

Contingency and Skepticism in Agamben's Thought

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Skepticism is often understood in terms of its epistemological implications alone, namely that we cannot have any certain knowledge. Throughout the history of philosophy, skepticism has been an important partner in conversation for exactly its epistemological position – if only to reject what many consider its unwanted outcomes. In the work of Giorgio Agamben, however, we find another way of retrieving some of the basic terms and concerns of ancient skepticism for ontology. Agamben shows that the skeptic's philosophical vocabulary allows us to articulate an alternative to both the affirmation of being characteristic of ontotheology, as well as the negation of being that characterizes contemporary forms of nihilism.

In this essay, I explore how Agamben retrieves ancient skepticism and how this skepticism informs some of his basic concepts. While Agamben sometimes explicitly refers to the influence of skepticism, at other occasions, his arguments and thoughts are merely marked by several skeptical traces which need to be brought out in a reading of his texts; it is worthwhile to consider both. To examine the skeptical heritage of Agamben's work and its implication for, especially, his accounts of contingency and potentiality which form the heart of his ontological concerns, in this contribution I discuss three different elements: (1) the skeptic formulae, and in particular Agamben's account of *ἐποχή* and *οὐ μᾶλλον*; (2) the skeptic passage that may be traced in his usage of the word *εὐπορία*, which requires some contextualization to understand its meaning and its skeptic kinship; (3) the skeptic overtones in Agamben's reading of the Pauline notion of *καταργεῖν*, deactivation or suspension.

THE SKEPTIC FORMULA

One of the most important references to skepticism can be found in Agamben's essay "Bartleby, or on Contingency."¹ This complicated essay offers a reading

of Herman Melville's story *Bartleby, the Scrivener* in which this story becomes a special kind of experiment, an experiment in ontology. As Agamben explains:

Not only science, but also poetry and thinking conduct experiments. These experiments do not simply concern the truth or falsity of hypotheses, the occurrence or nonoccurrence of something, as in scientific experiments; rather, they call into question Being itself, before or beyond its determination as true or false. These experiments are without truth, for truth is what is at issue in them.²

If we carefully consider this quote, we see immediately how Agamben underscores the priority of a particular *ἐποχή*, a suspension of judgement, in relation to the project he undertakes in this essay. Science is focused on judgements concerning the truth or the falsity of certain propositions and hypotheses, or judgements concerning the existence and non-existence of the beings and phenomena it investigates. Science carries out and sets up its experiments so that it can attain this specific goal: to arrive at a judgement. By contrast, the experiments of poetry and philosophy do not have this aim. Rather, the proper domain or place of their experiments can only be reached by a preliminary *ἐποχή*, namely by the suspension of this quest for truth or falsity. Poetic and philosophical experiments depend on such a suspension not because they are not interested in truth but rather because truth is not presupposed in them as something about which one can judge, as it is in the experiments of science. Or as Agamben puts it: truth is "at issue" in poetic and philosophical experiments. Thus poetry and philosophy also examine nature and being, but they do so in different modes than science does. This is the specific role of the suspension of judgement that Agamben invokes here: by it, philosophy and poetry aim to enter a domain inaccessible for the sciences, that is for that dimension of human understanding that aims at knowledge. Although skepticism is not mentioned in this particular passage, the skeptical vein of this remark is clear.

According to Agamben, these experiments of thinking and poetry aim at a change of one's mode of existence:

Whoever submits himself to these experiments jeopardizes not so much the truth of his own statements as the very mode of his existence; he undergoes an anthropological change that is just as decisive in the context of the individual's natural history as the liberation of the hand by the erect position was for the primate or as was, for the reptile, the transformation of limbs that changed it into a bird.³

This reference to change shows that what is at stake in these experiments is not the assessment of what is, but rather the possibility of transformation of what we are. This possibility simultaneously brings into play both "what is" and "what is not" in the form of "what can be." One's existence, to put it differently, certainly has some characteristics that can be discovered and examined

by the sciences; yet, it is the task of poetry and philosophy to consider our existence not only in light of the characteristics we have, but also in light of the possibility of us lacking these characteristics. The experiments of stories and thoughts thus affect one's dispositions and habits: ἔθος and ἔξις are at stake in poetic and philosophical experiments not as what is already given, ready to be examined, but rather as what is aimed at, as what can be affected and changed. The configuration of human action unfolded by a story may, in a fundamental way, change the actions and behaviors to which the reader is inclined. The configuration of thought unfolded by a philosophy may, likewise, transform the thoughts and convictions to which the reader is inclined. For Agamben, when he speaks about ontology, the questions of disposition and habit are always co-implied.

