AGAMBEN, “BARE LIFE,” AND ARCHAIC GREEK POETRY

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Abstract / Résumé

In this article, I take up the work of Giorgio Agamben, whose biopolitical theories, and in particular, the idea of “bare life,” are widely adduced in contemporary, morally charged discussions of politics, immigration studies, and the marginalization of various social groups. Agamben builds his ideas upon a reading of Aristotle, but I argue that his identification of Aristotle as the ur-source of biopolitical thinking misses an earlier moralizing discourse found in archaic Greek literary sources. I analyze passages of archaic epic and iambic poetry that describe proto-biopolitical moments before suggesting that the Ionian pharmakos ritual represents an early example of working with something like Agamben’s “bare life.” Biopolitics requires the logistics and technical infrastructure of an advanced civic bureaucracy, but the narrative fantasy of a community cohering around the abjection of select members of the group can be found already in the moralizing strategies of archaic Greek biopoetics.

Dans cet article, je me suis inspiré du travail de Giorgio Agamben, dont les théories biopolitiques et, en particulier, le concept de « vie nue » sont largement évoqués dans les débats contemporains et moralement chargés sur la politique, les études sur l’immigration et la marginalisation de divers groupes sociaux. Agamben construit ses concepts d’après sa lecture d’Aristote, mais je défends l’idée que son identification d’Aristote comme ur-source de la pensée biopolitique passe à côté d’un discours moralisant plus ancien qui se trouve dans les sources littéraires grecques archaïques. J’analyse des passages de poésies épiques et iambiques archaïques qui décrivent des moments proto-biopolitiques, avant de suggérer que le rituel ionien du pharmakos représente un exemple précoce de mise en œuvre de quelque chose qui s’apparente à la « vie nue » d’Agamben. La biopolitique requiert la logistique et les infrastructures techniques d’une bureaucratie civile avancée, mais la fantaisie narrative d’une communauté réunie autour de l’abjection de certains membres choisis du groupe peut déjà être trouvée dans les stratégies moralisantes de la biopoétique grecque archaïque.

To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize “how it really was.” It means to seize hold of a memory, as it flashes up at a moment of danger.

– Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”
The following pages demonstrate one way that moralizing strategies found in archaic Greek poetry can participate in modern ethical debates through the influential biopolitical theory of Giorgio Agamben. In some sense, this is a work of reception studies, though my ultimate point will be situated historically: whereas Agamben builds his theory of “bare life” upon a foundation of Aristotelian philosophy, the earliest Greek evidence for such an idea emerges from the world of archaic narrative. That is, biopolitical theory, the school of thought most closely associated with Agamben’s work, starts not from the realm of politics, properly understood, but from the experimental fantasies (replete as they are with various moralizing strategies) of archaic poetry.

After setting out the basic shape of Agamben’s political philosophy, I pursue two lines of argumentation. First, I suggest that classicists, who have thus far done little with Agamben’s work, ought to engage rigorously with his ideas, since many modernist scholars are building upon his political writings, all of which grow out of his reading of Aristotle. Paige duBois clusters Agamben with Badiou, Rancière, Butler, Negri, and Hardt as examples of intellectuals who use classics as a conduit for speaking to the present about the future. As she puts it: “To call their engagement with antiquity ‘reception’ is to use too pallid a term; they engage directly with ancient thinkers on questions of democracy, sacredness, gender, empire, and the conditions for philosophy today, for transformation tomorrow.” Second, Agamben’s concept of bare life, a system of inclusive exclusion whereby certain people are preserved within a community while simultaneously being excluded from it, can be found already in less theorized terms in archaic poetry. The system of alterity that I highlight will not be surprising in itself for anyone familiar with studies of the Other in classical scholarship, but I am more concerned with the legacy of that pattern of thought than with claiming to have found something new in its ancient form. In classical philosophy, Agamben finds a rigorous analytical structure that seems to convey greater authority, clarity, focus, and objectivity than narrative poetry, but the latter offers both implicit theorizations and bountiful opportunities for creative speculation. For classicists, then, it may be less important for us to say to the growing number of Agamben scholars that their detailed readings of Aristotle are imprecise than to promote the idea that biopolitics emerges from a biopoetic story world, in which bare life is explored in malleable and open-ended ways.

**Agamben and Biopolitical Theory**

Agamben, born in 1942 in Rome, honed his philosophical ideas largely in relation to those of Simone Weil, Martin Heidegger, and Walter Benjamin. For his biopolitical theories, however, the most important point of reference

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2 For alterity in antiquity, see Hartog 1988, Hall 1989, and Gruen 2011.
is Michel Foucault. Later in his career, Foucault began to discuss notions of biopower, which he saw as a new form of politics focused on managing, monitoring, and maintaining the lives of subject populations. He differentiated this modern form of sovereignty from premodern models that tended to be framed by the power to kill and the general powerlessness of humans to prevent death prior to the development of germ theory. Thus, he claimed that biopolitics emerged as a consequence of modernism in the eighteenth century, and he emphasized various dispositifs (“technologies of power” or “apparatuses”), such as state-sponsored health care, prison systems, and patterns of racial organization, that facilitated biopolitical control. As he put it, “for the first time in history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence; the fact of living was no longer an inaccessible substrate that only emerged from time to time amid the randomness of death and its fatality; part of it passed into knowledge’s field of control and power’s sphere of intervention.” This emphasis on the connection between biopolitics and modernity allowed Foucault to point to Aristotle’s famous description of the human as a “political animal” as a sign of the enduring paradigmatic stability of the premodern world: “For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question.”

For Foucault, biopolitics arose on the tide of modernism, because he understood this new sovereign attitude as a logical outgrowth of governments making use of new technologies of power—from vaccinations to surveillance equipment—to monitor and manage human populations. Such bureaucratic innovations involve a shift from thinking of humans as so many animals that might be killed or used in various ways to thinking of them as a collective species in need of husbandry.

