

# THAT WHICH IS BORN GENERATES ITS OWN USE. GIORGIO AGAMBEN AND KARMA

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## **ABSTRACT**

The publication of *Karman* marks an unexpected expansion of Giorgio Agamben's field of inquiry, placing his work in dialogue with texts and concepts drawn from the Buddhist tradition. At the center of Agamben's investigation is the question of how it is possible for humans to become blameworthy and according to the history he presents the notion of fault is joined to the Sanskrit *karman* ("intentional action") by way of an etymological link with the Latin *crimen*, meaning "an action insofar as it is sanctioned", which is to say, a crime. This shared lineage of *karman/crimen* betrays, however, a striking difference in the manner in which the two traditions address the problem of intentional action. Agamben recognizes this and locates within Buddhism an alternative to the Western conception of intentional action that does not imply a fixed subject for whom infinite responsibility and purposiveness can be irrevocably attached. This essay extends Agamben's inquiry by emphasizing the importance of habituation in formulating an ethics without a subject and by highlighting the place of habituation in the theory of karmic causation.

## **KEYWORDS**

Karma, Agamben, Buddhism, Habit, Culpability, Free Will

The path is obscured by small completions.

The Zhuangzi

The publication of *Karman* marks an unexpected expansion of Giorgio Agamben's field of inquiry. Although the central themes of the text are familiar enough—action, crime, guilt—and must be seen as a continuation of his previous investigations into Western political ontology, his decision to place these ideas in conversation with texts and concepts from the Buddhist tradition, specifically the Sanskrit concept of *karman/karma*, is unexpected. Principally known for his scholarship concerning the traditions of the Judeo-Christian West, this shift in Agamben's focus not only comes as a surprise to those familiar with his writings, but also offers a rare

opportunity to place his work in dialogue with the expansive philosophical heritage of the Buddhist tradition.

But why turn to *karman*?<sup>1</sup>

## 1. CULPA

Of particular importance to the story Agamben tells in *Karman* is the fact that, according to the nineteenth century linguist, Adolphe Pictet, who would introduce the thirteen-year-old Ferdinand de Saussure to the analytic study of Indo-European languages, the Latin *crimen*, which forms the root of the word ‘crime’, “likely corresponds to the Sanskrit *karman*, [meaning] ‘work’ in general, good or evil” (Pictet 1877: 436). Although Pictet’s etymology is by no means verified, and Agamben notes this, the linguistic intersection between *crimen* and *karman* frames the investigation.

According to the sources Agamben cites, *crimen* refers to action insofar as it has been sanctioned, which is to say, insofar as certain punitive consequences have been attached to the action, rendering it imputable to a subject through the operation of the trial. Although the meaning of *karman* is quite different, it is nevertheless possible to align the two concepts insofar as *karman* similarly joins intentional action with imputable consequences, ordering the world according to karmic laws whose internal principle unfolds according to the ascription of causal effects, rather than through the attribution of fault. On this point Agamben cites the Italian Sanskritist, Raniero Gnoli: “Every action, good or evil, when done consciously, produces an effect or fruit that will inevitably mature . . . *Karman* belongs to the nature of things (*dharmata*), which, as the Indian doctors say, is unquestionable, is a natural law, independent in its development from our concepts of moral justice, recompense, and punishment . . . The fruit, on its part, is so to speak an automatic, involuntary consequence of conscious action, ethically indifferent” (Gnoli 2001-4: xxii-xxiii).

Although he begins by aligning *crimen* and *karman*, Agamben’s underlying concern is to demonstrate how differently the two traditions from which these concepts emerge confront the problem generated by the principle of imputation common to each. Within the European context, which is Agamben’s principle focus, imputation will coincide with the emergence of a strong conception of individual will and personal freedom around which attribution and juridical blame will coalesce. By contrast, out of the Indian tradition, channeled through Buddhism, what will emerge instead is a profound denial of selfhood and an understanding of agency that does not presuppose the existence of an essential self or soul, while nevertheless

<sup>1</sup> Although it is more common to use the spelling *karma*, I have opted for the less common *karman* because this is the rendering Agamben uses throughout the book.

supporting a doctrine of successive births that receives the effects of previous karmic deeds and extends them into the future.

Despite their different formulations, however, Agamben suggests the possibility of discovering in *crimen/karman* the common source of something like an Indo-European ethic, without which “both the Buddhist doctrine of a liberation of people from the karmic sphere of ‘enchained doing’ [*saṃsāra*] and the connection of guilt and punishment, of virtuous action and its recompense, which stands at the foundation of Western law and morality, would simply make no sense” (Agamben 2018: 29). Both traditions evolve in response to the problem of imputation, but because they chart very different paths, each represents for the other a probing alternative. In contrast to the Indian tradition, attempts by Western philosophers and theologians to comprehend right action and provide a foundation for moral sanction have relied on presuppositions tethered to the idea of an autonomous will and to a sovereign self to which the will is assigned. Despite occasional exceptions, European thought has more or less continually sought to uphold this conceptual edifice, in the shadow of which the bond between action and guilt has steadily developed. “Our hypothesis”, Agamben writes, describing the trajectory of his investigation, “is in fact that the concept of *crimen*, of action that is sanctioned, which is to say, imputable and productive of consequences, stands at the foundation not only of law, but also of the ethics and religious morality of the West” (Agamben 2018: 29). To which he adds, signaling both a caution and an opportunity, “If this concept [*crimen*] should fail for some reason, the entire edifice of morality would collapse irrevocably” (Agamben 2018: 29).

The task of testing the solidity of the Western idea of sanctioned action, together with the will and the collection of divisive concepts that encircle it—guilt, responsibility, fault—is the principle undertaking of Agamben’s *Karman*, and the single question that motivates the investigation, the same question Kafka assigns to Joseph K. in the pages of *The Trial* and which Agamben adopts as the book’s epigraph, is simply this: “How can a human being be guilty?” It is the oddly self-evident quality of the question that the pages of *Karman* seek to explain, because the ease with which we ascribe guilt to subjects, implicating them in a discourse of culpability, has everything to do with the particular manner in which we have come to understand human action.

Essential to Agamben’s analysis is an account of the causal machinery at work in law, through which culpability (*culpa*) becomes possible. According to the etymology Agamben sketches, the Latin *causa* denotes that which is at issue in a trial, the affair over which there is a dispute that gives rise to litigation, and marks “the point at which a certain act or fact enters into the sphere of the law” (Agamben 2018: 5). To speak of *causa* in this way is to specify a threshold across which a certain action passes into the domain of law and becomes, as it were, a legal object, acquiring legal standing. For certain actions a supplemental set of effects is generated that exceeds

the natural effects brought about by the action itself and the trial is the mechanism whereby those supplemental effects become real. Whereas every action naturally produces effects, only certain actions, insofar as they are juridically relevant, trigger legal effects which it is the function of the trial to impute to a subject capable of bearing the consequences of legal judgment. The overall apparatus of the trial is responsible, then, not only for making real certain legal effects, but also for assigning these effects, in the form of penalty, to legal subjects who, brought into being by the same juridical discourse, have acquired a general capacity to bear the consequences of judgment, thereby being made culpable. Nothing illustrates more clearly the power of the trial to ascribe culpability than the fact that culpability is not limited to human beings.

At the end of the nineteenth century a number of historical surveys of animal prosecution were published—Karl von Amira's *Animal Punishment and Animal Trials* (*Thierstrafen und Thierprocesse*) (1891), Carlo d'Addosi's *Delinquent Beasts* (*Bestie Delinquenti*) (1892), and Edward Evans' *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals* (1906)—all of which chronicle in detail animal trials conducted not only in antiquity, but throughout medieval Europe and even into the early decades of the eighteenth century. Dogs, pigs, rats, moles, cows, even insects were arraigned in court on a broad range of charges and trials were conducted without abridgment: evidence was heard, witnesses were called, and in most cases the accused animal benefitted from legal counsel. “In the writings of medieval jurists”, Edward Evans reports, “the right and fitness of inflicting judicial punishment upon animals appear to have been generally admitted. Thus Guy Pape, in his *Decisions of the Parliament of Grenoble*, raises the query, whether a brute beast, if it commit a crime, as pigs sometimes do in devouring children, ought to suffer death, and answers the question unhesitatingly in the affirmative” (Evans 1906: 108). Likewise, in the writings of Antonius Mornacius we learn that in 1610 a Franciscan novice was torn to pieces by several mad dogs who were “by sentence and decree of the court put to death” (Evans 1906: 176). It is surely reasonable, Evans observes, that mad dogs should be killed, but “the remarkable feature of the case [as in other such cases] is that they should be formally tried and convicted as murderers by a legal tribunal” (Evans 1906: 176).