What type of experiment does ancient skepticism give rise to? To move towards an answer to this question, let me offer another passage, which describes the distinction between the scientific experiment and the poetic experiment, but which also makes a direct reference to ancient skepticism:

If what is at issue in a scientific experiment can be defined by the question "Under what conditions can something occur or not occur, be true or be false?" what is at issue in Melville's story can instead be formulated in a question of the following form: "Under what conditions can something occur *and* (that is, at the same time) not occur, be true *no more than not be true*?" [. . .] If no one dreams of verifying the scrivener's formula, [that is, "I would prefer not to,"] this is because experiments without truth concern not the actual existence of nonexistence of a thing but exclusively its potentiality. And potentiality, insofar as it can be or not be, is by definition withdrawn from both truth conditions and, prior to the action of "the strongest of all principles," the principle of contradiction.

In first philosophy, a being that can both be and not be is said to be contingent.⁴

Here Agamben makes a number of important connections. First, he shows that the question of whether one should judge or suspend one's judgement need not be conceived as an epistemological question nor as a question concerning the limits and finitude of the human cognitive apparatus. The epistemological approach, which restricts suspension to knowledge and beliefs, assumes that the reality of things and occurrences is fixed and that the only possible complications to this fixity reside in our cognitive access to reality.

Of course, one can approach this question in this way, but Agamben argues here that the skeptical ἐποχή is ultimately, and in its original inclination, concerned not so much with the limits of human cognition but rather with developing a different attitude to exceeding these limits. Thus, despite its epistemological resonance, the question of judgement or suspension of judgement calls for an ontological investigation – at least if we want to understand

the underlying ontological issue reflected in this difference between judgement and its suspension. To a certain extent, this need not surprise us: if our capacities to know or to understand make any sense, they should be guided and instructed by the reality that gives itself to be understood; otherwise, Being either becomes merely the product of our cognitive capacities, or it can only be accounted for as pure inaccessibility. In the above quote, Agamben offers a clear account of the distinction between judgement and suspension in ontological terms: whereas the former examines existence in its actuality (a being that either is or is not – a proposition that is either true or false), the latter has access to existence in its potentiality or contingency (a being that can both be and not be – a proposition that can be true no more than not be true).⁵

It is the formula of the “no more than,” or οὐ μᾶλλον, that establishes the direct link with ancient skepticism. Οὐ μᾶλλον is used in ancient skepticism to express the indifference between the two alternatives that a judgement offers: true no more than false.⁶ According to Agamben, the suspension of judgement with which this formula coincides is not only a form of indifference for the skeptics, but instead the skeptics viewed it “as an experience of possibility or potentiality.”⁷

Agamben is here referring to the use of δύναμις by Sextus Empiricus in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I.8; yet, his translation significantly differs from the usual one. He translates the first portion of *Outlines* I.8 as a skeptical definition of δύναμις: “The Skeptics understand δύναμις as any opposition between sensibles or appearances and judgments or intelligibles.”⁸ By contrast, standard translations suggest that δύναμις is nothing but the special capacity or potentiality of skepticism itself: “Skepticism is an ability [δύναμις] to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all.”⁹ Whether this difference of translation is important depends, once more, on our conception of the relation between epistemology and ontology. If we understand dimension in epistemological terms alone, then the usual translation, which brackets the ontological register that Agamben includes, is adequate. However, if one understands the epistemological capacity of skepticism as depending on an ontological component, that is that skepticism touches on a genuine feature of reality and leads to an attitude towards the world that captures this basic aspect of the world, then the skeptic’s δύναμις to oppose (which leads to the suspension of judgement) aims at δύναμις in the world, one that “shows itself on the threshold between Being and non-Being, between sensible and intelligible, between word and thing.”¹⁰ Hence, for Agamben, the skeptic’s capacity to affirm neither the sensible nor the intelligible has δύναμις, as what appears on the threshold between sensible and intelligible, as its proper object. Yet, granting that the skeptical δύναμις is the ability to attune ourselves to what happens or “shows itself” on the threshold between sensible and intelligible or between being and non-being, the question remains: is Agamben justified in identifying the object of the skeptical δύναμις with δύναμις itself?

Before answering this question (to which we return in the upcoming sections), let us first analyze how Agamben develops the discovery of δύναμις,