Agamben takes up Foucault’s basic biopolitical approach, though he reframes the role of classical antiquity in the emergence of biopolitics. Whereas Foucault saw a strong contrast between the ancient and modern worlds, Agamben locates the seed of modern biopolitics in antiquity; that

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3 For extended discussion of Agamben’s reliance on Foucault, see Patton 2007 and Snoek 2010.
4 Foucault began to discuss biopolitics in his 1975–1976 lectures at the Collège de France (see Foucault 2003: 239–265) and in the first volume of The History of Sexuality (Foucault 1978: 141–142). He greatly expanded upon this theme in lectures from 1978–1979 and 1983–1984, which are now available as Foucault 2008 and 2011. For Agamben’s development of Foucault’s concept of the dispositif, see Agamben 2009.
5 Foucault 1978: 142.
6 Foucault 1978: 143.
7 Lemm 2009: 153 makes a similar point.
The critical point of difference between Foucault and Agamben can be found in the latter’s notion of bare life, which has become his best-known and most frequently discussed catchphrase. He points to Aristotle’s *Politics* as proof that classical political theory was informed by a contrast between ἀρνία and ῥισ. I print the Greek text (which Agamben does not print) and the published English version of Agamben’s text:

μάλιστα μὲν οὖν τοῦτ’ ἐστὶ τέλος, καὶ κοινῆ πάσι καὶ χωρίς: συνέρχονται δὲ καὶ τοῦ ζήν ἑνεκεν αὐτοῦ καὶ συνέχουσαι τῇν πολιτικὴν κοινωνίαν. ἰῶσ γὰρ ἔνεστι τι τοῦ καλοῦ μόριου καὶ κατὰ τὸ ζήν αὐτὸ μόνον, ἀν μὴ τοῖς χαλεποῖς κατὰ τὸν βίον ὑπερβάλη λίαν. δὴν δὲ ὥσ καρτεροῦσι πολλήν κακοπάθειαν οἱ πολλοὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἀναλογίας τοῦ ζήν, ὡς ἐνούσης τινὸς εὐημερίας ἐν αὐτῷ καὶ γλυκύτητος φυσικῆς.

This [life according to the good] is the greatest end both in common for all men and for each man separately. But men also come together and maintain the political community in view of simple

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8 This point has caused confusion. Agamben’s notion of bare life is a critical element in his biopolitical thinking, yet bare life and biopolitics are not the same thing. Thus he says that “[i]n the classical world ... simple natural life is excluded from the *polis* in the strict sense, and remains confined—as merely reproductive life—to the sphere of the *oikos*” (*Agamben* 1998: 2, with reference to *Politics* 1252a26–35); he next contrasts this classical model with the modern biopolitical system: “the entry of zoē into the sphere of the *polis*—the politicization of bare life as such—constitutes the decisive event of modernity and signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought” (*Agamben* 1998: 4). Ambiguity seems to enter with the subsequent claim: “the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power. *It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power*” (*Agamben* 1998: 6, with original emphasis). I believe that no contradiction exists here, since Agamben is assuming that the ancient biopolitical body exists in the *oikos*, within the purview of the *polis* but not at the center of what we would call politics.

9 In September 2015, Google Scholar returned more than ten thousand citations for “bare life,” and Google Books returned more than thirty-five thousand. Such searches cannot be connected exclusively with Agamben’s use of the term, but they do sketch a general picture, particularly when refined by date. Prior to 1995, when *Homo Sacer* was originally published in Italian, Google Scholar returns only 538 hits and Google Books 2,190 hits for “bare life,” many of which include such phrases as “a thread-bare life.” Thus, the vast majority of the recent uses of this phrase can probably be linked to Agamben. In contrast, the search function on classicalstudies.org (the homepage of the Society of Classical Studies) returns only three hits involving Agamben (all from 2015), and the online review journal *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* includes only six.
living, because there is probably some kind of good in the mere fact of living itself. If there is no great difficulty as to the way of life, clearly most men will tolerate much suffering and hold onto life as if it were a kind of serenity and a natural sweetness. (Politics 1278b23–3)

The Greek text does not contain the noun _zôê_ at all, though the articular infinitive, especially in the phrase _τὸ ζῆν αὐτὸ μόνον_, seems to approach Agamben’s description of bare life. Yet for the connection between this concept and the origins of politics, he turns to an earlier passage from Politics that draws a distinction between voice (_phonê_ ) and language (_logos_). Again, I pair the unpublished Greek text with the published English translation:

> λόγον δὲ μόνον ἄνθρωπος ἔχει τῶν ζώων· ἡ μὲν οὖν φωνὴ τοῦ λυπηροῦ καὶ ἡδέος ἐστὶ σημεῖον, διό καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ὑπάρχει ξύροις (μέχρι γὰρ τούτου ἡ φύσις αὐτῶν ἐλήλυθε, τοῦ ἔχειν αἰσθήσειν λυπηροῦ καὶ ἡδέος καὶ ταῦτα σημαίνειν ἄλληλοις), ὁ δὲ λόγος ἐπὶ τῷ δηλοῦν ἐστί τὸ σμιφέρον καὶ τὸ βλαβερόν, ὥστε καὶ τὸ δίκαιον καὶ τὸ ἀδίκον· τοῦ γὰρ τὰ ἄλλα ζώα τοῖς ἄνθρώποισιν ἴδιον, τὸ μόνον ἠγαθὸν καὶ κακὸν καὶ δικαίον καὶ ἀδίκον καὶ τῶν ἄλλων αἰσθήσεων ἔχειν· ἡ δὲ τούτων κοινωνία ποιεῖ οἰκίαν καὶ πόλιν.

