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Comedy of the human being

Introduction

The question of what a human being is, is one of the central questions in philosophy. How we answer this question has consequences for ethics. The main problem with defining the human being may be that all the definitions are made by using the rational capacity of human beings, which is inseparable from the use of language. When we define the human being, and then think ourselves as human beings, there is always a being that defines itself by differentiating itself from itself. Giorgio Agamben's philosophy takes this difference as a starting point from which to think humanity. As we may see, in this differentiating from itself, there is already a possibility of comicality at hand. In this article, I will focus on the aspects of Agamben's philosophy that show the comicality of the human being. I will propose that the concepts of *style*, *habit* and *mannerism* are essential in defining human comicality.

Agamben's philosophy appears to be motivated by the aim of finding such ways of thinking human existence that would lead to happiness. One of the themes that Agamben presents as a source for such ways of thought is comedy. When we read Agamben's works and try to follow his argument, there appears to be a risk that if we could think of humanity in the ways that would lead to happiness, we would also lose humanity itself. This is because Agamben aims to conceive of a human being without making a difference between a living being and a human being. If we do not follow his thought carefully, we could easily end up thinking of humans as animals and of happiness as a return to a paradisiacal state. This is the reason why I propose that the ways of thinking a human being that Agamben bases on the discussion of comedy and comicality can both lead to happiness and preserve the humanity of a human being. This is because comicality creates happiness in moments that are like breaches in the historical 'story' enacted in the theatre of the human world, instead of leading to the eternal happiness beyond history and time.

The difference between the idea of human comicality and Agamben's

other conceptions concerning the human being, can be considered in relation to his discussion of style and mannerism. Whereas style is a concept by which it is possible to think a singular life, without making a difference between life and its form – because everyone who lives a bodily life has a unique style – mannerism is a concept that reveals a living being's resistance to human habits. According to Agamben, mannerism results from the resistance that is inherent in the human bodily being. Therefore, mannerism makes apparent the inappropriability of all human habits to a living being. When this inappropriability is intentionally highlighted by exaggerating mannerisms, the human being and human existence appear as comical.

In the following, I will firstly examine the relationship between happiness and comedy in Agamben's philosophy as well as the concepts of style and mannerism as modes of human existence. After that, I will consider the theme of comedy in Agamben's philosophy as a means of thinking human subjectivity and human being in such a way that the power determined articulation between a living being and a human being is dismantled. Finally, I will provide examples of comic representations and analyse their comicality using concepts from Agamben's philosophy.

Happiness and comedy, style and mannerism

Following Agamben's argument, to find happiness we should deactivate the Western production of the conception of humanity, which Agamben calls the anthropological machine (Agamben 2004, p. 37). Another term that Agamben uses to define Western ontology is biopolitics, originally introduced by Michel Foucault (Agamben 1998, p. 6). Both biopolitics and the anthropological machine presuppose a functioning power that constitutes human communities and societies, and determines how we define humanity. Our conceptions of human life and human rights depend on how we define human beings. According to Agamben (2000, pp. 4-6), it is possible to define a human being, because there is a power that bases itself on life, separates itself from it and makes life as its object. This power is there because of the human potentiality to make a difference between thought and its object. This difference can be made because there is language that makes thoughts communicable (see Agamben 1991, pp. 107-108). Agamben's central argument is that language precedes every human being. Human beings must learn how to use language to communicate. Therefore, language already exists as a structure of power that determines what and how we think, and above all, how thoughts can be communicated.

Learning how to use language means learning how to speak. When a human being speaks, he or she makes him- or herself as a subject of

language (Agamben 2007, pp. 52-55). Being able to speak is also being able to make a difference between one's being and how this being is conceived in language and language-determined forms of thinking. This is to say that a human being makes in him- or herself a difference between life and how the life is conceived as human life and how a living being is conceived as a human being. In definitions of a human being, there is always supposed a bare living being (see Agamben 2004, p. 38) that is then defined as human if it has the essential traits and abilities that make it a human being and that guarantee to it the right to the human life. In the modern world, this kind of biopolitical ontology can lead not so much to the radical dehumanisation of some people but rather to their exclusion from the protection of law and human rights (see Agamben 2000, p. 8). Typically, this is justified by the alleged protection of life in the community or in the society at large.