as what one finds on the threshold between being and non-being, in a specific conception of ontology of the contingent. Like a few other contemporary authors (we find a similar gesture, for example, in Heidegger and Meillassoux), Agamben shows how this understanding of skepticism and its *δύναμις* transform Leibniz's famous principle of sufficient reason, which Agamben translates as "there is a reason for which something does rather than does not exist."¹¹ The term *potius* – "from *potis*, which means 'more powerful,'"¹² and which is translated as "rather" – connects potentiality to reason and subordinates it to Being, Agamben argues. The skeptical formula of οὐ μᾶλλον or "no more than" emancipates Leibniz's "rather" from its subordination to Being.¹³ The skeptic formula οὐ μᾶλλον, and more precisely in its form of "Being no more than Non-Being," thus relocates *δύναμις*. The skeptic interest in ontology neither affirms Being (and the "onto-theo-logical ceremony" that goes hand in hand with it) nor Non-Being (and the "ungrateful guest" of nihilism which accompanies it).¹⁴ The skeptic *ἐποχή* detaches *δύναμις* from the primacy of either Being or Non-Being and instead locates it on the threshold of both. This, as Agamben concludes his discussion of skepticism, opens up a new ontology of potentiality and contingency, which he characterizes as follows: "To be capable, in pure potentiality, to bear the 'no more than' beyond Being and Nothing, fully experiencing the impotent possibility that exceeds both."¹⁵

Yet, what is exactly experienced in this way? Which transformation of existence is at stake in this philosophical experiment of skepticism? In which sense is this an impotent possibility? Why is *δύναμις* the term to capture this transformation, and why is it the true object of the skeptic capacity to suspend judgement? And how is this related to a specific conception of contingency? Each of these questions requires a deepening of the ontology of potentiality Agamben here announces.

THE SKEPTICAL PASSAGE

At one point in the essay "*Pardes*," where Agamben reflects on his relation to Derrida's work, he uses the word *εὐπορία* (transliterated to *euporia*): "The aporias of self-reference thus do not find their solution here; rather, they are dislocated and (according to the Platonic suggestion) transformed into *euporias*."¹⁶ The idea of the *aporia* (or *ἀπορία*) is central to Derrida's work and concerns non-passage, a situation in which one cannot pass, in which the road is blocked, obstructed, destroyed, or simply absent. Whereas *aporia* in Derrida's work often is discussed at the point of a dislocating or displacing what one thought was a passage, Agamben suggests in this quote that *ἀπορία* itself may also be dislocated and, by this, be transformed into an *εὐπορία*, a good passage, an ease or facility of going through.

To understand the stakes of this transformation of *ἀπορία* into *εὐπορία*, a clarification of the philosophical background of these terms may be beneficial. The combination of *ἀπορία* and *εὐπορία* – or rather of *ἀπορεῖν* and

εὐπορεῖν – plays a systematic role in Aristotle’s conception of the reflection, investigation, or discussion required by first philosophy, as he explains at the beginning of *Metaphysics* B.¹⁷ Here Aristotle argues that a good understanding of a topic requires that one engages with its difficulties or perplexities (ἀπορία) in order to find a way through (εὐπορία) them: only the one who has thus been engaged with the ἀπορία of certain problems and found a way out truly understands. One may even understand this conception of the relation between ἀπορία and εὐπορία in terms of Aristotle’s understanding of the relation between dialectics and first philosophy: whereas dialectics, as a sort of critical thought, is valuable for its capacity to find the ἀπορία of given opinions, it does not attain the true goal of its own enterprise, namely to find a way out of these ἀπορία and to enter a state of proper knowledge. In this sense, εὐπορία is nothing but the passageway from dialectics to first philosophy.

If we read Plato as preparing this Aristotelian insight, and we consider “the Platonic suggestion” of which Agamben speaks in “*Pardes*” in light of this understanding of εὐπορία, then Agamben’s critique of Derrida would be nothing but a return to the classical metaphysical perspective. Yet, due to its ambiguity, the Platonic dialogues have given rise to more than one descendent: not only to the classical metaphysical point of view of Aristotle, which in a certain sense has become normative in the history of metaphysics, but also to a skeptical heritage. Not only is there a historical link between Plato and skepticism – insofar as Plato’s Academy turned skeptical in its middle period under the guidance of Arcesilaus – but there is also a systematic link, as one may perceive a certain skeptical tendency in Socratic dialectic as a quest for ἀπορία.

Let us apply these considerations to the terminology of ἀπορία and εὐπορία. In fact, in Plato’s dialogues, there are a number of passages in which ἀπορία and εὐπορία come together. In some of them, it seems that an Aristotelian point of view is anticipated. Consider, for example, the following passage: “It is these problems of the one and many, but not those others, Protarchus, that cause all sorts of difficulties [ἀπορίας] if they are not properly settled, but promise progress [εὐπορίας] if they are.”¹⁸ A proper treatment of the difficulties promises a way out of the problems – and one might indeed interpret this εὐπορία as leading to the Aristotelian standpoint of a first philosophy. Yet, there are also passages in which it is clear that a more skeptic reversal of the relation between ἀπορία and εὐπορία is brought into play. Consider the following two examples: “For I myself do not have the answer [εὐπορῶν] when I perplex [ἀπορεῖν] others, but I am more perplexed [ἀπορῶν] than anyone when I cause perplexity [ἀπορεῖν] in others.”¹⁹ And: “Keep quiet, Hippias. We could well be thinking we’re in the clear [εὐπορία] again, when we’ve gotten stuck [ἀπορία] on the same point about the fine as we did a moment ago.”²⁰ The first passage, from the *Meno*, indicates that the difficulties Socrates creates do not stem from some superior knowledge, but rather from his superior being-perplexed. The second example, from the *Greater Hippias*, suggests that, when we think we have found a way out, we might actually find ourselves in an even more problematic