Despite the scope of his study, however, Evans fails to investigate, or even to raise as an issue, the mechanism whereby culpability is assigned to animal life. How is it possible that certain animal behaviors could be removed from the domain of natural activity, which is unimputable, and thereby become culpable? Undoubtedly it is only because animal prosecutions are no longer commonplace that the culpability of animals strikes us as curious, but the frequency of such cases nevertheless demonstrates how variable the attribution of culpability can be. More surprising still is the practice of extending culpability to lifeless objects, as we find in classical Greece. Judicial proceedings of this kind, known collectively as *apsychon dikai*

(prosecutions of lifeless things), were conducted before a special court, the *prytaneum*, to which Plato himself attests. In the *Laws*, for instance, we read: “If a lifeless thing rob a man of life—except it be lightning or some bolt from heaven—if it be anything else than these which kills someone, either through his falling against it or its falling upon him, then the relative shall set the nearest neighbor to pass judgment on it, thus making atonement on behalf of himself and all his kindred, and the thing convicted they shall cast beyond the borders, [*exorizein*, to ex-terminate in the literal and original sense of the term, to take beyond the *termini*] as was stated in respect of animals” (873e-874a) (Plato 1967: 267).

Despite their variety, it is important to keep in mind that what we encounter in each of these cases is culpability rather than fault. This distinction is crucial and helps to explain why humans and animals might face identical forms of prosecution. If, for instance, a sanction prohibits the taking of a human life then, should an animal kill a person, its actions would be as culpable as those of a human who did the same (“*culpa* refers to behavior that, without intending it, has caused some injury” (Agamben 2018: 9)). To be culpable is not the same as to be at fault and by all indication “in the formation of the most ancient laws, something like fault simply does not appear” (Agamben 2018: 8). Law’s original function was to introduce penalty in response to unwelcomed actions, not to ascribe guilt to agents. After all, an inanimate object cannot possibly be at fault, nor can it be found guilty in a moral sense, but it is entirely possible for a doorpost, an ox cart, or a stone to be held culpable. Even Evans acknowledges that, “[f]rom the standpoint of ancient and mediaeval jurists the overt act alone was assumed to constitute the crime; the mental condition [i.e., motivation] of the criminal was never or a least very seldom taken into consideration” (Evans 1906: 200). Thus, what we find in the earliest legal codes—such as those from the *Law of the Twelve Tables*: “If a father sells his son three times, the later shall be free from paternal authority” or “When a patron defrauds his client, he shall be dedicated to the infernal gods”—is not criminal legislation in the modern sense, but *regulation expressed as causation*, and for this reason should perhaps be understood descriptively rather than prescriptively, as a causal scheme, not unlike rules of a game which constitute the game by defining the causal environment that orders it, i.e., if a certain action is done, then certain effects will follow. Rules join certain actions to certain consequences, but the entire procedure (action, rule, judgment and penalty) transpires without necessitating the attribution of fault. “By all evidence, the law here limits itself to sanctioning a connection between an action and a juridical consequence. What is assigned is not a fault so much as a penalty in the broad sense” (Agamben 2018: 8).

When the ascription of fault finally arrives, it does so gradually through the expansion of the concept of culpability, first through Christian moral theology and later with the appearance of the modern subject, thereby joining responsibility to an increasingly autonomous individual. What we are dealing with here, Agamben

suggests, is “a gradation of fault” (Agamben 2018: 9) according to which, to a greater or lesser degree, the imputation of action is transformed over time according to the degree to which agency is involved.

We are accustomed to consider this evolution, which culminates in the modern principle according to which responsibility is founded in the last instance in the free will of the subject, as a progressive one. In reality, we are dealing with a strengthening of the bond that ties agents to their action, which is to say, an interiorization of guilt, which has not necessarily expanded the real freedom of the subject in any way. The connection between action and agent, which was originally defined in an exclusively factual way, is now founded in a principle inherent in the subject, which constitutes the subject as culpable. That means that fault has been displaced from the action to the subject who, if he or she has acted *sciente et volente*, [knowingly and willingly], bears the whole responsibility for it (Agamben 2018: 9).

Fault is attributed not to actions, but to the orientation of the will and therefore can appear only after agency has been extended to the subject. Fault and agency arise together, united by the juridical discourse that *crimen* inaugurates. Over time, and initially under the influence of Roman jurisprudence, penalty is separated from its role as the causal consequence of performing prohibited action and becomes instead the price paid for legal disobedience as such. Eventually, one is no longer penalized for performing a prohibited act, but for having willfully chosen to disobey a legal command and in so doing one commits, properly speaking and in the modern sense, a crime. “The sanction, which was initially nothing other than the immediate and unmotivated consequence of a certain action, now becomes the apparatus that . . . drives the behaviors that transgress its command outside itself as faults and crimes” (Agamben 2018: 19). All of this suggests that the nature of freedom in modern times has been largely misconstrued. Because fault is possible only to the extent that one is free (i.e., possesses agency) the expansion of human freedom has had the dubious effect of strengthening the connection between agents and their actions, binding human beings more tightly to their culpability and to their guilt.

This, then, returns us to the initial question that motivates Agamben’s investigation: “How can a human being be guilty?” From what has been said thus far, it should be clear that any answer to this question must include an account of free will as it emerged during the early Christian era, especially since the ancient world seems to have had little need for it. But it is also necessary to consider, as a part of this undertaking, the longstanding antagonism between volition and habituation that accompanies the historical expansion of human agency. Although Agamben does not address habituation in *Karman*, he does so in a number of other texts, most notably in *The Use of Bodies*, and it seems to me that without a sufficient understanding of habituation not only is it not possible to fully explain why Agamben turns to *karman*, but it is not possible to understand the nature of *karman* as such.

## 2. HEXIS

In the section of the *Summa theologica* known as ‘the treatise on habits’, Aquinas follows Aristotle in maintaining that habits arise in proportion to the frequency of their operation, for “by like acts like habits are formed” (*ex similibus actibus similes habitus causantur*) (Ia IIae q.50 a.1) (Aquinas 1920: 768). Regarding the relationship of habit to the will, around which so much controversy has accumulated, we read in Aquinas that every power that is directed toward action “needs a habit whereby it is well disposed to its act”, (Ia IIae q.50 a.5) (Aquinas: 1920: 771) and since the will is a power directed toward action, we must therefore admit the presence of habit within the will. In support of this, Aquinas turns to a passage from Averroes’s commentary on *De Anima*, which maintains that the Aristotelian understanding of habit (*hexis*) is principally related to the will inasmuch as “habit is that which one uses when one wills” (*habitus est quo quis utitur cum voluerit*) (Ia IIae q.50 a.5) (Aquinas 1920: 771)—a dictum Aquinas cites repeatedly<sup>2</sup>. Problems arise, however, the moment we try to clearly distinguish the habitual from the willful, particularly with regard to moral judgment and with respect to virtuous action more generally. It is for this reason that anyone who wishes to understand the Aristotelian theory of virtue presented in the *Nicomachean Ethics* must do so by first clarifying what is meant by the concept of *hexis*, because it is under the category of *hexis* that Aristotle situates virtue and frames its meaning. What must be grasped is the extent to which virtue is a type of habit.

