly: whereas for Badiou, the law is
simply the opposite of the (righteous) event, for Agamben the law is dialectically related
to righteousness as its source.

Therefore, as Agamben suggests, the notion of grace is intrinsically connected to that
of use, as Agamben suggests in the next quote:

[Grace] manifests itself as an irreducible excess with regard to all obligatory service. Grace
does not provide the foundation for exchange and social obligations; it makes for their
interruption ... grace entails nothing more than the ability to use the sphere of social
determinations and services in its totality.

Both grace and use are notions that carry the weight of the exception to a logic reigned
by identity, vocation, exchange, and social order. In this sense, grace and use both
express a particular nonconformity, but they do so in relation to the present order of
the world which they interrupt and deactivate only insofar as this order posits itself as
absolute. Here, one might say, the exception and the exceptional status of both grace
and use are indeed the consequence of a dialectical battle of the order with these
exceptions – and, indeed, given the original inspiration of the law to express and give
form to justice and righteousness, it might even become comprehensible why, paraphrasing Kierkegaard’s reflection on the exception in Repetition, this order, despite its
struggle with the exception since it does not want to allow an exception, will ultimately
rejoice over its exceptions.

4. Concluding remarks: on what it is to be nothing

To conclude, let me return to the problem of the Gnostic temptation in Paul and the
question of whether the philosophers today indeed emphasize Paul’s meontology.
Where do we stand with respect to these issues? Let me once more quote Critchley,
from whom I have taken the term ‘meontology.’ He speaks of the double declaration of
nothingness we find in Paul:

This discloses a peculiar double logic: in proclaiming faith and enacting life, the world
becomes trash and we become the trash of the world. The waiting community becomes the
unwanted offscouring that is seen as garbage by the lights of Greek wisdom and sees, in
turn, the existing communal world as garbage.

According to Critchley, there is a mutual proclamation of nothingness, indicating the
mutual exclusion of the realms of faith and law, of spirit and flesh, and of life and death.
Critchley, however, does not address the dialectical relation of this doubled nothing-
ness, and therefore for him this is yet another example of the fundamental meontology
operative in those parts of Paul’s letters emphasized by the philosophers. Yet, as I have
aimed to show, this mutual proclamation has to be understood in light of a particular
logic. To be nothing can take on different meanings. To be nothing in the present order
of the world refers to the denial of the possibility of the exception and of grace. The
world’s being nothing, however, refers not to such a denial but rather to faith’s indifference to what is something in the world – this is not a nihilism but simply means that the valuation attached to, for instance, wealth and power in Roman discourse or to circumcision in Jewish discourse are not affirmed, but rather suspended so that they can be used freely: freed from the law, these particular properties do not need to be annihilated, but are given free for a good usage. This is the very meaning of grace, as Agamben notes. The ‘capacity to gratuitously carry out good works independently of the law,’ simply means that good works can also be carried out beyond the commandments – exactly in those cases in which the commandment is at odds with justice and righteousness, this capacity is indeed the pure grace of the presence of justice. In this sense, as Agamben also notes, ‘grace entails nothing more than the ability to use the sphere of social determinations and services in its totality’ and thus offers the possibility to value even what the world considers to be worthless.

To claim that this is a nihilism or attests to a meontology is to mistake a Gnostic temptation in Paul for a Gnostic interpretation of Paul. Although Taubes has shown that this mistake has often been made, I hope to have shown that Agamben and Badiou are, as Taubes, aware of this difference between temptation and interpretation. In the dialectic usages of negation and nothingness in Paul, a suspension does not reduce to nothing but makes it free for another usage or interpretation. As we have seen, Paul’s notions of spirit, grace, and use are fundamental in this regard since they make up the very exception. They are the terms, as Agamben argues, that mediate what in any dualism or nihilism remains mutually exclusive.

Notes

2. I have discussed this framework extensively in Van der Heiden, *Ontology after Ontotheology*, 29–68. See also Hallward, *Badiou*, 81–152.
4. 1 Cor. 1:29 as quoted in Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 46.
5. For this idea, Critchley is indebted to Taubes whose *The Political Theology of Paul* is concerned with the Marcionist tendencies in the way Paul is inherited not only in early Christianity but also in present-day Western theology and philosophy.
6. Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 55ff. For an account of Nietzsche’s version of Paul, see Baker, ‘Paul and Political Theology,’ 296–98. It is important to emphasize that Critchley’s usage of the terms Gnosticism and Marcionism originates in Taubes ‘understanding of these terms. Gnosticism is thus used in a limited sense (a reference to Gnosticism as such would still allow for too many different perspectives and meanings; as one of the referees kindly pointed out to me, the complexity of the movement of Gnosticism is extensively discussed in Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”*). I have discussed Taubes’ understanding of the Marcionic nature of the reception of Paul in Western culture and history in Van der Heiden, ‘Paul’s Dialectic in Present-Day Philosophy,’ 44–8. For Taubes, the question of Gnosticism is exactly concerned with the question of whether Paul’s letters propose a dualistic perspective of reality, and this means in particular how he relates to his own Jewishness. Resisting the gnostic temptation is thus, for Taubes, to recognize in Paul not a dualistic but a dialectic tendency that takes up his Jewish identity and provides it with a different meaning.
8. For discussion of different authors and different topics concerning the present-day revival of Paul in contemporary philosophy, there is a lot of literature available, see e.g. Blanton and de Vries, *Paul and the Philosophers*; Caputo and Martin Alcoff, *Paul among the Philosophers*; Frick, *Paul in the Grip of the Philosophers*; and journals devoting special issues to it, such as *The Apostle Paul in Modern Philosophy*, special issue of *Bijdragen. International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* and *L’événement saint Paul: Juif, grec, romain, chrétien*, special issue of *Esprit*.