position, since we have not recognized the ἀπορία in our supposed εὐπορία. In both cases, the aim of dialectics is not to overcome the ἀπορία but rather to find the ἀπορία since what one takes to be an εὐπορία, a way out, is actually a form of self-deceit. In these two examples, dialectics concerns the dialectician's capacity to find the ἀπορία and to find the opposition that obstructs judgement in the discussion at hand.

If we read Agamben's reference to "the Platonic suggestion" in this way, at first we seem to have a big problem: after all, it seems that we lost the transformation of ἀπορία into a εὐπορία since there is no way out of the ἀπορία. We only have dialectics' way towards the ἀπορία. Indeed, this is our situation, so long as we insist on understanding εὐπορία in the Aristotelian sense of the passage to first philosophy and the way to true knowledge. In light of this interpretation of εὐπορία, to remain on the level of the ἀπορία is to fail to acquire the true end of philosophical inquiry. Yet, if we approach ἀπορία, not from the Aristotelian perspective, but from a more skeptic perspective, another picture arises. The insistence on and persistence of the ἀπορία is not simply a failure, but rather is a εὐπορία in another sense and in another direction: not as the passage to first philosophy, but as a passage to another domain.²¹

Let us consider this in further detail. The skeptical δύναμις, the capacity to find ἀπορίαί and to suspend judgements, opens up a domain in which something unexpected and unforeseeable happens to the skeptic. Sextus offers a beautiful image of this other passageway, which I quote here in full:

The Sceptic, in fact, had the same experience which is said to have befallen the painter Apelles. Once, they say, when he was painting a horse and wished to represent in the painting the horse's foam, he was so unsuccessful that he gave up the attempt and flung at the picture the sponge on which he used to wipe the paints off his brush, and the mark of the sponge produced the effect of a horse's foam. So, too, the Sceptics were in hopes of gaining quietude by means of a decision regarding the disparity of objects of sense and of thought, and being unable to effect this they suspended judgment; and they found that quietude, as if by chance, followed upon their suspense, even as a shadow follows its substance.²²

The skeptic's quest thus begins as a quest for a solution to the difficulties it confronts, and sets out on an inquiry that seeks the Aristotelian εὐπορία as its goal. Yet, in its efforts, the skeptic is utterly unsuccessful – at least from the perspective of this goal – and only finds ἀπορίαί. Having at first described skepticism in terms of the ability to oppose, in this passage Sextus describes this the skeptic's capacity as an incapacity, an inability (μὴ δυναθέντες): the skeptic's power is indeed, as Agamben suggests, an "impotent possibility"²³ since the skeptics are incapable of finding a way out. Yet they embrace this incapacity in their suspension of judgement. To articulate it in Agamben's vocabulary, the characteristic capacity or potentiality (δύναμις as δύνασθαι, as in *Outlines*

I.9) of the skeptics is the capacity or potential not to find a way out of the ἀπορία.²⁴ Yet this incapacity that only finds ἀπορίαί or non-passages turns out to be the skeptical passageway to quietude (ἀταραξία). The opening of this other passage, this other εὐπορία, which is the suspension of judgement, befalls the skeptic by chance and is comparable to a shadow (σκιά) that follows its body (σῶμα). Thus this other, non-Aristotelian εὐπορία is the other side, the shadow of the ἀπορία: it is the ἐποχή of the skeptic. It is the potential not to find a way out (in the Aristotelian sense) that opens up the skeptical way to ἀταραξία.