Although *hexis* has typically been translated into English as habit, drawing from *habitus*, which was its Latin equivalent and which Aquinas tells us serves as a suitable substitute since both words have their root in the verb ‘to have’ (Ia IIae q.49 a.1) (Aquinas 1920: 763), care must be taken not to associate the term too closely with the notion of a simple reflex or routine. Such a misstep quickly leads to an apparent inconsistency of which Aristotle’s practical philosophy has been mistakenly accused, namely, that since actions performed out of habit are insufficiently voluntary to be considered moral, moral skill cannot be said to arise from habituation. But even if we are careful not to project contemporary connotations onto the classical usage of the term, the precise relationship between habit and will remains ambiguous, especially when we read that the will operates by means of habit. How are we to account for the autonomy of the will while at the same time maintain the habitual nature of its operation?<sup>3</sup> Any solution to this dilemma must not only contend with the semantic difference that lies between *hexis* and our modern understanding of habit, but must also confront discrepancies between ancient and modern conceptions of the

<sup>2</sup> For instance, (Ia IIae q.49 a.3), (Ia IIae q.52 a.3) and (Ia IIae q.63 a.2). The quotation also appears repeatedly in Aquinas’s earlier works. See for example, the *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* (*Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*) (III, d.23, q.1 and III, d.34, q.3). See also, the *In decem libros Ethicorum expositio* (*Commentary on the Ten Books of the Ethics*) III, 6: “A habit is that quality by which a person acts when he wishes” (*habitus est quo quis agit cum voluerit*).

will, because the precise historical meaning of habituation is joined to the fate of what it means to exercise volition.

In the second volume of *The Life of the Mind*, which is devoted to reflections on the faculty of the will and by extension to the problem of freedom, Hannah Arendt opens with the peculiar difficulty presented by the fact that “[t]he faculty of the Will was unknown to Greek antiquity and was discovered as a result of experiences about which we hear next to nothing before the first century of the Christian era” (Arendt 1971: 3)<sup>3</sup>. Although there is no complete consensus as to whether the concept of the will was strictly lacking from the Greek philosophical context—there are numerous Greek terms that designate degrees of volition (*boulēsis*, *thelema*, *proairesis*)—it is broadly accepted that the ancients did not employ the notion of the will as the medieval world would come to understand it, particularly with respect to the nature of freedom. And this opinion is not limited to current scholarship. Hobbes claims, for instance, that although the ancients considered in great detail the nature of causality, “the third way of bringing things to pass, distinct from necessity and chance, namely freewill, is a thing that never was mentioned amongst them, nor by the Christians in the beginning of Christianity”, and it was quite some time before the doctors of the church “exempted from this dominion of God’s will the will of man; and brought in a doctrine, that not only man, but also his will, is free” (Hobbes 1841: 1). If this is in fact the case, then among the principle problems confronting the Christian philosophers of subsequent centuries was the need to reconcile this *tertium quid*, together with the theological problems in relation to which it arose as a solution, with the philosophical systems of the classical world in which the absence of the concept of the free will posed no fundamental difficulties.

It is within the space of this problem concerning the will and its relation to action that Agamben’s *Karman* locates a significant part of its inquiry. According to Agamben’s explanation, “the will acts as an apparatus whose goal is to render masterable—and therefore imputable—what the human being can do” (Agamben 2018: 44) and this process begins with one of the great achievements of Aristotle, which was to conceive of human action in terms of potential and act. It is so common for us to think in these terms, Agamben observes, that we often fail to recognize the pragmatic nature of its creation, which was to secure a connection between actions and subjects. “[I]t is precisely in the context of the Aristotelian theory of potential that we see appear for the first time in classical Greek thought something that resembles a concept of will in the modern sense” (Agamben 2018: 45). Because Aristotle must explain how it is possible to move from potential to act, he is obliged to deploy a

<sup>3</sup> The Greeks, she tells us, do not even have a word for what we consider to be the free will. “*Thelein* means ‘to be ready, to be prepared for something’, *boulesthōi* is ‘to view something as [more] desirable’, and Aristotle’s own newly coined word, which comes closer than these to our notion of some mental state that must precede action, is *pro-airesis*, the ‘choice’ between two possibilities, or, rather, the preference that makes me choose one action instead of another” (Arendt 1971: 16).

concept (*proairesis*) to name the source of this possibility. Although in using *proairesis* “Aristotle could not have in mind anything like the free will of the moderns . . . it is significant that, to cure in some way the split he himself had introduced into potential, he had to introduce into the latter a ‘sovereign principle’ that decides between doing and not doing” (Agamben 2018: 46)—“from which the theologians will elaborate the doctrine of the freedom of the responsibility of human actions” (Agamben 2018: 45).

This sovereign principle is extended as it passes through Christian theology where the will is transformed into a solid foundation for human freedom. It was, “a matter of transforming a being who *can*, which the ancient human being essentially is, into a being who *wills*, which Christian subjects will be” (Agamben 2018: 44). What Agamben is suggesting here is that “the passage from the ancient world to modernity coincides with the passage from potential to will, from the predominance of the modal verb ‘I can’ to the modal verb ‘I will’”, (Agamben 2018: 49) thereby securing responsibility for human action. Neither in Hebrew nor in New Testament Greek is there any precise terminology for the concept of the will and it is not until the fourth century—first in debates over the doctrine of divine will and then in Augustine’s reflections on the will (*voluntas*) surrounding the circumstances of his own conversion—that the concept receives its full articulation.

In her doctoral dissertation, which has as its theme the concept of love in Augustinian thought, Arendt at one point turns her attention to the passages from the *Confessions* in which Augustine tells the story of his conversion. For Augustine, she explains, “time and again, habit is what puts sin in control of life” (Arendt 1996: 82) because habit is that which not only binds us to this world, obscuring our true nature, but also conceals the future from us by orienting us toward the past. In each case, habit serves not to fortify the will, but to disfigure it because the routines of habituation stand in the way of volition, conforming it to *cupititas* and to sin. For Augustine, the great danger in allowing the will to become habituated to earthly concerns is, of course, that the soul’s capacity to embrace divine command is diminished. For although the soul is unitary, under the influence of habit volition “is wrenched in two and suffers great trial, because while truth teaches it to prefer one course, habit prevents it from relinquishing the other” (Augustine 1961: 175). Thus, the soul, divided by habit, turns away from divine law and from the guidance of conscience through which the law is conveyed internally. Sincere commitment on the level of the intellect to live according to new moral principles, in addition to the profound change of spiritual conviction brought on by conversion, encounters resistance when extended to the inclinations of the body, and habit marks the earthly remnant that stands opposed to everything the spirit now yearns for. “These two wills within me, one old, one new, one servant of the flesh, the other of the spirit, were in conflict and between them they tore my soul apart” (Augustine 1961: 164).

What is essential to understand, however, is that the will has no natural orientation toward which its potential is directed and so remains susceptible to external influence. Although our wills are free to choose to do those things that we want, what we want is not genuinely up to us. Augustine comes to realize this. Although the will is free, it is only free insofar as it is able to choose what it desires and habituation tends to reorient those desires, directing them away from God's law. The challenge of obedience arises from this misalignment. In order for the will to choose what is right it must first desire what is right, and according to Church doctrine, refined by Augustine in his debate with Pelagius, the instrument of this guidance is grace. According to *De Correptione et Gratia* (*Treatise on Rebuke and Grace*), Augustine teaches that it is by divine intercession alone that humanity acquires the power to resist sin, and this is not simply by being shown what is to be done, but by being supplied the means of doing it—"For the grace of God [is] that by which alone men are delivered from evil, and without which they do absolutely no good thing, whether in thought, or will and affection, or in action; not only in order that they may know, by the manifestation of that grace, what should be done, but moreover in order that, by its enabling, they may do with love what they know" (3.ii) (Augustine 1872: 71-72). Or, as we find in Bernard of Clairvaux's *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, (*On Grace and Free Will*), a text which Aquinas will repeatedly quote: "It is in virtue of free choice that we will, it is in virtue of grace that we will what is good" (Bernard 1920: 28).