Among living beings, only man has language. The voice is the sign of pain and pleasure, and this is why it belongs to other living beings (since their nature has developed to the point of having the sensations of pain and pleasure and signifying the two). But language is for manifesting the fitting and the unfitting and the just and the unjust. To have the sensation of the good and the bad and the just and the unjust is what is proper to men as opposed to other living beings, and the community of these things makes dwelling and the city. (Politics 1253a9–18)

It is language that permits the expression of ethical judgements and discernment, without which a _polis_ cannot exist.

For Agamben, the relationship between voice and language precisely parallels that between _zôê_ or bare life and _bios_, and his reading of this section of Aristotle’s text deserves extended treatment:

The living being has _logos_ by taking away and conserving its own voice in it, even as it dwells in the _polis_ by letting its own bare life be excluded, as an exception, within it. Politics therefore appears as the truly fundamental structure of Western metaphysics insofar as it occupies the threshold on which the relation between the living being and the _logos_ is realized. In the “politicization” of bare life—the metaphysical task _par excellence_—the humanity of living man
is decided. In assuming the task, modernity does nothing other than declare its own faithfulness to the essential structure of the metaphysical tradition. The fundamental categorial pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political existence, *zōê/bios*, exclusion/inclusion. There is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion.¹⁰

Many animals can express pain or excitement with their voices, but only humans, according to this argument, restrain their animal voices in order to engage in language. The animal voice is still there and erupts in moments of sensory overload, but language dominates, even as it falls silent to listen to others or to contemplate difficult ethical situations. This parallel between voice/language and *zōê/bios* thus allows Agamben to argue that his exclusionary principle is “consubstantial with Western politics” and that “bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men.”¹¹

This notion of bare life as the excluded portion of the species *Homo sapiens*, which does not enjoy the full privileges of humanity yet which cannot be removed from the community, runs through the rest of the entire *Homo Sacer* series, which now includes nine volumes. Agamben’s bare life is perhaps best encapsulated in his discussions of Nazi internment camps and the image of the *Muselmann*.¹² And it may be a fluke of history that his theories have gained particular prominence in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, because in many ways his biopolitical theories speak directly to the American response to those attacks. For example, in the final chapter of *Homo Sacer* he argues that “[t]oday it is not the city but rather the [detention] camp that is the fundamental biopolitical paradigm of the West.”¹³ This comment builds upon his meditations on the Holocaust, but it also anticipates the realities of the American prisons at Abu Ghraib, Iraq, and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Perhaps even more provocatively, he claims that his analysis in *Homo Sacer* reveals “an inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism” that is predicated on the increasing focus of modern democratic regimes on managing the lives and bodies of their citizenry.¹⁴ The Patriot Act, signed into law by the American president George W. Bush late in 2001, seemed in many ways to prove Agamben right.

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¹² Agamben 1999: 55 notes that the *Muselmann* “marks the threshold between the human and the inhuman.”
Agamben’s biopolitical system has become popular in large part because it offers a flexible model of politics rooted in an exclusionary principle that makes intuitive sense in relation to any community in which some section of the population is radically deprived of economic resources or social opportunity. His ideas are particularly important in immigration studies, where the status of refugee communities all too frequently approaches that of bare life. The moral implications of Agamben’s thought on the modern world are obvious, but what might specialists in classical antiquity add to this conversation?

One obvious avenue for response is to evaluate the classical foundation of Agamben’s project. James Gordon Finlayson, a professor of continental philosophy, has taken on this project with thoroughness and rigor. His analysis charts real and unsettling problems in Agamben’s presentation of the Aristotelian concept of bare life. He argues that Agamben’s distinction between zoê and bios derives more from Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1958) than from Aristotle (102–103); that Agamben fundamentally misunderstands Aristotle’s use of bios, which is not exclusively used of humans, and zoê, which in the classical era was not yet a pejorative term indicating subhuman status (108); that zoê and bios do not form a conceptual pair in ancient Greek along the lines of such binaries as nomos and physis (109); that zoê and bios furthermore do not exist in mutual opposition, as Agamben claims, but that Aristotle’s concept of bare life refers to the efficient cause of the polis and distinguishes it from bios politikos only in that the former does not provide the sufficient conditions for the latter to exist (111–113); and that Agamben follows Foucault in misunderstanding what Aristotle meant with that famous description of the human being as a politikon zôon (112–114). All this leads Finlayson to conclude that “Agamben does not discover a concealed biopolitical paradigm stretching back to fourth-century Athens; rather, he invents one.”

In light of this blistering critique, one may reasonably wonder why anyone would take Agamben’s ideas seriously or why a classicist would waste any time on Agamben. Yet those alternatives are related in interesting ways, since, on one hand, modernist scholars may not care about antiquarian arguments, if they find useful explanatory power in Agamben’s ideas regardless of their accuracy on matters of ancient philosophy; and on the other hand, classicists ought to be concerned about the intellectual propriety of having so many analyses of the contemporary world draw upon Agamben’s Aristotle if it is, indeed, fundamentally flawed.