Reflecting on this discussion, we thus find two different approaches to εὐπορία (both different from the Aristotelian one), and both of them need to be taken into account when we try to understand what Agamben says in his brief but profound comment on Derrida's approach to ἀπορίαί. First, following the skeptic or critical dimension of certain Platonic dialogues, an ἀπορία is a way out of a particular self-deception; while the "pre-aporetic" εὐπορία is marked by self-deceit, an ἀπορία is in a certain sense the true εὐπορία itself since it liberates one from deception.²⁵ Second, there is the skeptical account of εὐπορία as the shadow of ἀπορίαί, emphasizing how a seemingly failed enterprise can be caught by the unexpected surprise of another passage; rather than being "pre-" or "post-aporetic," this εὐπορία, as the shadow of ἀπορίαί, might best be simply called an aporetic (ἄπορος) εὐπορία. This, it seems, is the type of εὐπορία Agamben has in mind in his comment on Derrida: for on the skeptical understanding it is the ἀπορία itself that is the εὐπορία. Moreover, in the skeptical account, the εὐπορία follows the ἀπορία as something unexpected, something that befalls the skeptics in a situation where they experience their incapacity to judge. Hence this experience indeed deserves to be called an experience of potentiality and contingency: the skeptical δύναμις, understood as the power not to judge, stays far from its Aristotelian actualization – from the Aristotelian εὐπορία – but exactly in this way, the skeptic has an experience of δύναμις itself. That is to say, skeptics not only experience ἀταραξία itself, but they also experience the chance of ἀταραξία unexpectedly befalling them. In this way we see how the particular skeptical attitude of thinking – with its δύναμις to reach an ἐποχή, its potential not to pass judgement – is the attitude that is required to experience δύναμις as pure potentiality and contingency. It is this ἔθος of thinking that goes hand in hand with the new ontology of δύναμις that is thus created.²⁶

A SKEPTICAL PAUL?

The third and last skeptical moment of Agamben's work can be encountered in what might seem an unlikely place: his engagement with the Letters of Saint Paul. Without going as far as to argue that Paul is really a skeptic, I contend that some of the basic features of Agamben's reading of Paul are akin to what he discerns in the skeptic's discourse and in the skeptical discovery of another

passageway out of an ἀπορία. If scholars link Paul's discourse to any Hellenistic school, they usually associate it with Stoicism (and for good reasons); but this reference plays no role in Agamben's discussion of Paul in *The Time that Remains*. Moreover, at important and strategic points, it is also clear that Agamben is not especially interested in the eschatological moments of Paul's letters (which, for Paul, seem to be of fundamental importance). Rather, Agamben focuses on Paul's description and understanding of the time of the "now," a time of crisis – a crisis of the law, of the world, of the people of God, and so on. The question is: how is this crisis not merely nihilistic – the mere destruction of the law, the annihilation of the world, the decay of the people of God, and so on – but how can it offer, in its shadow, a way out?²⁷ This particular focus allows Agamben to trace features in Paul that are similar to the ones he traces in skepticism.²⁸

To make this similarity as clear as possible, let me first offer an Agambian reformulation of the skeptic account of the suspension of judgement. A philosophical dialogue – discussing a topic and its difficulties or ἀπορίαι – aims at a solution of these difficulties. A dialogue works or functions properly if it offers a way out of these ἀπορίαι by means of a solution and towards proper knowledge (that is, the Aristotelian case). By insisting on the ἀπορία and through suspending judgement, the skeptic interrupts this normal and proper functioning; in light of this functioning, the suspension of judgement renders inoperative dialogue as the quest for the proper judgement; it deactivates this dialogical activity. Along with authors such as Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot, Agamben shares an interest in this particular inoperativity that is traced not only in the dialogical inquiries of philosophy, but also in a number of other domains. Yet what is unique in Agamben's thought is how he understands this inoperativity to be something fortunate, as becomes apparent in his account of Paul.²⁹

This reformulation of the ἐποχή in terms of inoperativity is helpful when turning to Paul, for the concept of suspension plays a central role in Agamben's interpretation of Paul. For the purposes of this essay, I limit myself to one (important) example, namely Agamben's attention to the verb καταργεῖν (*katargein*) in Paul's letters. Καταργεῖν is a verb that appears more than twenty times in these letters and, in particular, in the following well-known passage of the *First Letter to the Corinthians*:

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify [καταργήσῃ] the things that are.³⁰

One might say that this is indeed one of the more skeptical passages of Paul's, in which the value and the capacity of the wisdom of the world (τὴν σοφίαν τοῦ κόσμου)³¹ is doubted, and in which preference is given to what the world deems foolish, base, and despicable. Paul's diatribe against the world and

its order leads him, in this passage, to claim that God prefers the lowlifes of this world in order “to nullify the things that are.” The verb that is used here, καταργεῖν, to nullify, must be understood correctly. Καταργεῖν does not indicate a simple destruction of the world and its order, since it is not the antonym of ποιεῖν. Agamben writes: “As we have seen, this term (which is prudently rendered by Jerome as *evacuari*, ‘to empty out’) does not mean ‘to annihilate, to destroy’ [. . .] the positive equivalent of *katargeō* is not *poieō*, but *energeō*, ‘I put to work, I activate.’”³² Καταργεῖν thus expresses something like “to put out of work” or “to deactivate.” With this particular sense of the verb in mind, Agamben connects καταργεῖν and κατάργησις to suspension and even translates them as “to suspend” and “suspension” or as “to deactivate” and “deactivation.”