It is possible to see then, that, under the canopy of Christian eschatology, grace comes to supplant habit as the preferred means through which the pure potentiality of the will, which designates the radical nature of its freedom and the specific quality of humankind's moral nature, acquires the tendency toward specific action. Whereas *hexis* is guided by means of exposure to practice, exercise, and examples, grace springs from the direct influence of God, installed not to eliminate choice but to guide action in the face of habitual tendencies that run counter to divine command, resulting in the acquisition of what Bernard calls "moral habits" (*habitus acquisiti*) (Bernard 1920: 32, fn. 5). Grace, like habit, imparts not the act but the disposition to act.

A careful analysis shows that we are not dealing with two distinct terms—habit and grace—but with the articulation of the same conceptual dilemma under the influence of two divergent ontological environments. Indeed, the doctrine of the Church, following Aquinas, speaks of "habitual grace" (*gratia habitualis*) (Ia IIae q.110 a.2) (Aquinas 1920: 1084). And it is due to these differing frameworks that habit and grace are destined to collide, leading to an antagonism that has never been satisfactorily reconciled. On the one hand, according to the ecclesiastic presentation, grace is said to accompany free will so that the tendencies of habit may be overcome, but yet on the other, because grace expresses the direct influence of God, it is difficult to see how such influence does not run contrary to the very notion of free will it

professes to support. How, in other words, is it possible for freedom to persist under conditions that are not only beyond one's control, but which are made possible only through the unearned generosity of God? The will's freedom is once again placed into question, compromised by the bestowal of grace that moves it.

There is no clearer indication of the inability to reconcile free will and grace (and along with it the reconciliation of free will and habit) than the ecclesiastical factionalism that materialized around the subject during the late sixteenth century. The dilemma has never been definitively decided, either philosophically or canonically, and resulted in the convening of the *Congregatio de auxiliis divinae gratiae* (1598-1607) under Clement VIII, which concluded not only without a theological resolution to the controversy—articulated primarily by a protracted dispute between Dominicans and Jesuits concerning the nature of grace and free will—but with a détente imposed by papal decree which shut down the controversy by accepting the viability of the three major positions (Augustinian, Thomistic, and Molinist), and by explicitly forbidding the opposing factions from condemning each other as heretical.

Grace merely reproduces in the domain of theology the antagonism between habit and volition that we began with. Whenever freedom is advanced as an absolute there will always appear the impossibility of satisfactorily answering the problem of how the will remains free while nevertheless being affected by external influences, whether empirical or transcendent. Even within the Christian context of its original formulation, the concept of free will which the West has relied upon almost without exception to ground its moral and political institutions remains undecided. This is why, as Agamben claims quite directly, if this term were to fail, if the free will were to let go of the burden it has carried, the ethico-political scaffolding of the West would have to change. Whenever free will is precluded, as it was across much of the ancient world and as it is in Indo-Buddhist philosophy, human responsibility is not expressed principally in terms of obedience to command but in dedication to techniques, and what is perfected in the domain of human action is the fluency of skill, not the sincerity of obligation.

### 3. ALTERA NATURA

In the opening pages of a careful study dedicated to explaining the absence of the will in classical antiquity, Albrecht Dihle cites a list of Greco-Roman authors, each of whom speak of the limitations placed on the gods by the laws of nature. “Not even for God are all things possible” (*ne deum quidem posse omnia*), Pliny the Elder writes in the *Naturalis historiae*, “he cannot cause twice ten not to be twenty or do other things along similar lines, and these facts unquestionably demonstrate the power of nature” (II.5) (Pliny 1967: 187). And Seneca, after opening an inquiry into the benevolence of the gods, refers us to constraints placed upon them by their own nature: “And what reason have the gods for doing deeds of kindness?”, he

asks, to which he answers simply, “it is their nature”. And therefore, “one who thinks that they are unwilling to do harm, is wrong; they *cannot* do harm” (95.49) (Seneca 1928: 89). When Greco-Roman thinkers speculated on theological problems what they almost always arrived at was a divine figure restricted by the ontological limitations of the given world, thereby distinguishing it from Christian cosmology where the will of the divine, rather than the order of nature, set humanity’s moral bearing. “[W]hen Greeks found out about the Christian idea of creation”, Agamben explains in an account of the schism between ancient and Christian cosmology, “what remained incomprehensible in it for them was precisely the idea that it did not result from a necessity or a nature, but from a gratuitous act of will” (Agamben 2018: 56). To act properly in such a world is to be motivated more by intellect than by will, to decide according to reason rather than obedience, which Seneca captures succinctly in the dictum, “I do not obey God, rather I agree with him” (96.2) (Seneca 1928: 105). These worlds were not the manifestations of a creator who fashions reality *ex nihilo* but of a God who instead, as Dihle puts it, “molds what was without shape . . . animates what was without life . . . brings to reality what was merely a potential” and, above all, “does not transcend the order which embraces himself as well as his creatures” (Dihle 1982: 4).

In the works of Epicureanism, where the gods are removed almost entirely from the natural world and all things populate a single plane without hierarchy, this vision of a thoroughly immanent cosmos is pushed even further. And nowhere is this expressed more completely than in Lucretius’s *De rerum natura* where the full autonomy of nature is affirmed. “Nature is her own mistress and is exempt from the oppression of arrogant despots, accomplishing everything by herself spontaneously and independently, free from the jurisdiction of the gods” (2.1090-1093) (Lucretius 2001: 62-63). Subtracting from his description of nature every teleological element, Lucretius presents us with an image of a universe that is comprehensively un-designed. “It was certainly not by design that the particles fell into order”, he writes, “they did not work out what they were going to do, but because many of them by many chances struck one another in the course of infinite time and encountered every possible form and movement, they found at last the disposition [*disposituras*] they have” (1.1022-1030) (Lucretius 2003: 41). Not only is it the case that the gods have no hand in crafting the natural world, but nature too proceeds without a plan, and thus, for Lucretius, every explanation of nature that privileges the language of purpose is fundamentally misguided. No organ was created for the sake of being used and in this sense, there is nothing that an organ is *for*. The eye was not created for the sake of sight, nor the ear for hearing, nor the legs for walking. Instead, he insists, in a passage he has lost none of its disruptive force, “I maintain that all the parts were in being before there was any function for them to fulfill” (4.841-842) (Lucretius 2001: 123).

What we encounter here, in this sweeping reversal of the causal relationship between organ and function, is a complete undoing of the teleological character of natural philosophy, together with the notions of purpose and will that it often implies, and with it a reorientation of ontology around the notion of use. It is significant, then, that Agamben cites these passages from *De rerum natura* not only in *Karman*, but also in *The Use of Bodies*, between which they form a sort of bridge. “It is in Lucretius”, he writes, “that use seems to be completely emancipated from every relation to a predetermined end, in order to affirm itself as the simple relation of the living thing with its own body, beyond every teleology” (Agamben 2016: 51). What is being developed in these passages, and across both investigations, is an ontology of use, wherein Agamben extends Lucretian naturalism so as to reimagine human action—conceiving it as potential without act, means without ends<sup>4</sup>. Those who are under the impression that actions follow from agents, or insist that organs precede their functions, are participants in a misleading reversal of the order of existence. “Such explanations, and all other such that men give”, Lucretius writes, zeroing in on this point, “put effect for cause and are based on perverted reasoning; since nothing is born in us simply in order that we may use it, but that which is born generates its own use [*quod natum est id proceat usum*]” (4.831-835) (Lucretius 1966: 307). It is precisely in this reversal that we begin to glimpse an overlap with *karman*, which, as Agamben observes, describes the domain of human action according to an analogous understanding of causation.