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15 Finlayson 2010.
16 Finlayson 2010: 116, with original emphasis.
17 Attell 2014: 98–99 admits that some may object to Agamben’s reading of Aristotle, but he argues that Agamben is less concerned with historicist accuracy than with uncovering “the fundamental assumption and blind spot of the tradition that is christened with Aristotle’s text” (99).
Might Agamben have committed all the critical errors outlined above while still providing either an intentional misreading of Aristotle or an analysis of a deep structure that Aristotle reflects in his language without himself clearly recognizing? Either alternative is possible, but they suggest strikingly different roles for the classical tradition. If Agamben is strategically misreading Aristotle, we may wonder why he needs classical philosophy at all. Is it simply the imprimatur of Aristotle’s name and the classical roots of the Western tradition that leads a modernist to trump up some half-baked and tenuous connection with “the Greeks” in order to bolster his primarily modernist claims? If that is correct, then the classical tradition merely re-entrenches the Eurocentric elitism that makes our field an uneven sell across a globalized world. If, however, Agamben found something productive in Aristotle, even if that kernel has changed in the transcription from ancient to modern philosopher, then his system of thought may participate in a still open classical tradition, much as an analysis of Aristotle’s influence on Augustine or Aquinas can be presented in such terms. And if Agamben’s opposition between zoê and bios does get at something in Aristotle’s cultural context of which he was not clearly aware, then we can hope to take a wider historical view and find some trace of it elsewhere. And for that, we turn to the archaic period.18

BIOPOTICS IN ARCHAIC GREEK POETRY

Agamben’s idea of bare life emerges from a process in which some members of society are dehumanized in order to define and reiterate the full personhood of others. My argument in this section is that such an opposition can already be found in archaic poetry and that, from this perspective, biopolitics is actually prepolitical. The polis may have facilitated the logistical development of biopolitical systems, but poetic experimentations with bare life existed earlier. Thinking in terms of alterity may be hardwired into the human animal, but we find the outward expression of that impulse in narrative before it can be discerned in either history or political theory. Although examples could surely be adduced from virtually any genre, I begin with archaic epic, then turn to iambic poetry, and conclude with the case of the Ionian pharmakos ritual, an example that begins to have real traction in historical practice.

In Homer’s Odyssey, which involves many moments of abjection, we find a series of motifs that can be read as meditations on bare life. Perhaps most obvious is Circe’s transformation of Odysseus’ crew into pig-men in

18 We could look for bare life or evidence for biopolitical systems earlier in the classical era as well. Yet, despite the possibility of viewing institutions such as the Spartan agogê or Plato’s imagined eklogê in Republic as biopolitical regimes, neither case is particularly compelling (see, e.g., Esposito 2008: 53). Furthermore, the thought world of the classical era is so deeply shaped by archaic images and themes that it makes more sense to turn first to the earlier era.
Agamben, “Bare Life,” and Archaic Greek Poetry

Odyssey 10. Homer notes that the outward appearance and social treatment of these “manimals” was that befitting swine, but that their minds remained what they had been before (238–241). The transformation also highlights Odysseus’ own high status, in that Hermes comes to the island in order to give him the moly root (275–309), which prevents his following his crew into the pigsty. Once her magic has been thwarted and she has sworn not to harm him, Circe gives Odysseus hospitality both in bed and at table, which further differentiates his privileged standing from that of his crew. This narrative inculcates the idea that some people naturally end up with more (divine protection, special treatment, sex, food) whereas others do not, and although this scene should not be understood as a model for any historical community, it resonates throughout the classical tradition and thereby informs the attitudes that have shaped real civic groupings. Even though the crew remain in pig form only briefly, the separation between those living as animals and Odysseus as he receives special treatment inside marks a distinction quite similar to what Agamben finds in Aristotle.

Whereas Odysseus’ men soon regain human form, the Homeric presentation of Hades offers a more pervasive model of separating levels of existence.20 Exploring Hades may spur reflection on our shared human mortality, but the easy narrative slide between the realms of the living and the dead can be read in other ways as well. Homer’s characterization of Hades emerges less from particular passages than from the habitual emphasis on its cheerless monotony. Both Elpenor (Od. 11.51–83) and Patroclus (Il. 23.63–92) bemoan their plight of existing on the infernal margins in the interim between their deaths and burials, but the world they wish to attain is “joyless” (Od. 11.94) and populated by “powerless heads” (11.29 and 49) that can do little more than flit (11.222) and squeak (24.4–9) like bats.21 A few paradigmatic criminals receive unending punishment, but the real horror of Hades is its etiolation and the reduction of once vital humans to so many shadows and wraiths. Following Circe’s instructions, Odysseus reinvigorates the voices and minds of the dead by allowing them to drink the blood of a ram.

20 On this scene, see the delightfully idiosyncratic study of Bettini and Franco 2010. Wadiwel, a professor of Human Rights at the University of Sydney, has already connected both this scene and Homer’s underworld (discussed below) with Agamben’s biopolitical theory (Wadiwel 2008), though his analysis does not dig deeply into the ancient texts.

21 I focus on epic depictions of the underworld, but similar accounts can be found in other genres as well. For example, Archilochus fr. 133W, which contrasts the respect given to the living and the disregard for the dead, concludes with the words κάκιστα δ᾿ αἰεὶ τῷ θανόντι γίνεται, “a dead man’s lot is always worst.” For a broad analysis of ancient Mediterranean conceptions of the underworld, see West 1997: 151–166 and Tasso 2013.
but this poetic device that permits communication (briefly re-empowering logos over phonē) stands as the nearly unique exception to the universal rule that relegates the dead to an ethereal and insignificant eternity. Odysseus’ full humanity (and, through his example, ours) is affirmed in contrast to the dead, who continue to exist only as inconsequential specters of human vibrancy.

The example of Achilles’ conversation with Odysseus in the underworld makes this point most dramatically.22 As Odysseus tries to praise the dead Iliadic hero for his greatness, Achilles rebuffs his flattery:

μὴ δὴ μοι θάνατόν γε παραύδα, φαίδιμ’ Ὀδυσσεύ.
βουλοίμην κ’ ἐπάρουρος εἶν δητευέμεν ἄλλω, ἀνδρὶ παρ’ ἀκλήρῳ, ὃ μὴ βίοτος πολὺς εἶη, ἢ πάσιν νεκύεσσι καταφθιμένοισιν ἀνάσσειν.

Don’t talk to me about death, great Odysseus.
I’d rather serve another, working his dirt,
Some unimportant fellow without much means,
Than lord over all these withering corpses.