In relation to the structures of power that determine our social life and our rights and obligations in it, we are perhaps accustomed to thinking of ourselves as more or less sovereign subjects who can be held responsible for our actions and even for our personhood. In so far as we are rational beings, i.e., we are able to think in the ways that can be communicated, we can adapt our actions and characteristic traits to the requirements and obligations of current power structures to save and maintain our right to be considered as human beings. If we fail to do that, whether for the reason of sickness, getting old, an accident, a natural catastrophe or personal "weaknesses", we are in danger of becoming reduced to bare life. This is the reason why Agamben looks for new ways of thinking humanity in such a way that it would not be possible to separate human being from living being, and human life from bare life.

One way to avoid the difference between the life of a singular human being and the human life is to make no distinction between *how* and *what* a human being is. The question of what a human being is, requires an ontological definition; for example, *zoon logon echon* (rational animal) or *zoon politikon* (political animal). In contrast, the question of how a human being is brings to the fore the myriad habits of human beings, as well as the unique style of each individual in their use of these habits as part of their way of life. Style is a concept that Agamben uses to consider life as inseparable from its form (Agamben 2016, p. 233). Following Agamben's argumentation, style emerges from a unique body that cannot be fully appropriated by an individual who uses it by using the habits he or she has learnt. The same applies to the use of language. Like the body, language is an intimate thing that we cannot fully appropriate, but when we use it, we do so in our unique style (ivi, pp. 82-87). Style is the how of a unique human being is, and therefore, in style, there is no difference between a living being and a human being.

Agamben speaks of mannerism as the opposite pole of style (Agamben 2016, p. 87). On the other hand, it seems that mannerism is the same thing as style, but in mannerism the inappropriability of the body, as well as the inappropriability of habits and ways of using language are highlighted. When someone has style, we can get the impression that he or she really masters the habits he or she uses. He or she appears to have made the habits as his or her own, or as if they were natural to him or her. Perhaps this kind of appearance also justifies the claim that in style life and its form are inseparable. Nevertheless, Agamben proposes that style can be defined as *disappropriating appropriation*, or *forgetting oneself in the proper* (Agamben 2019, p. 45). This is to say that when someone has style, he or she does not concern him- or herself with the inappropriability of the body or language nor with the ways of using them. He or she only uses them in the ways he or she has learnt to use them and forgets him- or herself in this use. In some of his texts, Agamben refers to this kind of use as happiness (e.g., Agamben 1993, p. 29). On the other hand, he gives similar statements about mannerism, which he defines as *appropriating disappropriation* or *presenting oneself in the improper* (Agamben 2019, p. 45). It may be easy to see the comic potential of mannerism, especially when it is used intentionally. When it is not intentional, however, it falls into the category of style, as it is then “disappropriating appropriation”; that is, acting as if the habits were natural and therefore proper to their user.

Considering Agamben’s philosophy as a whole, mannerism appears to be one of the ways of resisting the structures of power that determine the habits and how to use them properly. Mannerism shows the inappropriability of habits and language to human beings as living beings. There is always a living being with a clumsy body, stuttering, strange intonations, and missed words. Mannerism can also make us to see ourselves and others as comic characters. In mannerism, there is a difference between a living being and the way in which it attempts to present itself as a human being. This presentation can be seen as a character, like a comic mask – a non-living figure that the living being tries to play. According to my interpretation, the human comicality arises when the difference between a living being and the character it is trying to play becomes apparent. Following Agamben’s thought, this kind of comicality can be defined as an impossibility of speaking, impossibility of acting and impossibility of living. These are impossibilities for a living being. Conversely, speaking and acting are possible for the non-living, mask-like characters that act in the theatre of power. The question remains as to whether these impossibilities are comical and, if so, how. Agamben seems to suggest in the book *Pulcinella* that if one accepts these impossibilities, forgets them, and acts as if they were one’s own, there can be found happiness, an example of

which is Pulcinella (Agamben 2018, p. 115). On the other hand, I argue that comicality arises not simply from accepting and forgetting these impossibilities, but from highlighting them. Agamben also seems to suggest that the comical highlighting of these impossibilities is a way of accepting and forgetting them (e.g., Agamben 2018, pp. 88-89).