Applied to the above quote from Paul, this particular sense of καταργεῖν implies something like the following.³³ The world and its order are marked by distinctions between the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, those who are something in this order and those who are nothing in this order. In 1 Cor. 1: 27–8, Paul does not simply describe the annihilation of this world and its order but rather the deactivation and suspension of it. This brings into play a particular indecision, which is reminiscent of the skeptic’s: rather than destroying the order and either not replacing it or substituting some other well-established order, the suspension of the order expressed by the verb καταργεῖν puts the given order in another perspective. In particular, through the suspension of oppositions by means of which this order operates, the world is viewed in light of both its contingency and its potentiality. While people tend to comply with this order because they see it as permanent, its suspension does not destroy the world but rather discloses it in its transience. This means two things at once: first, it means that the present order or form of the world has a transitory, contingent character – as Paul later insists in 1 Cor. 7: 31 when he writes that the present form of the world, τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ κόσμου, is passing away. However, it also means that what is considered to be nothing is given back its potentiality to be: what is not can yet be otherwise than nothing.

Agamben insists on this reference to potentiality in his account of καταργεῖν, and he contends that Paul’s use of the term can be understood as an intervention on the philosophical, Aristotelian thought of the relation between ἐνεργεία and δύναμις, actuality and potentiality.³⁴ Hence, καταργεῖν is not only the antonym of ἐνεργεῖν, but is, as such, also a concept Paul uses to deconstruct the Aristotelian scheme of actuality and potentiality. In particular, καταργεῖν as “a taking out of the act” gives rise to another way in which potentiality may realize itself: “Potentiality passes over into actuality and meets up with its *telos*, not in the form of force or *ergon*, but in the form of *astheneia*, weakness.”³⁵ One might be inclined to object: what would an actualization without actuality or work be? In which sense can one think of the τέλος of which Paul speaks without a relation to the Aristotelian δύναμις/ἐνεργεία scheme? Yet, rather than trying to come to terms with such questions, Agamben is solely interested in the strangeness exhibited by Paul’s rhetoric, which aims at deactivating the Aristotelian thought

of the δύναμις/ἐνεργεία scheme by bringing into play the notion of ἀσθένεια. To understand what this new δύναμις/ἀσθένεια or potentiality/weakness scheme means, one should note that Agamben immediately connects the Pauline notion of weakness to the notion of impotentiality or incapacity (ἀδυναμία). Agamben thinks ἀδυναμία not as simple impossibility but rather as a way to “maintain a kind of potentiality.” He explains in “On Potentiality” that “to be potential means: to be one’s own lack, *to be in relation to one’s own incapacity*. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality *are capable of their own impotentiality*; and only in this way do they become potential.”³⁶ By connecting impotentiality to weakness, we see the return of a structure similar to the one we found in skepticism. The incapacity of the skeptic to arrive at a judgement is at the same time the skeptic’s capacity to not judge and to suspend judgement (and thus to arrive at ἀπαρξία as the graceful shadow of ἐποχή). Likewise, in Paul’s strange rhetoric, which is not bound by the Aristotelian linking of δύναμις, ἐνεργεία, and τέλος, potentiality is said to find its τέλος in its own incapacity or weakness. This incapacity or weakness is, in fact, Agamben argues, the power, potential, or capacity not to pass into actuality:

According to Paul, messianic power does not wear itself out in its *ergon*; rather, it remains powerful in it in the form of weakness. Messianic *dynamis* is, in this sense, constitutively “weak” – but it is precisely through its weakness that it may enact its effects – “God has chosen weak things of the world to shame the things which are mighty” (1 Cor. 1: 27).³⁷

The reference here to 1 Cor. 1: 27 (quoted above) indicates two things. First, impotentiality or weakness is in fact a potentiality, namely as the potential not to affirm or be integrated into the order of the world. Second, weakness, as potentiality, truly deactivates this order. It is exactly for this reason that God chooses the weak things and the things that are not (τὰ μὴ ὄντα). The weak and the things that are worth nothing cannot actualize their potential in the order of the world; thus they are exemplary of a weakness that, in light of the καταργεῖν (the suspension or deactivation of the existing order), turns out to be a potentiality, namely the potential not to affirm this order.