(Od. 11.488–491)

Certainly, matters of genre shape this scene, since these lines underscore the contrast between two types of heroism. Achilles represents the greatness of living fast and dying young, and that ethos is out of place in the epic dedicated to the hero who always makes it home. Thus, it is natural that Achilles would lament his fate within an Odyssean narrative. Yet the generic difference between these perspectives does not explain away the fact that in the Odyssey the dead exist in close narrative proximity to the living. Death preserves the outlines of human society and individual identity, while draining away all power to effect any change in the world. The greatest figures of mythical history become inconsequential when they pass into the realm of the dead. Again, the Homeric account of Hades does not reflect any specific system of belief, and Odysseus’ katabasis is a heroic feat rather than an argumentative proposition.23 Yet in Agamben’s terms, the dead are included in the Homeric world by a process of exclusion; and it is their existence, as the wraith of Achilles so hauntingly shows, that permits the living to understand the full empowerment of their personhood. Through Odysseus’ intervention, the dead briefly experience again something akin to their living vigor, but as the scene concludes, they slip back into bare life.24

22 Gainsford 2009 provides a helpful overview and analysis of the trends in scholarship on this scene and provides bibliography.
23 Johnston 1999: 149.
24 The classically trained poet A.E. Stallings has recently brought together precisely the issues that inform this paragraph. Her poem “Charon” depicts the waves
Just as Hades preserves the powerless image of the dead among the living, Tartaros serves an analogous function among the immortals. As Hesiod explains, after defeating their rivals, the Olympian gods created a space for their eternal imprisonment within a circuit wall with bronze gates made by Poseidon (Theog. 715–819). To be sure, the Titans are forced to endure Tartaros due to their refusal to accept Olympian authority, but newly established regimes always present their predecessors as illegitimate in some way. The myth of succession, furthermore, is really a story of usurpations, since human succession is predicated on the eventual decline of the older generation that ultimately gives way to the younger. Among immortals, no such transition is possible, and Hesiod’s Theogony shows not so much the legitimacy or goodness of Zeus' regime as its effectiveness at establishing itself without any legitimating charter or authority. The detention camp that is Tartaros exists at the furthest extreme from the human world, but epic poets transcend such geographical separation by bringing human audiences into a narrative in which divine groups are segregated and in which the powerful can be defined largely in opposition to those who are imprisoned within Tartaros without any hope of leaving their confinement. Zeus needs the imprisoned Titans, that is, as evidence of his own legitimacy.

Archaic epic creates spaces, perhaps designed to emphasize a hero’s greatness or to explain our cosmic order, that permit biopolitical thinking along the lines of what Agamben has theorized. The episodic structures that encourage us to imagine the edges of reality, where humans can be magically transformed into animals, where figures like the dead Achilles continue to exist in degraded form, and where a parallel, alternate divine order lives in thrall, also suggest ways in which we mortals could segregate ourselves in real terms. The mythological accounts of Odysseus’ adventures, after all, are only a few steps removed from classical examples of ethnographic othering, such as Herodotus’ accounts of various non-Greek people. Archaic epic, of Syrian refugees fleeing civil unrest as so many dead souls crossing the River Styx (Stallings 2015).

On this passage, see West 1997: 297–300. The later influence of Hesiod’s poem is traced by Scully 2015, who comments on ancient unease with the Hesiodic fate of the Titans (98–99).

On the paradox of how a “constituting power” (potere constituente) establishes itself as sovereign, see Negri 1999: 21.

Much as modern media have allowed careful scrutiny of the prisons at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, neither of which is easily accessible to the general public. Beall 2009 is the most recent argument in support of reading τάρταρα at Theog. 119 as an accusative plural, rather than a nominative. The upshot of this argument is that Tartaros composes a space within the Olympian gods’ ambit of power. The counterargument implies that Tartaros is a primordial element of the cosmos, together with Chaos, Gaia, and Eros.
that is, gives us a rich vocabulary and narrative familiarity with something approaching Agamben’s concept of bare life.

Another archaic variation on the theme of bare life emerges much more intimately and, perhaps, paradoxically among the fragments of iambic poetry. In our longest surviving example of archaic iambos, Semonides leaves the realm of the gods at a distance and presents a fundamental separation between men and bestial (i.e., all) women. More specifically, Semonides presents each female not only in terms of her animal or elemental mind, *nous*, but also in her social capacity *qua* wife. Thus, we hear a catalogue of wifely templates whose behaviour is determined by their derivation from a pig, fox, dog, donkey, weasel, horse, and ape, as well as two types made from earth and sea. Before a brief coda, Semonides describes one final model, created from the bee, who is good and who represents the idealization of woman as someone who bears legitimate offspring and tends the household for the betterment of the entire family. With this last exception, all wives are wretched and all cause myriad problems for the putative audience of husbands, and some are described in particularly abject terms. For example, the pig-wife lies in a dung-heap (3–4); the dog-wife’s voice is reduced to mere yapping, thus denying her *logos* and acknowledging only her *phonê* (20); the earth-wife seems completely insensate, as if she were nothing more than the clay that shaped her (22–24). These traits all correspond to the particular wife’s unique phylogenic existence, but this is merely the logical outgrowth of the initial equation of woman and animal. The “anthropological machine” of iambic poetry shows us (justifies, explains, instantiates) a world of male privilege that hinges on the frustrations and challenges of controlling the subordinate class of women, who are lesser because they are animal.

However tempting it may be to read Agamben’s bare life back into the scant outlines of an archaic system of gender norms, caution is needed. Semonides’ poem may also show that bare life is not just the ultimate extremity of degradation but a spectrum that leads to such a point. Ewa Ziarek has already argued that Agamben’s model needs to account for gender (and racial) issues more precisely. As she puts it, “at the turn of the 20th century, racialized and gendered subjectivities still occupied liminal positions in Western democracies, and as such were associated in the political imaginary with the inclusive exclusion of bare life.”

