

**ily cere-  
cahier**

**whatever & bartleby  
giorgio agamben**



ily cere- cahier 4  
parts of:

**The Coming Community**

Giorgio  
Agamben

*Translated by Michael Hardt*

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# Whatever

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THE COMING being is whatever<sup>1</sup> being. In the Scholastic enumeration of transcendentals (*quodlibet ens est unum, verum, bonum seu perfectum*—whatever entity is one, true, good, or perfect), the term that, remaining unthought in each, conditions the meaning of all the others is the adjective *quodlibet*. The common translation of this term as “whatever” in the sense of “it does not matter which, indifferently” is certainly correct, but in its form the Latin says exactly the opposite: *Quodlibet ens* is not “being, it does not matter which,” but rather “being such that it always matters.” The Latin always already contains, that is, a reference to the will (*libet*). Whatever being has an original relation to desire.

The Whatever in question here relates to singularity not in its indifference with respect to a common property (to a concept, for example: being red, being French, being Muslim), but only in its being *such as it is*. Singularity is thus freed from the false dilemma that obliges knowledge to choose between the ineffability of the individual and the intelligibility of the universal. The intelligible, according to a beautiful expression of Levi ben Gershon (Gersonides), is neither a universal nor an individual included in a series, but rather “singularity insofar as it is whatever singularity.” In this conception, such-and-such being is reclaimed from its having this or that property, which identifies it as belonging to this or that set, to this or that class (the reds, the French, the Muslims)—and it is reclaimed

not for another class nor for the simple generic absence of any belonging, but for its being-*such*, for belonging itself. Thus being-*such*, which remains constantly hidden in the condition of belonging (“there is an *x such that* it belongs to *y*”) and which is in no way a real predicate, comes to light itself: The singularity exposed as such is whatever you *want*, that is, lovable.

Love is never directed toward this or that property of the loved one (being blond, being small, being tender, being lame), but neither does it neglect the properties in favor of an insipid generality (universal love): The lover wants the loved one *with all of its predicates*, its being such as it is. The lover desires the *as* only insofar as it is *such*—this is the lover’s particular fetishism. Thus, whatever singularity (the Lovable) is never the intelligence of some thing, of this or that quality or essence, but only the intelligence of an intelligibility. The movement Plato describes as erotic anamnesis is the movement that transports the object not toward another thing or another place, but toward its own taking-place—toward the Idea.

# Bartleby

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KANT DEFINES the schema of possibility as “the determination of the representation of a thing in whatever time.” It seems that the form of the *whatever*, an irreducible *quodlibet*-like character, inheres in potentiality and possibility, insofar as they are distinct from reality. But what potentiality are we dealing with here? And what does “whatever” mean in this context?

Of the two modes in which, according to Aristotle, every potentiality is articulated, the decisive one is that which the philosopher calls “the potentiality to not-be” (*dynamis me einai*) or also impotence (*adynamia*). For if it is true that whatever being always has a potential character, it is equally certain that it is not capable of only this or that specific act, nor is it therefore simply incapable, lacking in power, nor even less is it indifferently capable of everything, all-powerful: The being that is properly whatever is able to not-be; it is capable of its own impotence.

Everything rests here on the mode in which the passage from potentiality to act comes about. The symmetry between the potentiality to be and the potentiality to not-be is, in effect, only apparent. In the potentiality to be, potentiality has as its object a certain act, in the sense that for it *energein*, being-in-act, can only mean passing to a determinate activity (this is why Schelling defines the potentiality that cannot not pass into action as *blind*); as for the potentiality to not-be, on the other hand, the act can never consist of a simple transition *de potentia ad actum*: It is, in

other words, a potentiality that has as its object potentiality itself, a *potentia potentiae*.

Only a power that is capable of both power and impotence, then, is the supreme power. If every power is equally the power to be and the power to not-be, the passage to action can only come about by transporting (Aristotle says “saving”) in the act its own power to not-be. This means that, even though every pianist necessarily has the potential to play and the potential to not-play, Glenn Gould is, however, the only one who can *not* not-play, and, directing his potentiality not only to the act but to his own impotence, he plays, so to speak, with his potential to not-play. While his ability simply negates and abandons his potential to not-play, his mastery conserves and exercises in the act not his potential to play (this is the position of irony that affirms the superiority of the positive potentiality over the act), but rather his potential to not-play.

In *De anima* Aristotle articulates this theory in absolute terms with respect to the supreme theme of metaphysics. If thought were in fact only the potentiality to think this or that intelligibility, he argues, it would always already have passed through to the act and it would remain necessarily inferior to its own object. But thought, in its essence, is pure potentiality; in other words, it is also the potentiality to not think, and, as such, as possible or material intellect, Aristotle compares it to a writing

tablet on which nothing is written. (This is the celebrated image that the Latin translators render with the expression *tabula rasa*, even if, as the ancient commentators noted, one should speak rather of a *rasum tabulae*, that is, of the layer of wax covering the tablet that the stylus engraves.)

Thanks to this potentiality to not-think, thought can turn back to itself (to its pure potentiality) and be, at its apex, the thought of thought. What it thinks here, however, is not an object, a being-in-act, but that layer of wax, that *rasum tabulae* that is nothing but its own passivity, its own pure potentiality (to not-think): In the potentiality that thinks itself, action and passion coincide and the writing tablet writes by itself or, rather, writes its own passivity.

The perfect act of writing comes not from a power to write, but from an impotence that turns back on itself and in this way comes to itself as a pure act (which Aristotle calls agent intellect). This is why in the Arab tradition agent intellect has the form of an angel whose name is *Qalam*, Pen, and its place is an unfathomable potentiality. Bartleby, a scribe who does not simply cease writing but “prefers not to,” is the extreme image of this angel that writes nothing but its potentiality to not-write.



# **Translator's Notes**

1. Whatever (*qualunque*). This adjective-pronoun has many uses in Italian that are rather awkward in English. The thematic centrality of the term, however, has required that we preserve its position every time it occurs in the text. The corresponding French term (*quelconque*) has a resonance in the work of other contemporary philosophers, such as Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou, that unfortunately may be lost on English readers because various translations have rendered it differently, as “particular” in some cases and “general” in others. As Agamben makes clear, however, “whatever” (*qualunque* or *quelconque*) refers precisely to that which is neither par-

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notes:



*ily cere- cahiers* is a collection of texts (fragments). it is a branch of the collective *it is part of an ensemble*. these texts function as starting points for dialogues within our practice. we also love to share them with guests and visitors of our projects.

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