These final remarks also make clear that the suspension of the order of the world should not be understood as an effort on the part of Paul to simply inverse the existing order, giving riches to the poor and power to the weak. Rather, the transitory nature of the world, which is disclosed by the suspension of its order, is otherwise denied in and by this order; this ordered world claims permanence for itself and, therefore, it does not discern the crisis it is in. Paul’s καταργεῖν aims at tearing down this form of (self-)deception of the order of the world, and thus at showing that, in a certain sense, all things are in the same situation as the lowlifes, the poor and the weak. In this Pauline logic that connects δύναμις to ἀσθένεια, it is exactly to the weak that potentiality is returned by the suspension of the order of the world.³⁸

THE ONTOLOGY OF POTENTIALITY

Skepticism, as I noted at the beginning of this essay, is usually discussed in terms of its epistemological impact and, more precisely, the claim that we cannot attain certain knowledge. Agamben, however, notes that the philosophical vocabulary of ancient skepticism is not developed solely for an epistemological position, but, perhaps more significantly, concerns a specific ontology of δύναμις. This ontology, as his account of philosophical and poetic experiments indicates, goes hand in hand with a particular conception of δύναμις according to one's ἔθος and habits. If we consider the particulars of this ontology of δύναμις or potentiality, it is clear that it is indeed developed through skeptical means. I have discussed how Agamben's approach to ἐποχή, the suspension of judgement, and the concept of inoperativity all belong to a particular skeptical heritage. The skeptics, as Sextus already indicates, are the ones that "keep on searching."³⁹ This quest continues because the skeptic cannot find proper and stable answers, but only problems and difficulties; hence the skeptic school is also called aporetic (ἀπορητική).⁴⁰ This failure to arrive at proper knowledge deactivates and suspends a particular conception of philosophical thinking. However, as Agamben argues, this process, which is a failure from the Aristotelian point of view, is not so when considered from the skeptic's perspective: this process depends on and discloses a particular conception of δύναμις. The incapacity to reach a conclusion is the potential not to participate in the order of an Aristotelian first philosophy – much like the way in which Paul describes the incapacity of the powerless as the potential not to participate in the order the world prescribes. This is the δύναμις of the skeptic in a double sense. As *genitivus subjectivus*, it is the disposition of the skeptic expressed in the Agambian formula of "the potential not to . . .," as in the potential not to affirm or deny. At the same time, however, the insistence on this potential not to . . ., its becoming a *habitus* or ἔθος of skeptical thinking itself, leads neither to nothing nor to mere failure. By accident and chance, it discloses another ontological conception of δύναμις. As *genitivus objectivus*, the δύναμις of the skeptic offers a conception of potentiality that is no longer subordinated to actuality. Rather, as Agamben reads in Paul, it leads to a conception in which weakness or impotentiality is power. Thus it is in the form of this particular weakness in which δύναμις is given back to what is (as well as what is not).

It is important to note that in both the skeptical and the Pauline case, this emphasis on the importance and power of weakness or failure is not simply a counter-model either to the Aristotelian conception of an εὐπορία out of the encountered ἀπορία or to the concept of ἐνεργεία as the goal of δύναμις. A counter-model suggests that one might choose. Rather, the skeptic's account of philosophical inquiry, as well as the Pauline account of the present order of the world, both depart from an experience of crisis and ἀπορία. The order of the world cannot maintain its permanence, and the ἀπορία presented to thought do not allow an Aristotelian way out. It is in response to this experience of a crisis of thought and world that a new reappraisal of weakness is to be found:

by making this weakness or incapacity one's habit, and by insisting on the potential not to be integrated into a particular mode of thinking or a particular order of the world, another power is generated. One may call this a power of resistance to the normal sense of εὐπορία – finding solutions to given problems, or negotiating with the given order of the world – and at the same time it is a power of chance or contingency which is granted another εὐπορία.

NOTES

1. Giorgio Agamben, "Bartleby, or On Contingency" ["Bartleby"].
2. *Ibid.* p. 260. Here I only develop Agamben's description of the experimental role of stories and philosophy in line with the philosophical experiment of skepticism. For a more extensive consideration of how Agamben uses Bartleby, see Gert-Jan van der Heiden, "Reading Bartleby, Reading Ion: On a Difference between Agamben and Nancy."
3. "Bartleby" p. 260.
4. *Ibid.* pp. 260–1; unless otherwise noted words in brackets are my own.
5. An interesting discussion may arise at this point between the attention to contingency both in Agamben's work and in Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, and their differing accounts of the principle of contradiction with respect to the contingent.
6. See Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* [*Outlines*], trans. R. G. Bury, I.188–90. In his essay, Agamben connects this skeptical formula of οὐ μᾶλλον to Bartleby's formula "I would prefer not to" (see "Bartleby" p. 253–9).
7. Agamben, "Bartleby, or On Contingency," p. 257. He derives this from a quotation from Sextus Empiricus which he translates as follows:

The Sceptics understand potentiality-possibility [*dynamis*] as any opposition between sensibles and intelligibles. By virtue of the equivalence found in the opposition between words and things, we thus reach the *epokhē*, the suspension, which is a condition in which we can neither posit nor negate, accept nor refuse. (*Ibid.*; bracketed insertion included by Agamben)

In the Loeb edition, the same quotation is translated as follows:

Scepticism is an ability, or mental attitude, which opposes appearances to judgments in any way whatsoever, with the result that, owing to the equipollence of the objects and reasons thus opposed, we are brought firstly to a state of mental suspense and next to a state of "unperturbedness" or quietude. (*Outlines* I.8)

Sextus continues: "Now we call it an 'ability' [δύναμιν] not in any subtle sense, but simply in respect of its 'being able' [δύνασθαι]" (*ibid.* I.9).