Semonides’ poem opens a space in which we might integrate Ziarek’s comment about the elements of bare life that are present in traditional gender norms with Finlayson’s critique that Agamben had misunderstood the Aristotelian relationship between

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29 This is Agamben’s term for the process through which a community determines how some groups end up in a condition of bare life while others do not (Agamben 2003: 37).

30 Ziarek 2012: 205.
zoê and bios. Indeed, Finlayson argues that Agamben mistakenly opposes these terms, which Aristotle distinguishes not via opposition but through a contrast of causality. When we recognize, for example, that the Aristotelian theory of conception similarly differentiated the female (material) and male (formal and efficient) roles (Gen. an. 729a38–730b32) or that Aristotle marked a crucial distinction between the subservience of women and slaves to male citizens, since women are necessary partners with men in maintaining the species whereas slaves represent an optional source of labour (Pol. 1252a25-b5), then we can suggest a new understanding of bare life as the lower range of such Aristotelian hierarchies (not strict oppositions) infused with an ethical concern for any marginalized people.

This analysis also helps explain the dynamics of Semonides’ poem. Women are “other,” subordinate and bestial, and they cause anxiety and annoyances for their male counterparts. The idea that they are created from the stuff of animals and the natural world reiterates the typical division of male and female in terms of a nature–culture binary, and this poem thus justifies, explains, and normalizes a system in which options and possibilities were more constrained for women than for men. Yet at the same time, Semonides’ thoroughgoing emphasis on marriage and reproduction, though presented primarily in negative terms, reveals a commitment to the idea of male and female working together, even if in terms of a clear hierarchy of male over female. As Mark Payne puts it, “Despite appearances to the contrary, the female difference the poem imagines as nonhumanness must be understood to involve some ongoing re-enchantment of the appetitive bond between the married couple.”

This is particularly true in Semonides’ penultimate comment that each man praises his own wife—presumably because he thinks she is a bee—and derides his neighbour’s. Although the poem claims that nearly all women are banes for men, each particular man believes that he has married well. The humour of the poem shifts from a simple rhythm of misogynistic typologies that radically separates male from (and above) female to a joke about male myopia that makes it difficult to distinguish a bee-wife from any other as objective and subjective perspectives become jumbled, and that leaves everyone—male and female—risible and imperfect. I suggest, therefore, that Semonides’ poem affects the gender system in two contradictory ways simultaneously, creating a workable and sustainable tension. On one hand, women are reduced to a kind of bare life by being connected primarily to the world of animals and elements rather than that of humans, by being presented as a great pain for men, and by the dozens of specific slanders that besmirch women’s characters. But on the other hand, male desire ensures that each man thinks his own wife is the exception to the rule; and the

For a succinct discussion of Aristotelian thinking about females and slave, see Demand 1998: 69–71.

ubiquitous emphasis (in this poem and throughout archaic poetry) on the importance of family shows that women remain critical to the male-centred world in ways that render them simultaneously a form of bare life but also something more than a mere efficient cause, in the Aristotelian sense, of attaining a good life.

Other iambic passages portray characters close to bare life, such as the image in the Strasbourg Epode of the speaker’s enemy washing up on the beach vomiting seaweed, teeth chattering and lying face down in the sand (Hipp. fr. 115W), but rather than accumulating more specifics, I want to expand the range of archaic thinking about bare life by examining moments when Archilochus plays with the idea of presenting himself in such terms.33

In three fragments, Archilochus presents himself (or his first-person male narrator) as an animal and a female.34 Fr. 23W depicts a male speaker trying to seduce a woman; the man worries that he appears base (δειλός) and compares (perhaps even equates) himself to an ant; the fragment then concludes with this perplexing image, presented here in simplified form:

πόλιν δὲ ταύτην … ἐπιστρέφεαι
οὕτως ποτ´ ἀνδρες ἐξεπόρθησαν, σο δὲ
υῦν εἰλες αἰχμῇ καὶ μέγ´ ἐξήρω κλέος.
κείνης ἄνασσε καὶ τυραννίην ἔχε·
pολλοῖσι θην ζη̣λ̣ωτὸν ἀνθρώ̣πων ἔσεα̣ι.

You move around this city, [which]
No one has ever conquered, but you’ve
Now won it with your spear and have great glory.
Rule it and reign supreme.
Truly you will be envied by many men.

Here the speaker presents his desire in a way that inverts typical archaic motifs. Most often, gender norms and urban planning work together to place

33 This issue is absent from Semonides’ poetry, but appears in different guise in Hipponax. Although the surviving fragments include many examples of déclassé activities, cases that approach bare life are fewer. In fr. 10W, the pharmakos is described as “withered by hunger” (λιμῷ γένηται ξηρός), and in light of the other named appearances of Hipponax within his poetry, it is at least possible that he has taken on the role of the pharmakos here; in fr. 32W, Hipponax depicts himself as extremely cold and begs Hermes for help; the speaker in fr. 39W is ready to commit suicide if the ingredients for a kykeon are not provided; in fr. 95aW Bupalus is cursed, which may or may not be part of a narrative of extreme degradation; and, as mentioned above, the victim of the Strasbourg Epode (fr. 115W) seems to be a clear example of bare life.

the woman safely within the walls of the city, beyond which male attackers bent on plunder and rape sometimes roam free. But Archilochus casts the desired female in the role of spear-wielding conqueror, and depicts his male speaker as an eager war trophy. Grammatical and biological gender overrun their bounds as the woman enacts violence with her phallic spear and is rewarded with a man’s kleos, and the feminine noun polis, which has let down her guard for no man up to this point, serves as the image of the desirous male. A Lothario coaxing a woman toward romance is hardly an image of bare life, but the striking reversal of presenting male sexual desire in terms of a survivor in a forcibly subjugated city suggests a fantasy of abject plenitude that relies on a familiarity with the real degradations of military conquest.