13. One might read in this attention to the indifference at work in the type of subjectivity that speaks from Paul’s letters, Badiou’s version of what Heidegger and Agamben found in the specific attitude of *hós mé*, which Paul recommends in 1 Corinthians 7.

14. Badiou speaks in this context not of the destruction or negation of differences, but rather of ‘the traversal of all differences’ (Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 110).


16. Ibid, 110–11. Cf. also Hallward, Badiou, 110. In a completely different philosophical tradition, the sense of equality with which Paul’s universality goes hand in hand, has also been recently put on the agenda, cf. Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual*.


18. Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 61. In the same context, Badiou explains Nietzsche’s misreading of Paul as follows: ‘If Nietzsche is so violent toward Paul, it is because he is his rival far more than his opponent’ (ibid., 60); a similar remark can be found in Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 85–7.


20. Ibid, 57. It is important to note, especially with respect to Agamben’s critique of Badiou’s usage of the Pauline phrase ‘Jew nor Greek’ to exemplify the exception as universal, that Badiou does not say that the form of subjectivity introduced by the event is an abstract universality – every concrete subject is divided and is, on the one hand grounded in one of the discourses and on the other hand called to go beyond this discourse (or rather, beyond discourses of particularity as such). In this sense, the divided subject that Badiou introduces might indeed be closer to Agamben’s ‘non-non Jew’ than the latter is willing to acknowledge, see Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 51. I will discuss this more extensively below.


22. Ibid, 74.


24. For another reference to spirit in terms of such a path of the subject, see Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 82–3.


28. It would be interesting and worthwhile to extend this analysis and comparison with Kierkegaard as a mediating thinker between Hegel and Badiou when it comes to the question of dialectics. Note that Kierkegaard insists on an ambiguity on the side of the universal as well as of the exception. On the universal, he notes: ‘the struggle itself is a strange conflict between the rage and impatience of the universal over the disturbance the exception causes and its infatuated partiality for the exception, for after all is said and done, just as heaven rejoices more over a sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous, so does the universal rejoice over an exception.’ Thus, on the one hand, the universal is frustrated that the exception resists the universal’s application to it, but on the other hand, the universal is marked by an ‘infatuated
partiality for the exception,’ thus suggesting that the universal exists so that the exception may manifest itself. On the exception, he notes: ‘the insubordination and defiance of the exception, his weakness and infirmity.’ Hence, the exception is not only perseverance in resistance but is also weakness and infirmity and needs the universal to become stronger as universal. In these remarks it is not difficult to see the sense of Badiou’s subject as a Two prefigured: The subject is, as fidelity, always also a fight with and against the other path. As Kierkegaard continues: ‘The whole thing is a wrestling match in which the universal breaks with the exception, wrestles with him in conflict, and strengthens him through this wrestling. … The vigorous and determined exception, who although he is in conflict with the universal still is an offshoot of it, sustains himself.’ For all quotes, see Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling, 226–27.