In his essay, *What is the Act of Creation?* (Agamben 2019, p. 21), Agamben argues that mannerism is a source of creation. He states that every authentic creative process is suspended between habit and inspiration. Habit is a skill that can be more or less mastered by a creative artist, an actor, or a poet. However, in the creative act, there is also a resistance to the use of habit, which stems from inspiration. The origin of inspiration lies in the impotentiality of the living being, that is, in the inappropriability of the habit or the non-mastering of it. The urge to create comes from the improper, habit, in the use of which a living being can forget itself and feel happiness. However, the condition of the creative act, of creating something new and personal, is the resistance to this habit, which can be defined as presenting or remembering oneself in the improper – the definition of mannerism. This is another kind of happiness, which may also be defined as comical.

It may be a common conception that a person's character is defined by his or her individual style and mannerisms, or that these traits are what we use to recognise people we know. For example, we can recognise an acquaintance from afar by their style of gait. In this respect, it could be argued that style makes a person appear authentic and inseparable from their true self, making them unique. Mannerisms, on the other hand, make a character appear artificial, like a comic mask that a living being uses or is forced to use to play their role in society. Based on Agamben's philosophy we must ask whether we can ever be authentic? According to Agamben, we can have a voice only if we don't speak, i.e., when we do not make ourselves as subjects of language. Similarly, we can have an authentic form of life when we are neither acting nor thinking, but perhaps only contemplating our potentiality to act and think (see Agamben 2016, pp. 277-278). But when we interact with other people, we present ourselves as characters with recognizable traits, habits and ways of speaking to make ourselves recognized as persons. Inappropriate habits, including ways of communicating, expropriate us, which causes an urge to speak and act. The singular living being in us resists this, which manifests as mannerism (ivi, p. 87). According to Agamben's philosophy, the combination of improper habits and mannerism is the most proper that we have. Performing the mask is the closest to the living being. This is also the happiness of Pulcinella, who forgets his mask, by both renouncing it and making it as his own.

Agamben seems to suggest that accepting one's character as a mask that cannot be lived, accepting acting as the use of improper habits, and

accepting language as not our proper voice, leads to happiness. On the other hand, he claims that to believe that we are the character, by which we are recognized as human beings, is a phantasm (Agamben 2018, p. 107). It could also be argued that identifying with our character and believing that we can truly live our life as that character, is the core of human comicality. This idea is supported by Alenka Zupančič's (2008, p. 32) note that a poor chap who thinks he is a king is simply pathetic, whereas a king who believes that he really is a king is comical. A non-comical, and perhaps happy, king might be one who accepts that he is merely performing the role of king in the theatre of the power, doing so by using the habits of a king in his own unique style that arises from his individual bodily being. A ridiculous king might be one who assimilates himself as a living being with the character of the king, failing to notice that his bodily being resists the habits of the king and making them appear as mannerisms. A comical king, a king who is intentionally presented as such, is a comic character in whom the difference between a living being and the character he or she is playing becomes apparent.

Comedy in Agamben's philosophy

The theme of comedy has appeared in Agamben's philosophy every now and then, starting with an early essay, *Comedy* (orig. 1978) and receiving its most extensive treatment in the book *Pulcinella* (orig. 2015). As we have noted, Agamben's philosophical project is motivated by the aim of finding ways of conceiving of humanity that would lead to happiness. The search for "happy endings" is one reason why Agamben's philosophy has been said to have a comical attunement (see Prozorov 2014, p. 3). This does not mean that Agamben's writing style is comical, nor that he employs techniques to create comical effects. Rather, it is just the search for happiness that justifies defining Agamben's thought as comical. This definition is supported by the essay *Comedy*, in which Agamben asks why Dante named his poetic project *La Divina Commedia* "comedy" and concludes that it is because Dante prioritised the material and content of the poetic representation over stylistic aspects. In terms of content, comedy is characterised by a foul beginning and a happy ending, in opposition to tragedy, which has an admirable beginning and a terrible ending. (Agamben 1999a, pp. 4-6.)