In the epode that includes the fable of the fox and the eagle (frr. 172–188W), Archilochus again combines feminization with animalization. The surviving fragments present textual challenges, but the basic framework of the poem strongly suggests that the Archilochean speaker depicts himself as a vixen and Lycambes as a female eagle, since both animals are tending their young. Again, gender issues are confounded from the start, since Archilochus introduces the fable with the innuendo of interspecies sex (fr. 174W):

\[
\alphaἶνός \ τὸς \ ἀνθρώπων \ ὅδε, \\
\ως \ ἄρ’ \ ἀλώπηξ καὶ ετὸς \ ξυνεωνίην \\
\ἐμεῖξαν,
\]

Here’s a fable of men,  
How the fox and eagle in partnership  
Comingled,  

Of course, the animals do not actually have sex with each other, but the human issues that inform this fable, probably including Lycambes reneging on his promise to wed Archilochus to his daughter Neobule, makes the idea of sex between ill-matched partners an apt metaphor. In fr. 176W, the fox seems to be addressing herself as she looks up with helpless anger and frustration at the bird who has snatched away her kits. In its traditional form, and presumably here too, the fable concludes with the fox gaining revenge by devouring the eaglets (who had already devoured the kits), so the helpless impotence of fr. 176W does not last long, but as in fr. 23W, Archilochus has his male speaker inhabit the role of an animalized female (in fr. 23W

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36 Corrèa 2007: 106 reads ἐμεῖξαν in fr. 174 as the violent “confrontation” of enemies on the battlefield. Brunck (1784) and Liebel (1818) both print ἔθεντο, which is blander and impedes any interesting undertones. See West’s apparatus for the textual issue.
the animalization happens prior to the feminization, whereas here they are mixed), who is powerless before a greater force. In fr. 23W the male took on the perspective of a subjugated female in a devastated city; in the epode, the Archilochean fox is physically unable to reach her enemy and can do nothing but pray and curse as she watches her young die above her.

The Cologne Epode (fr. 196aW) presents a final Archilochean example of this nexus of animalization and feminization. Again we have a seduction narrative, but unlike fr. 23W, the Cologne Epode includes the words of the female interlocutor, who encourages the man to have sex with Neobule instead of her. Most of the fragment consists of the male speaker’s response, in which he savagely rejects Neobule and concludes that if he were to have sex with her he might whelp (τέκω) blind and premature offspring “just like the bitch” (ὡσπερ ἡ κύων, 41). The verb τίκτω can be used of either male or female parents (“sire” or “give birth to”), but the speaker explicitly likens himself to a female dog who, when in heat, can do little to fend off male sexual advances. The dog that passively accepts all partners perfectly fits the tenor of the male speaker’s invective against Neobule, but it comes as a surprise to see him incorporate himself into that image.

Mark Payne emphasizes both the manner in which this Archilochean strategy fosters a sense of emotional continuity among humans and animals and, more specifically, how iambic aggression, when set to a bestial key, explores the “pleasure of unlimited wounding.” That fantasy of ultimate revenge allows the Archilochean persona to imagine deeds, such as devouring his enemy’s offspring, that would risk total alienation if expressed in purely human terms and via human bodies. This trope is amplified by the combination of animal and female imagery, because both of these terms represent lesser alternatives to the androcentric conception of man as self-empowered and self-determining male citizen. Archilochus’ use of such imagery is bold, perhaps shocking, but surely not progressive. Yet we can recognize that his poetic strategy reveals something of the negative space of his archaic world-view. Without any overt theorization, of the sort we find in Aristotle, Archilochus has shown us where we can find bare life in his cultural context.

Although we have very few historical details about the social organization of archaic Greek communities, they certainly were prepolitical in that they preceded the predominance of the polis. The Ionian pharmakos ritual, however, can be seen in a smattering of sources that bridge the archaic world and the better understood classical polis. This ritual of exclusion first appears in a few fragments of Hipponax (frr. 5–10W and possibly 37W), though Bremmer has plausibly fleshed out a broad pattern by drawing upon later

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37 The most recent analysis of this poem is Swift 2015.
38 On this image, see Payne 2010: 31–33; West 1997: 500 connects Archilochus’ words here to Sumerian and Akkadian proverbs, but this explanation does not preclude other, uniquely Archilochean implications.
39 Payne 2010: 35.
sources, while making it clear that this composite image must have been subject to regional and temporal variation.\textsuperscript{40} Generally speaking, a framework existed in many places in which one or sometimes two people from the community were selected, initially given some form of benefit (meals, clothing, or the like), and then driven out (perhaps even killed). This scapegoat pattern offers certain parallels to Agamben’s example of the Roman \textit{homo sacer}, whose defining feature is that he can be killed with impunity but cannot be used as a sacrificial victim. The \textit{pharmakos}’ role is less perplexing than that of the \textit{homo sacer}, but both figures exist within the conceptual frameworks of their respective cultures through a process that balances inclusion and exclusion.\textsuperscript{41} Perhaps Agamben preferred not to focus on the \textit{pharmakos}, because that topic had already been dissected so thoroughly by the likes of Derrida and Girard, but it could be that the \textit{pharmakos}’ expulsion seemed too far from the form of specifically inclusive exceptionalism that Agamben stresses.\textsuperscript{42} Yet the \textit{pharmakos} pattern emphasizes (if in alternation) the preliminary incorporation of the sacrificial figure within the social space (at times even into the prytaneion, or administrative centre of the \textit{polis}) as a preparation for his ultimate expulsion, much as Odysseus’ men are fed inside Circe’s home before being led out to live as animals. As Bremmer puts it, “elimination from the community started from the heart of the community.”\textsuperscript{43} Furthermore, the inclusion of the \textit{pharmakos} ritual within a community’s civic calendar (whether on a fixed annual basis, as with its role in the Athenian Thargelia, or as an option in extraordinary circumstances) suggests that it was well ensconced within the social imagination. The \textit{pharmakos} provides a pre-Aristotelian foundation for biopolitical thinking that emerges from sources that draw together a broader set of cultural agendas than we find in Aristotle’s Athenocentric \textit{Politics}. For the present purposes, we need not speculate about the extent to which these human scapegoats were regarded with visceral loathing (and members of the community may have truly equated these people to refuse or understood the process as a staged comedy of innocence) to recognize a moralizing implication in the idea that the safety and health of a community could depend on the expulsion of some of its members. Rituals do not always reflect patterns of thought or social organization that govern the nonritual life of a community, but with the \textit{pharmakos} we have moved from the \textit{biopoetic} world of archaic