Supporting this ontology of use is the legacy of habituation. Having abandoned teleological explanation, which comprehends action only insofar as it is aligned with a predetermined end, Lucretius must instead rely on action alone, in the absence of a purpose that defines it. And it is precisely here that habit makes its appearance, replacing the paradigm of agency with that of use. “[T]he living being does not make use of its body parts” Agamben explains, addressing this alternative ontology, “but by entering into relation with them, it so to speak gropingly finds and invents their use. The body parts precede their use, and use precedes and creates their function” (Agamben 2016: 51). Parts find their way in the world by exploring it, by encountering it again and again until a way of acting is generated that eventually becomes so habitual that it seems to be the natural condition of the body part to operate in the way it does. The legs, to take one of Lucretius’s examples, are not made for walking but only become able to walk through repetitive exposure to specific behaviors, just as the same legs, exposed to dancing, over time take on that quality. The action constitutes the nature of the thing and does not extend beyond it. What is brought into being, in other words, is the act itself. And the very same is true,

<sup>4</sup> Agamben describes this as a shift from action to use. Early in *The Use of Bodies* we read: “One of the hypotheses of the current study is, by calling into question the centrality of *action* and *making* for the political, that of attempting to think *use* as a fundamental political category” (Agamben 2016: 23, emphasis added).

Agamben suggests a few pages later, with respect to the subject of action, the self. “This self”, he writes, “is therefore not something substantial or a preestablished end but coincides entirely with the use that the living being makes of it” (Agamben 2016: 54). Consequently, and despite every impression to the contrary, the self, including the sense of its own agency, is not the source of action, but is rather an effect.

[T]he self coincides each time with the relation itself and not with a predetermined telos. And if use, in the sense that we have seen, means being affected, constituting-oneself insofar as one is in relation with something, then use-of-oneself coincides with *oikeiosis*, insofar as this term names the very mode of being of the living being. The living being uses-itself, in the sense that in its life and in its entering into relationship with what is other than the self, it has to do each time with its very self, feels the self and familiarizes itself with itself. *The self is nothing other than use-of-oneself* (Agamben 2016: 55).

According to the ontological paradigm offered to us by Lucretius, but also in line with what we have seen thus far of Agamben’s own philosophical understanding, actions that coincide with use must be understood to operate in the absence of agency. In *The Use of Bodies*, in a chapter entitled *Habitual Use*, Agamben explains that if habit is always already a use-of-oneself, “then there is no place here for a proprietary subject of habit, which can decide to put it to work or not. The self, which is constituted in the relation of use, is not a subject, is nothing other than this relation” (Agamben 2016: 60). Thus, habit, insofar as it corresponds with self-use, is, properly speaking, the name given to action without a subject. Joining subjectless action directly to concepts that lie at the center of his onto-political project, Agamben concludes: “*Use, as habit, is a form-of-life*” (Agamben 2016: 62).

Before turning to *karman*, and to the manner in which it supplements Agamben’s understanding of use, let us briefly turn to the passages from the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle presents the theory of habituation upon which he establishes his theory of virtue. With respect to the general theory of virtues, *hexis* designates a stable, durable trait constitutive of a person’s character, which originates neither from natural temperament nor from convention, but from repeated experience and exercise. It is for this reason that as far back as Roman antiquity, *hexis* has been described as a second nature (*altera natura*). But what are we to make of this second nature and how does it rank with respect to the first?

Virtue, then, being of two kinds, intellectual and moral, intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit, whence also its name is one that is formed by a slight variation from the word for ‘habit’. From this it is also plain that none of the moral virtues arises in us by nature; for nothing that exists by nature can form a habit contrary to its nature. For instance the stone which by nature moves downwards cannot be habituated to move upwards, not even if one tries to train it by throwing it up ten thousand times; nor can fire be habituated to move downwards, nor can anything else that by nature behaves in one way be trained to behave

in another. Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit (1103a14-1103a25) (Aristotle 1991: 1742-1743).

The significance of *hexis* being rooted in the verb ‘to have’ is made apparent from this passage for, with respect to the general theory of virtues, Aristotle employs *hexis* to designate a durable attribute of character that originates neither from natural temperament nor from convention, but from repeated exercise. The manner in which *hexis* indicates a type of having is therefore not at all the same as when we say that someone ‘has’ an object in the form of possession. Indeed, in the case of ‘having’ a habit, it might be more appropriate to say that one is held by the habit. What differentiates *hexis* from mere possession, and the reason it stands in close proximity to character (*ethos*), is that *hexis* indicates a manner of having that is a kind of holding—an active, ongoing state. For this reason, *hexis* is contrasted with *diáthesis*, which indicates a more temporary state. In the *Categories* we read that, “A *hexis* differs from a *diáthesis* in being more stable and lasting longer. . . It is what are easily changed and quickly changing that we call *diáthesis*, e.g. hotness and chill and sickness and health and the like” (8b27-9a9) (Aristotle 1991: 14). *Hexis* designates an enduring, rather than transient, quality but not an essential quality. It is a state of character, a disposition, arising not from natural inclinations, but from the cultivation of stable behavioral preferences, a field of activity shaped by practice, becoming “through length of time, part of a man’s nature and irremediable or exceedingly hard to change” (8b26-8b29) (Aristotle 1991: 14). It follows from this, then, that the task assigned to ethics, in the absence of every law and command, is nothing other than to guide the effective acquisition of habit, to enable the positive attainment of an *altera natura*.

In keeping with the passage quoted above, *altera natura* is distinguished from *prima natura* principally with respect to its cause, for *hexeis* of all types differ from natural capacities (*dunámeis*)—such as the ability to see, to hear, or to walk—to the extent that they are acquired through practice and repeated action. For this reason *hexis* is presented as a distinctly human type of potentiality. Unlike natural potentials which are limited to specific ends and do not require habituation to pass into action, virtues require habit because human potentiality remains open to many ends. Whereas, according to Aristotle, the potential of a natural agent is bound to a specific and necessary end and for this reason “natural things cannot become accustomed or unaccustomed”, human potentiality is “passive” with respect to action and is therefore capable of receiving dispositions, which over time and through repeated application become durable inclinations. As Aristotle explains, in a passage reminiscent of Lucretius,

[O]f all the things that come to us by nature we first acquire the potentiality and later exhibit the activity (this is plain in the case of the senses; for it was not by often seeing or often hearing that we got these senses, but on the contrary we had them before we

used them, and did not come to have them by using them); but virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do, we learn by doing, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts (1103a25-1103b2) (Aristotle 1991: 1743).

The comparison with Lucretius is striking, not only because Aristotle's unreservedly teleological description of natural capacities is so clearly at odds with that of Lucretius ("it was not by often seeing or hearing that we got these senses"), but also because there are points concerning the acquisition of virtues where the two philosophers seem to be in agreement. In contrast to abilities that are acquired congenitally, such as sight and hearing, those aptitudes associated with human virtues are different insofar as they arise directly from use. One is not born brave, Aristotle tells us, but becomes so by acting bravely, and more generally, "virtues we get by first exercising them". What separates Lucretius from Aristotle, thereby securing for *De rerum natura* the radical quality of its ontological paradigm, is Lucretius's insistence that the natural and the habitual operate according to the same mechanism. It is not only the human being that acquires its nature secondarily, as a disposition that follows from activity, as Aristotle suggests; it is all of nature that operates in this fashion. For Lucretius, *the cosmos acts before it is*. And for this reason, everything that exists does so as *altera natura*. There is no primary nature.

The world Lucretius describes is a horizontal one, composed of aggregations of material and behavioral patterns that form semi-stable arrangements (*disposituras*) that do not answer to a transcendent model or plan; rather each corresponds only to itself as it reaches out laterally to those other arrangements and patterns that constitute the elements of its surroundings. Extending Lucretius's vision, it is possible to conclude that the world is, in effect, not a collection of objects, but rather a network of arrangements/dispositions assembled over time through habituation, operating at a variety of scales. Whereas the commonsense way of understanding the world assumes the real existence of objects, each with their own natures, together with the belief that their causal interactions are somehow linear—epitomized by the distorted analogy of dominos falling—the model offered by habituation, by contrast, is of a *causal field*. Causation is topological, not sequential. Nothing arises from a single cause. Whatever comes into being does so immanently, as one of the possibilities of nature, sustained by countless interactions within a field of conditions, for which we find a precise Buddhist expression in the principle of dependent origination (*prañītyasamutpāda*), one of the core tenants of Buddhist thought for which the appropriate analogy is not a linear series but an interconnected net (*Indrajāla*). "There is no real production", the fifth century Buddhaghosa teaches, "there is only interdependence" (Conze 1983: 149).