In the essay *Comedy*, the main question is how to think about the question of guilt. In tragedy, the protagonist is condemned as guilty because of his or her actions. The tragic hero acts according to his or her nature, so he or she is subjectively innocent, yet condemned by the laws of the community as objectively guilty. A comic protagonist,

in turn, is condemned as guilty because of actions that are caused by his or her character, yet his or her nature remains innocent. Agamben refers to tragic guilt as “natural guilt”, which implies that human beings are conceived as guilty by nature. The biblical story of the Fall of Man is an example of this, which is to say that human existence would be marked by tragic guilt. Comic guilt, by contrast, is personal guilt because there only the character of a human being is condemned, while the human being as a living being remains innocent. The passion of Christ transforms tragic guilt of man to personal guilt. According to Agamben, this is also anti-tragic, because there is not taking place the guilt of the just, as in tragedy, but the justification of the guilty. (Agamben 1999a, pp. 8-9.) Anti-tragic or comic guilt requires a distinction between a person and human nature. This is to say that a person is seen as a set of individual properties that are added to human nature and that are like a theatrical mask through which a human being plays his or her role in the community and is judged only as that person, while human nature remains innocent. Dante’s *La Divina Commedia* takes its title from this anti-tragic distance between the actor and the person – the division between innocent human nature and guilty personhood (ivi, p. 13).

To combine the ideas that Dante’s *Commedia* is a comedy because of the happy ending and because it pictures the justification of personal guilt, I suggest that the happy ending is achieved by conceiving human existence as a difference between an innocent, natural being and a guilty person. This is to say that to find a happy ending to the tragedies of world history in which we live, we can try to transform them into comedies in which we play characters, whose power-determined roles are judged by power-determined laws (see Agamben 1999a, p. 13). Happy endings achieved in this way do not bring about the complete end of history. Rather, they can be seen as momentary endings of history, or fleeting breaks and escapes from the story produced by the structures of power (see Agamben 2018, p. 43).

In his earlier philosophy, Agamben presents the ideas of the end of time and history from the perspective of finding a happy ending and the possibility of a happy life. At the first sight, Agamben’s suggestions to think a human being in such a way that there would be no difference between a living being and a human being, seem to be a kind of return to the paradisiacal state or entering to the messianic time. Agamben uses both these Judaeo-Christian concepts in his attempts to undermine the Western biopolitical ontology. However, in Agamben’s philosophy, messianic time is the time that is always coming, and therefore, the end of time is not eternity but an unending occurrence of ends of time (Agamben 2005, pp. 63-68). He also suggests that

we should not presuppose a paradisiacal state as the original state of humanity, from which we have fallen since to be a human being is to stay between the loss of the inseparability of being and humanity and the renewal of this inseparability (Agamben 2020, p. 149). Although Agamben repeatedly proposes that the experience of being somewhere in between living being and human being, or forgetting this division leads to happiness, these experiences seem to be momentary and can be achieved by exploring the comicality of human being. In the book *Pulcinella*, Agamben uses the figure of Pulcinella, a comic character, as an example of fleeing the power-determined story and getting beyond history. As Agamben (2018, p. 107) states, Pulcinella is beyond tragedy and comedy. This is because he happily forgets his being a mask, and the impossibility to live a mask.

Pulcinella seems to be a figure in which human life and the natural life are inextricably linked. This comic servant character from classical *commedia dell'arte* theatre looks half chicken, half human. Pulcinella is a recurring type, a recognizable mask that can play any role in any comedy. There is no “real” face of Pulcinella behind his mask. Not having a face is an image of Pulcinella’s full acceptance of being a character without trying to take ownership of it. He is not responsible for his character, because there is no transcendental consciousness that the Western ontology has supposed as a basis of human subjectivity. In Pulcinella, there is no distinction between the responsible consciousness and the outer persona. There is only the happiness of being in contact with the body, by using it according to habits, and the happiness of using language to communicate. (Agamben 2018, pp. 114-117.)

Agamben also uses Pulcinella as an example of avoiding the phantasm of living one’s character. Instead of trying to live his character, Pulcinella simply forgets it: “Pulcinella escapes both: character, because he gives up his face for a mask; phantasm, because he entrusts himself only to his childlike forgetfulness” (Agamben 2018, p. 107). This statement implies that Pulcinella is not comical in such a way that he would believe that he really is the character he plays. In fact, Agamben lets us understand that Pulcinella is beyond both comedy and tragedy just because he is a “ceremonious farewell of every character” (*ibid.*). This enables him to simply live the unlive without either assuming it as a destiny or comically imitating it (*ibid.*). This also means that Pulcinella lives a life that is beyond any form of life determined by the power.