\textsuperscript{40} Compton 2006 offers the broadest application of the \textit{pharmakos} ritual to Greek literature. Still foundational is Bremmer 1983 (updated and expanded, primarily in areas other than Greek culture, in Bremmer 2008). See Mirhady 1997 for the possible role of the \textit{pharmakos} in the Athenian practice of ostracism.

\textsuperscript{41} The \textit{pharmakos} and \textit{homo sacer} have been brought together in terms of Agamben’s theories by Antonello and O’Leary 2009: 38 and 46 and Beebee 2010, especially 305.

\textsuperscript{42} Girard 1977; Derrida 1981; Girard 1986.

\textsuperscript{43} Bremmer 1983: 313.
narrative into the classical *polis*. Whatever historical realities underpin that earliest era of Greek poetry, we can recognize that patterns of exclusion that affirm the full humanity of certain in-groups appear in the Western tradition first in narrative form and before the theorizations we find in the fully developed world of the *polis*.

**Conclusions**

Bare life, then, is nothing more than abjection—not in the sense that Kristeva uses the word, but as a form of life imposed or conditioned by the wider community. Agamben finds Aristotelian support for a classical conceptualization of community that hinges on the delimitation of abject subsections, and he builds this insight into his claim (following Foucault) that biopolitics is the modern, technologized, governmental management of human populations. The debased individuals, groups, and types that exist under the abject conditions of bare life permit the positive valuation of others. Thus, animal, slave, woman, child, foreigner, and barbarian are some of the categories that help to delineate the notion of adult, male, citizen. This may be a truism, but Agamben has gone farther than most in presenting the abject state of bare life as a critical ethical challenge of the modern world.\(^{44}\) The manner in which he does so, primarily through his use of Aristotle, also challenges scholars of antiquity to respond to his provocative, at times flawed, analysis of classical philosophy.

As I hope to have shown, as the biopolitical foundation for the dynamics of social abjection, Aristotle is neither unique nor, strictly speaking, necessary. The conceptual underpinnings of Agamben’s system—the idea and the fantasy that “we” can bolster our position by excluding the “other” within our midst—appears already in archaic Greek narrative poetry. And clearly this material was understood in antiquity to have moral implications. Plato’s *Euthyphro*, for example, in searching for a definition of piety, takes the Hesiodic tale of Zeus’ treatment of Cronus as a primary ethical point of departure (6a). Similarly, Pindar, in a poem dedicated to Hieron of Syracuse, claims that he has “often seen from afar bilious Archilochus in distress (ἐν ἀμαχανίᾳ) fattening himself on heavy words of hate” (Pyth. 2.54–56). Pindar’s word ἀμαχανία means “helplessness,” and it encapsulates many of the issues relating to Archilochus’ self-presentation, discussed above.\(^{45}\) As an animal and as a female, Archilochus renders himself abject, and Pindar

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\(^{44}\) In this his ideas parallel those of Emmanuel Levinas, for whom ethics emerges from the obligations imposed on the subject when confronted by the face of the other: see Levinas 1969.

\(^{45}\) On this passage, see recently Steiner 2011. A similar argument could be made about Pliny’s account of Bupalus and Athenis creating a statue (*imago*) of Hipponax, which they displayed to a circle of people who laughed derisively (NH 36.4.12). The isolation of the individual at the center of the community, unified by defining a circumference focalized around him, captures Agamben’s idea of an inclusive exclusion.
defines his and his patron’s position of privilege in contradistinction to that of the abjectified iambist.

Perhaps the most important outcome of exploring the moral implications of bare life in early Greek poetry has to do with narrativization. It is generally assumed that full-blown biopolitical regimes could not exist until the advent of modernity provided the logistical and technological means to impose a biopolitical order. Yet we can wonder to what extent such innovations spurred new ideas about social control or whether new technologies merely facilitated the implementation of old fantasies of domination. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer conclude their meditation on Odysseus as an icon of the dialectic of enlightenment, as someone who overcomes the terrors of myth in order to usher in a world of modern terrors, by reconsidering the hero’s instructions to his son to execute Penelope’s treacherous maids in _Odyssey_ 22. The women are hanged from a single hawser that Telemachus ties to a pillar and pulls tight around a spur of the palace (465–473). Adorno and Horkheimer read this technologized mass execution in terms of the atrocities carried out during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as confirmed by their comment on Wilamowitz’s description of the killing as being carried out in a “modern way” (_Die Heimkehr des Odysseus_, 76).46 Of course it may be that these traumatized scholars were merely reading their own anxieties back into Homer, but it may also be that they were recovering an early-narrativized precursor to the modern realities of bare life.

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46 Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 61–62 and 265, n. 61. The authors focus on what can be read beneath “the cold detachment of narrative, which describes even the horrible as if for entertainment…” (61).
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Agamben, “Bare Life,” and Archaic Greek Poetry