#### 4. KARMAN

The final chapter of *Karman* begins with a declaration: “The politics and ethics of the West will not be liberated from the aporias that have ended up rendering them impracticable if the primacy of the concept of action—and of will, which is inseparably jointed to it—is not radically called into question (Agamben 2018: 60). This statement sets the stage for Agamben’s direct engagement with *karman*, because unlike the Judeo-Christian tradition of the West, which has sought at almost every turn to anchor the subject in the freedom of the will, the Indo-Buddhist tradition has sought refuge in the opposite direction, in the overcoming of the ego in pursuit of a very different sort of freedom.

As we have seen, for Agamben, the legal apparatus finds its primary function not in the regulation of action, nor even in the application of penalty, but in “the creation of a subject for human action” (Agamben 2018: 77). The subject is the shadow that the law casts in its wake, produced as the effect of an onto-juridical philosophy that requires for its operation a center of imputation for voluntary action. It is the removal of this subject, and the will by which it conceives of its own operation, from our understanding of action, that is the task Agamben bestows to Western philosophy, fully aware of the enormous edifice that threatens to be brought down in the process. From this standpoint it becomes possible, at last, to appreciate Agamben’s turn to *karman* and in doing so to grasp the full significance of the Indo-Buddhist endeavor to separate action from the subject, *karman* from *ātman*. “Oh monks”, Agamben writes, quoting from the sutras, “I teach only one thing, namely *karman*. The act exists, its fruit exists, but the agent, who passes from one existence to the other to enjoy the fruit of the act, does not exist” (Agamben 2018: 78).

The challenge of reconciling the apparent inconsistency contained in karmic teachings—between the principle that life is conditioned by actions across successive rebirths and the principle that maintains the inexistence of a permanent self capable of receiving the consequences of those actions—has preoccupied Indo-Buddhist scholars for centuries and Agamben finds in their work a strategy that aligns closely with his own. “If one translates [their work], not without a certain arbitrariness, into the terms of our investigation”, he writes, “the Buddha’s strategy becomes perfectly coherent: it is a matter of breaking the connection that links the action-will-imputation apparatus to a subject”, (Agamben 2018: 78) which Agamben’s historical study has sought to reveal the possibility of within certain corners of the Western tradition. “Action”, he continues, advancing the Buddhist position, “exists in the wheel of co-production conditioned according to the purely factual principle ‘if this, then that’, and for this reason, it seems to implicate in transmigration those who recognize themselves in it; *the subject as responsible actor is only an appearance due to ignorance or imagination* (or, in terms of this investigation, this subject is a pretense produced by the apparatuses of law and morality). Yet this means that the problem

becomes that of thinking in a new way the relation—or non-relation—between actions and their supposed subject” (Agamben 2018: 78, emphasis added). Should Western scholars adopt this undertaking as their own, or even accept it as a problem to be confronted, the expansive discourse on *karman* within the Buddhist canon can be for them an invaluable source of guidance.

There is no single meaning that can be ascribed to the concept of *karman*. Like every fundamental philosophical principle, its significance for the tradition to which it belongs is expressed through the gradual semantic adjustments that are the very condition of its preservation. The term *karma/karman* appears for the first time in the *Rig Veda* where it bears the limited meaning of action associated with the proper performance of ritual practice. It is not until the time of the *Upaniṣads* that its usage expands to include the normative dimension of intentional actions and the fruit (*phala*) of those actions. In a celebrated passage from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* it is stated that “According as one acts, according as one conducts himself, so does he become. The doer of good becomes good. The doer of evil becomes evil. One becomes virtuous by virtuous action, bad by bad action” (IV.4.5) (1931: 140). The implication here, which is inherited by the Buddhist tradition, is that intentional action gives rise to character in the sense that repeated behavior, by becoming habitual, forms a tendency or disposition (*saṃskāra*) within the doer which conditions future deeds. *Karman* is the principle that describes this process, articulating the relation that obtains between one’s actions and one’s state of being.

The sequencing here is important and echoes the description of character found in Aristotle. It is not character that determines behavior, but behavior that determines character. The act precedes the agent. The Buddhist tradition will make much of this causal reversal because, whereas the Brahmanical tradition retains the belief that the self (*ātman*) is enduring, separate and independent, thereby supplying a tangible solution to the difficult problem of explaining the transference of karmic consequences across lifetimes, Buddhism will chart a different path according to which the self does not exist in any permanent sense. The pre-Buddhist notion of a core self that travels across lifetimes was given up by Sakyamuni for the idea of the transmission of dispositional patterns alone (*saṃskāras*) according to the karmic process whereby the self is made and remade through actions, giving rise to the pretense of agency and self-consciousness. But simply because the existence of an enduring self is an illusion does not mean that the associated experience is false. An illusion does not mean that something is not real, it simply means that something is not what it appears to be, that we have somehow misattributed its cause.

This is true of all phenomenological reality. Our perceptions are, of course, acutely different from the way things exist in the actual world. The green we see when we look at spring leaves is present only in the perceptual model supplied by our brain. Color is internally constructed, a mental model for navigating our environment, and yet even though we know this to be the case it is terribly difficult not

to assume that the things we perceive are in fact real. The brain gives all perception an ascribed character of reality and the same is true for our *sense* of self, which is quite simply the perceptual model we have of our own existence, shaped by the constraints of a profoundly social, intersubjective environment. World-modeling is a feature of all organisms and is necessary for survival, but for organisms capable of modeling social behavior this capacity is amplified, especially in the case of animals capable of using language. It is within the linguistic domains inhabited by human beings, where a sense of agency appears as a dominant part of the perceptual model, epitomized by the grammatical use of the first-person pronoun, that properly intentional actions arise. The unfolding of intentional action generates consequences for the individual, but also for those who share a common semantic world, by propagating the conceptual elements that populate that world, thereby altering what is considered real within it. We hear echoes of this in the well-known opening verse of the *Dhammapada*: “All experience is preceded by mind, led by mind, made by mind” (2008: 3). These actions, and the enduring positive and negative effects they propagate are, broadly speaking, karmic.

Indian Buddhism identifies five modes of activity (*niyama*) which constrain the arising and ceasing of conditioned phenomena and *karman* refers only to the mode corresponding to action which arises from intention (*cetanā*). The well-known definition of *karman* in the *Nibbedhika Sutta* states this precisely: “Intention, I tell you, is *kanma*. Intending, one does *kanma* by way of body, speech, and intellect” (AN 6.63) (1997). What must be avoided here, however, is the mistake of associating the intentionality of *karman* too closely with moral fault. Although *karman* is properly associated with the belief that virtuous action leads to desirable births, whereas malicious action results in future births characterized by suffering, this does not occur because the doer is being rewarded or punished for the deed. Although meritorious action may result in a pleasurable rebirth, this temporary satisfaction nevertheless remains within the bounds of *saṃsāra* and does not lead to the cessation of *karman*, which is the condition for achieving an enlightened state (*nirvāṇa*), for despite its positive nature, meritorious activity remains intentional. It is intentionality (*cetanā*) itself that is problematic and the generator of *karman*, not because these are actions we can legitimately be blamed for, but because intention is the effect of a model of the world that is false, generating conditions that then appear to us as the result of a subjective agent. Although intending does not necessarily involve rational deliberation, there is no intentionality without a sense of self that directs the mind towards a particular end. Thus, anytime we act intentionally we unavoidably strengthen the illusion of the self, attaching ourselves more firmly to it, and thereby extend its karmic effects. We desire to see our existence in the world as the result of a plan behind which stands an agent as its cause, but that experience, which includes the desire for agency itself, is the effect of an illusory process, and this illusion is the principle effect of *karman*.