8. Modified from “Bartleby” p. 257; translation of *Outlines* I.8.
9. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, trans. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes, I.8.
10. Agamben, “Bartleby, or On Contingency,” p. 257.
11. “Bartleby” p. 258.
12. Ibid.
13. “The formula emancipates potentiality [. . .] from both its connection to a ‘reason’ (*ratio*) and its subordination to Being” (ibid.).
14. Ibid. p. 259.
15. Ibid.
16. Giorgio Agamben, “*Pardes: The Writing of Potentiality*,” p. 217. There are a few other occurrences of this term in Agamben’s *oeuvre*: see Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, p. 134.
17. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 995a24–b4 (see *The Complete Works*, ed. J. Barnes). According to Heidegger, this form of reflection is διαλέγεσθαι; see Martin Heidegger, *Grundbegriffe der Aristotelischen Philosophie*, pp. 158–61.
18. Plato, *Philebus*, 15b–c; all translations of Plato are from *Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper.
19. Plato, *Meno*, 80c–d.
20. Plato, *Greater Hippias*, 298c.
21. Elsewhere, I have discussed the role of this εὐπορία in relation to the ἀπορία of dialogue in terms of Plato’s *Parmenides* in order to articulate Agamben’s perspective on the problem of plurality (in relation to both Badiou and Nancy); see Gert-Jan van der Heiden, *Ontology after Ontotheology: Plurality, Event, and Contingency in Contemporary Philosophy*, pp. 117–26, and Gert-Jan van der Heiden, “Deciding on Plurality? Plato’s *Parmenides* between Badiou and Agamben,” pp. 204–6.
22. *Outlines* I.28–9.
23. “Bartleby” p. 259.
24. Note that indeed, in *Outlines* I.9, where Sextus glosses δύναμις with the verb “to be able” (δύνασθαι), he uses the same verb (δύναμαι) as the one he uses in I.29 to say what the skeptics cannot do (μὴ δυναθέντες). It is thus indeed a capacity that is at first experienced as an incapacity – and therefore indeed deserves to be called, in an Agambian vein, a potential not to . . . (find a way out).
25. For the difference between pre-aporetic and post-aporetic εὐπορία in Plato, consider Frisbee C. C. Sheffield, *Plato’s Symposium: The Ethics of Desire*, p. 70ff. The post-aporetic εὐπορία, as it is called here, indicates that ἀπορία, as a way out of self-deception, is itself a form of progress – and in this sense it compels us to “be optimistic about inquiry” (p. 71).
26. See “Bartleby” p. 259.
27. One striking passage can be found in Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains [Time]*, 55–7.
28. A more elaborate account of these suspensions can be found in my forthcoming article, “Suspending the World: Paul’s Proclamation of Contingency.”

29. One of the most important discussions in which this inoperativity plays a role is the discussion on community, and I agree with De la Durantaye that, whereas Agamben is not unique in his understanding of the aporias of community, the *euporia* he finds there is unique, cf. De la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben*, 161.
30. 1 Cor. 1: 27–8; translation from the *New International Version (NIV)*.
31. 1 Cor. 1: 20.
32. *Time* p. 96. Here, of course, we also see the intrinsic connection between *κατάργησις* and the French term *désœuvrement*, translated as inoperativity: *ἐνεργεία* or being at work (*oeuvre*) has as its antonym being out of work (or action).
33. Note that Agamben himself chooses in this context a different passage from Paul related to the suspension of the law (*Time* p. 96), although he also refers to 1 Cor. 1: 27–8 in this section (p. 97) and also mentions it elsewhere (p. 10).
34. He notes that Paul was familiar with this opposition and uses it (at least twice) in his letters, see *Time* p. 90.
35. *Ibid.* pp. 96–7.
36. Giorgio Agamben, “On Potentiality,” p. 182. At this point, Agamben refers to Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1046a32. He makes this reference again at *Time* p. 97.
37. *Time* p. 97.
38. The type of potentiality that arises is discussed in another, famous passage of the *First Letter to the Corinthians*, namely 1 Cor. 7: 28–31. Here, the passing away of the order of the world is connected to a particular *ἔθος* that relates to the world in attunement with its passing away. The *ἔθος* is not simply one of impossibility or incapacity in the everyday sense, but one of *ὡς μὴ*, of “as not,” as Agamben translates this Pauline phrase: the weak and powerless are not only weak, but they do the things in the world in light of their potential not to . . .
39. *Outlines* I.3–4.
40. *Ibid.* I.7.

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