29. Badiou, Logics of Worlds, 4; see also 45, 299.
30. See Badiou, ‘From Logic to Anthropology,’ esp. 45–8. I would like to thank one of the referees for pointing this reference out to me. As Badiou writes at 47: ‘So, this logic is actually non-dialectical – in Hegel’s and Marx’s sense – since it does not start with the creativity of negation as such, though the site of negativity is certainly included in the consequences of which is affirmative.’
31. ‘So when I say that there is something non-dialectical, whether with regard to Paul or to the field of concrete political analysis, I am putting forward the same idea formally speaking. We have to try to understand the exact conditions under which we are able to have something like a possibility of concrete negation. And this can only be achieved, it seems to me, in the field of primitive affirmation, through something that is primitively affirmative and not negative. To use my own terminology: it is a question of event and subject’ (Badiou, ‘From Logic to Anthropology,’ 46–7).
33. Cf. also the ‘dialectic of the subject’ (Badiou, Logics of Worlds, 497).
34. Taubes, The Political Theology of Paul, 65–6; Agamben, Homo Sacer, 16.
35. Let me emphasize that I limit myself here to the themes that directly respond to what I discussed in relation to Badiou. There are, of course, more extensive accounts possible of both the sense of dialectics and the sense of the exception in relation to Agamben. I have done so elsewhere, cf. Van der Heiden, ‘Paul’s Dialectic in Present-Day Philosophy.’
36. Although, Agamben does refer to 1 Cor. 1:28 (cf. Agamben, The Time That Remains, 10), he does not refer to this text when explicating the meaning and impact of the verb katargein in reflection on this verse, cf. especially 93–107.
37. The importance of this notion of katargein thus stretches out to the notion of inoperativity, which is a core concept of Agamben’s work. Even in the last book of the Homo Sacer-series, The Use of Bodies, he returns to this notion and to its Pauline origin and shows its proximity with the notion of destituent power that plays a fundamental role in it, see Agamben, The Use of Bodies, 273–74.
39. ibid, 99.
40. ibid, 100.
41. For the discussion of vocation or klètos, see Agamben, The Time That Remains, 19–43. It is also in this context that the notion of chrēsis is first introduced.
42. Here, I will be limiting my discussion to The Time That Remains. Yet, to see the impact and the importance of Paul’s notion of chrēsis for Agamben’s work as a whole, one should note that the notion of use plays a central role well beyond the confines of this book. At least two other works deserve to be mentioned. In The Highest Poverty, Agamben shows how in the Franciscan order this sense of use is opposed to the sense of right and property or ownership and concerns the form of life that is at stake in the monastery. Also here, Agamben traces this sense of use and form of life back to 1 Corinthians 7:20–31, which is also the crucial passage in The Time That Remains. ‘What is lacking in the Franciscan literature is a definition of use in itself and not only in opposition to law. The preoccupation with constructing a justification of use in juridical terms prevented them from collecting the hints of a theory of use present in the Pauline letters, in
The relation of power of law and the righteousness or justice of the law and to show how it can be read as an intervention in Badiou’s reading of Paul.


Critchley does not discuss this dimension of the ἡσὶ μὲ in Agamben’s interpretation and is therefore bound to identify this ‘as not’-structure with Paul’s meontology, even though he does quote 1 Cor. 7:21, which is one of the passages in which *chrēsis* does not only appear but to which Agamben actually refers to introduces his account of *chrēsis*, cf. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 177–80; Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 26. Perhaps one can say that the question of meontology is the point of departure for these discussions because of the widely acknowledged Gnostic temptation in Paul, but it cannot be the end point.

One could further explore this difference in terms of the relation of the event and division of the subject in Badiou and compare this to Agamben’s emphasis not so much on the question of universality but of the determination of this universality in terms of the theme of separation (*aphorismenos*) and its consequences for the notions of the part, the all and the remnant in Paul, cf. Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 44–58. This analysis would allow one to clarify the strange occurrence that the notion of the exception does not only enter Badiou’s text to think the universal and the event but also to characterize the Jewish discourse and its emphasis on the exception and the election (Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 41–2, 56–7). Badiou does not reflect on the relation between these two forms of exception because, for him, the exception constituted by the grace of the event is pure indifference to Jewish discourse. Against this background, Agamben’s inquiry into Paul’s account of separation and election shows that for Paul, the theme of election is taken from Jewish discourse but also transformed and returns in the form of the important theme of the remnant, that which becomes visible when the Jewish discourse is rendered inoperative. Moreover, and it is important to note that, this does not mean that Agamben simply rejects the idea of universality that Badiou invokes – after all, the remnant and the revocation of all vocations is a possibility for all – but he does show the complexity of this notion and shows that it cannot be thought in terms of pure indifference to Jewish discourse alone, but should rather be understood as a free (universal) use of the terminology Jewish discourse offers.

The different roles of Abraham and Moses are understood by Agamben in terms of (or perhaps as anticipation of) what Schmitt describes as the difference between the constituting power (in this case of pact and trustworthiness) and the constituted power (in this case of the commandments); Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 118.

The relation of power – or the force – of law and the righteousness or justice of the law obviously deserves further explication, but would lead us beyond the scope of this article. At this point, a discussion between Agamben’s Paul and Derrida’s work in *Force de loi* promises an important contribution.


Acknowledgments

This work was supported by NWO (Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research) under Grant 360-25-120.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the NWO Free Competition for the Humanities: [Grant Number 360-25-120];

Notes on contributor

Gert-Jan van der Heiden is Professor of Metaphysics at the Radboud University Nijmegen. He is working mainly on hermeneutics and contemporary French thought. He published Ontology after Ontotheology: Plurality, Event, and Contingency in Contemporary Philosophy (2014).

Bibliography