In a passage that not only distinguishes the intentional nature of *karman* from moral responsibility, but also returns us to the theme of culpability, Karin Meyers explains:

Although the fact that karma has a pleasant or painful result according to whether *cetanā* is wholesome or unwholesome (in addition to other contributing factors) makes it tempting to read *cetanā* in terms of our own intuitions about moral responsibility, there is an important conceptual distinction between facts pertaining to the etiology of karma and those pertaining to moral responsibility, and we should not assume there is a direct correlation between the two. Moral responsibility, specifically, culpability is an important topic in commentaries on the monastic rule, for example, but does not figure prominently in the etiological analyses of karma one finds in the *Abhidharma*. This makes sense given that the former has to do with the conduct of persons in a social context governed by a rule and the latter, primarily with the impersonal operations of karma. While moral responsibility is perhaps always at issue in a theological context wherein God is understood to legislate moral law and judge individual desert, it need not be so in the Buddhist context where action is understood to have results according to an impersonal natural order (Meyers 2010: 164-165).

Significantly, Agamben draws our attention to this very issue, citing a passage from the *Aphorisms of Shiva (Śivasūtra)* of Vasugupta to illustrate how the moralization of *karman* in terms of merit and demerit is not only a mistake, but is itself a karmic effect. Shiva, who is described as exempt from karmic rebirth, is said to be present in all sentient beings, thereby suggesting that for all creatures non-karmic action is possible. Standing in the way of such action, however, is a flawed manner of perceiving the world. *Maya*, the “power of obscuring”, distorts our understanding and one of the elements that results from this distortion is the flawed assumption that *karman* operates punitively, according to merit and demerit. “Those who are imprisoned in the ‘bond of Maya’ know and feel, but their discernment is limited to the vision of bonds. For this reason, ‘in the bond of Maya moral merit and demerit are founded—namely, karmic responsibility for actions carried out’” (Agamben 2018: 78). What the text communicates, Agamben suggests, anticipating the historical development of karmic theory away from a simple punitive model, “is that the relationship of the awakened self with its actions is no longer the karmic one of merit and demerit, of means and end, but is instead similar to that of dancers with their gestures” (Agamben 2018: 79)—this last point we will return to.

To rethink action in relation to the subject demands, therefore, a reversal of sorts. Despite the way it seems, the self in all of its obviousness is not the cause of karmic action, the responsible subject who is assessed according to proper conduct, but is rather its principle effect, to which we are deeply and habitually attached. The more we attempt to make sense of our experiences in terms of the ego, judging them according to merit and demerit, the deeper we plant this illusion of the self. This circle of intentional action whereby the ego differentiates itself from the very world it strives to make sense of, is *karman*, i.e., a form of cognitive causality

together with the habits of behavior and awareness it creates and perpetuates. From the Buddhist point of view, then, to say that there is no self is, in fact, not to say that the self does not exist. Rather, it is to recognize that what we experience as the self is precisely this projected appearance of permanence, the future effects of which unfold according to the laws of *karman* and are the source of suffering. As Buddhaghosa teaches in the *Visuddhimagga*, In the ultimate sense, all the truths should be understood as empty because of the absence of any experiencer, any doer, anyone who is extinguished, and any goer. Hence this is said:

For there is suffering, but none who suffers;  
 Doing exists although, there is no doer.  
 Extinction is, but no extinguished person;  
 Although there is a path, there is no goer  
 (XVI.90) (Buddhaghosa 2010: 528-529)

Lucretius sought to comprehend the world on the basis of action alone, in the absence of every relation to a predetermined end. The organs of the body were not designed for the use they acquired (“you have no reason at all to believe that they could have been made for the purpose of usefulness” (855-857) (Lucretius 1966: 309)), but instead the actions of the parts over time coalesced into organs that only much later give the appearance of having preceded their activity. Buddhaghosa outlines a similar strategy, expressed in the language of Buddhism, concerning the unfolding of human action. There is no doer that stands before the deed, it is rather the deeds that form over time patterns of activity that seem to implicate the existence of an agent that governs them. In both cases, the ontology under consideration privileges actions not actors, and the causal mechanism that must be explained is the pathway by which behaviors promote habitual tendencies in the absence of a subject that precedes them. The conventional assumption that being is properly understood either in terms of an origin from which it originates or an end toward which it is drawn (that potentiality is predetermined by actuality) is dismissed as a mistake. *Nothing, in fact, moves from potentiality to actuality.* Reality is constituted not by actualities, but by actions, their repetition, and the durable dispositions that flow from them. Altered in this way, the entire problem space of Western ontology is transformed and with it the meaning of ethics.

What does ethics look like against the background of an ontological commitment that admits only actions without imputable subjects? Such a system would run counter to every religious and juridical instinct of the modern world, deactivating from the outset the responsible subject upon which its institutions are founded. From what has been said thus far, however, it seems clear that any such ethics would need to foreground the role of habituation and thereby, at least in this respect, follow the model set down by Aristotle. And this is precisely what we find. In a study devoted to the fourth century Indian philosopher, Vasubandhu, Meyers demonstrates that it is precisely a concern with habituation, in the absence of moral agency, that

characterizes his early approach to Buddhist ethics. “The cultivation (*bhāvanā*) of the path is not primarily an exercise of free or rational choice”, she writes, describing a process whereby intentionality gives way to the spontaneity of disposition, “but a process of habituation by which the mind comes to gravitate towards virtuous objects or ends as a result of attending to these objects with appropriate views, desires and moral sentiments. This training requires effort, but the end result is the effortless virtue that results from a well-disciplined personality” (Meyers 2010: 177-178). What we encounter here is not a demand to make a proper moral choice, but a call to embody a certain attitude, to transform one’s disposition in response to a series of encounters and practices so as to adopt, as it were, a second nature. According to the Christian moral tradition, habit is a difficulty to be overcome, whereas for Buddhism our capacity for habituation is a condition for the possibility of ethics. Capturing precisely this tension, which also troubles the debate between Aristotle and Augustine, Meyers concludes: “In short, the control that motivates Vasubandhu’s theory of action is not the ability to resist habitual conditioning, but the self-control born of habituation” (Meyers 2010: 254).

To yield to a change of disposition (*saṃskāra*, but also *hexis*), guided by practice, is not merely to undergo a transformation of personal attitude, it is also to change the appearance of the world, and in this sense *karman* does important ontological work within Buddhist philosophy. The self and the world arise together, and *karman* describes the process whereby sentient beings constitute their world or realm (*loka*) as environments inseparable from their own activity as subjects. The world we inhabit is brought into being by the way in which we perceive it, and the way in which we perceive the world retroactively constitutes our identity. Over time, these views become mutually reinforcing. We respond to the world in the way we perceive it and because we perceive the world not only in terms of facts, but also in terms of values, there are enormous ethical implications to perception—implications that are missed when the primary focus is on adherence to moral duty. “From karma the various worlds arise” (Vasubandhu, IV.1), writes Vasubandhu, and tradition describes five realms into which karmic rebirth is possible. As the *Nibbedhika Sutta* describes it: “There is kamma to be experienced in hell, kamma to be experienced in the realm of common animals, kamma to be experienced in the realm of the hungry ghosts [*preta*], kamma to be experienced in the human world, kamma to be experienced in the world of the devas. This is called the diversity in kamma” (AN 6.63) (1997). Or, as Vasubandhu himself explains, in a more visceral manner, although the *preta* drink bile, blood and urine, this is not because the *preta* live on some other world where all rivers are polluted. It is due to *karman* that *preta* experience as fetid what we taste as water. The point being, of course, that when one experiences the world through anger, one enters the realm of hell. When one experiences the world through greed, one lives an insatiable life in the realm of the *preta*. One need not take these statements literally to grasp their meaning: samsaric

existence, and the suffering that characterizes it, is dispositional, inseparable from the habituated actions of mind and body.

This generative element of *karman*, capable of fabricating worlds, finds its most delicate expression in a distinction that is absolutely fundamental to Buddhism, namely, the non-duality that characterizes the relationship between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*. Although many sources describe this subtle relationship, its definitive presentation is found in the stanzas of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, written by the second century monk, Nāgārjuna—the only Buddhist philosopher cited by Agamben prior to the publication of *Karman*<sup>5</sup>. Nāgārjuna writes,

Whatever is the limit of *nirvāṇa*  
That is the limit of *saṃsāra*.  
There is not even the slightest difference between them,  
or even the subtlest thing  
(25.20) (Nāgārjuna 1995: 75)

In his commentary on these verses, Jay Garfield explains: “To be in samsara is to see things as they appear to deluded consciousness and to interact with them accordingly. To be in nirvana, then, is to see those things as they are—as merely empty, dependent, impermanent, and nonsubstantial, but not to be somewhere else, seeing something else”. To which he adds, a few lines later, “Nagarjuna is emphasizing that nirvana is not someplace else. It is a way of being here” (Garfield 1995: 332). In other words, *nirvāṇa* entails a shift in the way one is; an ontological transformation that somehow deactivates the demand of *saṃsāra* by rendering that demand inoperative in the very location where it exists. Realizing an enlightened state, then, is a manner of accomplishment that does not involve any kind of completion, recuperation or retrieval, but rather a new relationship to the given. “*Nirvāṇa*”, Agamben writes in the final pages of *Karman*, “is not another world that is produced when the world of aggregates has been annulled, another thing that follows the end of all things. But neither is it a nothing. It is the not-born that appears in every birth, the non-act (*akṛta*) that appears in every act (*kṛta*) in the instant . . . in which imaginations and errors conditioned by ignorance have been suspended and deactivated”. (Agamben 2018: 85)<sup>6</sup>. Drawing these principles into the space of

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of Agamben’s engagement with Nāgārjuna see DeCaroli, Steven 2012.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that Agamben’s use of the term ‘not-born’ (alongside ‘non-act’) is significant and bears an important legacy in Buddhism. Bankei Yōtaku’s (1622-1693) Zen teachings center almost entirely on the idea of the unborn (*fishō zen*). And in the *Genjōkōan* Dōgen (1200-1253) tells us that, “according to an established teaching of the Buddha Dharma, one does not say that life becomes death. Thus we speak of the ‘unborn’ (*fishō*). And it is an established Buddha-turning of the dharma wheel that death does not become life. Thus we speak of the ‘unperishing” (Dōgen 2009: 257). But what is it to say that something is unborn (*fishō*)? The Japanese *fishō* translates the Sanskrit *anutpāda*: *an-* meaning ‘not’, *utpāda* meaning ‘coming forth, or birth’. Taken together *anutpāda* simply means ‘having no origin’ and within the discourse of Buddhism the term is closely associated

his ongoing political investigation and joining them more broadly to themes that characterize his philosophical project, he concludes, “Thus, inoperativity is not another action alongside and in addition to all other actions, not another work beyond all works: It is the space . . . that is opened when the apparatuses that link human actions in the connection of means and ends, of imputation and fault, of merit and demerit, are rendered inoperative. It is, in this sense, a politics of pure means” (Agamben 2018: 85).

The concept of inoperativity, which has played an enormous role in Agamben’s reconceptualization of both ontology and political action, is here united with fundamental tenets of Buddhist practice, opening a space not only for their intersection, but for a deeper consideration of practice in the context of Agamben’s philosophy. For our purposes, however, the importance of practice emerges from the fact that it concerns action and from the standpoint of Buddhism this practice/action, properly understood, is not on the way to an accomplishment, not exerted in the interest of an achievement, not a means to an end, but remains purely practice/action as such—a commitment best exemplified in the Zen tradition, and perhaps especially in the words of Dōgen, who never tired of teaching that the essence of Buddhism is *shikantaza*, Just sitting. Just acting.

Glimpses of a comparable understanding of practice can be found in Agamben’s writings as well. Consider, for instance, his commentary in *The Use of Bodies* on what he calls ‘contemplation’—action which, in the very act of acting, dissolves the subject of action: “Contemplation is the paradigm of use”, he says, “Like use,

with *śūnyatā*, being empty of intrinsic nature. The unborn, or the not-born, does not refer to that which does not yet exist, as if things wait in the wings lined up to be born into the world. The shifting of natural elements over time create arrangements that never actually snap into existence as wholes. There is just a slow transformation which never reaches a point of transition when it is possible to say, now this is born, this has been fully actualized. But nevertheless, things *are* born. When Agamben speaks of “the not-born that appears in every birth”, the existence of birth is affirmed. In what sense? The born is that which comes into being conventionally, as a distinction made between this-and-that which appears factual. But in each case, that which is born conventionally remains unborn in a more fundamental sense—empty, impermanent and changing. In this way, the born and the unborn are aspects of the same phenomenal entity.

The same can be said, of course, of death and the idea of extinction. The realization of *śūnyatā*, which is to say, the non-essentialist view of existence in which the notion of something like completion has no place and really makes no sense. Once an essentialist ontology is replaced with an ontology of action or use, the doctrine of karmic rebirth becomes far less puzzling. After all, the principle of death as a concept is premised on the assumption that something comes to an end, but without a substantial self this notion of an ending is incomprehensible, making it perfectly reasonable to speak of the continuation of action into the future, beyond anything we might temporarily identify as a self. Death is not a loss—it is simply the rearrangement of parts. It is significant then, that Lucretius, who shares with Buddhism an ontological view that privileges action, should devote many pages of *De rerum natura* to a strenuous argument against the fear of death. To fear death, he argues, is to be taken in by the false belief that you—your conscious self—will be present after your life ends so as to experience the loss, which is no different, and no less implausible, as lamenting the non-existence of your life that preceded your birth.

contemplation does not have a subject, because in it the contemplator is completely lost and dissolved” (Agamben 2016: 63). And in an interview from 2004, conducted long before the publication of either *The Use of Bodies* or *Karman*, Agamben says something quite similar in reflecting on the practice of the self.

One way the question could be posed is: what would a practice of self be that would not be a process of subjectivation but, to the contrary, would end up only at a letting go, a practice of self that finds its identity only in a letting go of self? It is necessary to ‘stay,’ as it were, in this double movement of desubjectivation and subjectivation, between identity and nonidentity. This terrain would have to be identified, because this would be the terrain of a new biopolitics (Agamben 2004: 117).

Elsewhere, Agamben ascribes the name ‘gesture’ to this special non-subjective form of self-use, denoting a manner of action that is neither a means to an end, nor an end in itself, thereby approximating non-karmic action. Gesture is activity that, in the very manner in which it is carried out, at the same time stops itself, exposes itself, and holds itself at a distance. “This holds both for the operations of the body and for those of the mind: gesture exposes and contemplates the sensation in sensation, the thought in thought, the art in art, the speech in speech, the action in action” (Agamben 2018: 84).

There is much more to be said regarding the place of practice in Agamben’s philosophy, especially because his discussion of the topic is rather limited. But when the topic does arise, not only do we find that it aligns with certain aspects of Buddhist practice, but that alignment follows at a more basic level from a set of shared ontological commitments which, as we have seen, offer a corrective to the ontological assumptions of the West, the effects of which are visible in the institutions and procedures that surround the juridical subject. Agamben’s task in *Karman* has been to show that the edifice of Western morality and law is trapped in something like a karmic cycle, fixed within a samsaric state characterized by self-centered action joined to culpability, through which continual attempts are made to fix the damage done by the invention of the responsible subject by doubling down on the notion of free will. Criminality (*crimen*) stands at the center of this cycle, its viability dependent upon a profound ontological misunderstanding of the world, which enables culpability to be imputed to a subject that does not exist in the manner we think it does. Caught in an ongoing intensification of the ego vis-à-vis a celebration of political and economic freedom, the modern world does not recognize the trap it has set for itself. From a Buddhist perspective, to the extent we exercise capacities associated with free will and volition, we tend to reduce freedom precisely because, in doing so, we fortify the principle source of suffering. The task of exposing this dilemma stands at the center of Agamben’s onto-political project and, insofar as it overlaps with the central tenets of Buddhism, suggests a path to a very different sort of freedom, one which begins by showing how the onto-political ideals of the West, and the institutions that have emerged from them, have forged the bonds of

*saṃsāra*, exemplified by the figure of the free and responsible subject, as if these were the very means of its liberation.

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