This kind of life seems to be, once again, an example of a happiness in which the human being is lost, and there is an animal-human hybrid that lives from one moment to the next, by simply enjoying its body:

Pulcinella's body is no longer, as in Western metaphysics, the animal presupposed to the human. He breaks the false articulation between the simply living being and the human, between the body and logos. The anthropological machine of the West is jammed. This is why his body – at once cheerful and deformed, neither fully human nor truly animal – is so difficult to define. Pulcinella is nothing other than the delight that a body receives from its being in contact with itself and with other bodies – nothing other than a certain use of bodies. (Agamben 2018, p. 117.)

Yet again, this kind of being is not a return to the paradisiacal state but seems to require certain discipline and skill:

[C]ontact with Pulcinella entails transformation of the body. It is not an Edenic or paradisiacal body once lost and now recovered. It is an original that is reached with discipline and skill (*arte*) only later as a 'clumsiness' or awkwardness. [...] And it is precisely this body skillfully made clumsy that gets a laugh. (Agamben 2018, pp. 88-89.)

These statements seem to imply that, to reach the Pulcinella-like state in which it is possible to make no difference between living and being a character, one must use comic skills to make one's body clumsy. I would suggest that this is can also be done intentionally, by using mannerisms; that is, presenting oneself in the improper or appropriating disappropriation. In doing so, the body appears as a body that cannot be appropriated either. In the comical deformation the human body becomes "what it could never not be: not my or your body, but only a body" (Agamben 2018, p. 89). It is an *inappropriate* that is the source of comic mannerism. And it is this very mannerism in which the biopolitical articulations between a living being and a human being are broken.

Pulcinella is also an example of the impossibility of saying and the impossibility of acting. In his earlier philosophy, Agamben speaks about human *infancy* and human *impotentiality* that can be seen as non-comical approaches to those impossibilities that define human existence.

Infancy is a concept that denotes a human being's relationship to the communicative use of language. *Impotentiality* denotes a human being's relationship to the ways of acting he or she has learnt. *Infancy* signifies the innate human ability to learn to use language (Agamben 2007, p. 65). However, since language exists before a human being who must learn to speak (*ibid.*), it is not the proper voice of an individual and in speaking a unique living being remains silent. The speaker makes him- or herself the subject of language, who bears witness to a being that always falls beyond language (Agamben 1999b, pp. 116-117, p. 121).

Impotentiality is based on the innate human potentiality to learn different skills. Since a human beings have no innate skills, they always

have the *potential not to* act according to them (e.g., Agamben 2014). In Agamben's thought, this *potential not to* act is the sense of *impotentiality*: it is not a simple incapability but a potentiality to remain in a state of potentiality. This impotentiality is there just because human beings have no innate skills that they necessarily actualize but only skills that they acquire as potentialities. Impotentiality is also a way to conceive the aforementioned inappropriability. Although a human being has learnt skills and is potential to use them, the skills, which can also be termed habits, are always inappropriable to him or her because he or she has not been born with them. Human impotentiality can also be considered by using the concept of *gesture*. Agamben argues that all human action, including speech, can be considered gestures, i.e., forms of movement that appear when a person uses his or her body. When seen as gestures, human action becomes a medium that uses the human body as its material basis. (See Agamben 2000, pp. 58-59.)

In *Pulcinella*, *infancy* and *impotentiality* are turned to straightforward impossibilities. *Infancy* has become an impossibility of saying. Whereas the concepts of *infancy* and *testimony* highlight the disruptive desubjectification of a human being, which takes place when a speaker makes him- or herself as a subject of language, the impossibility of speaking is comical: "To show, within language, an impossibility of communication and to show that it is funny – this is the essence of comedy" (Agamben 2018, p. 1). Pulcinella never understands what is said to him in the sense intended by the speaker, and thus language fails to serve communication; it only provokes laughter (ivi, p. 17). Pulcinella typically has a squeaky voice and a strong, almost incomprehensible Neapolitan dialect (ivi, p. 45). It can be argued that the tone of his voice and his dialect are the mannerisms that result from Pulcinella's presenting himself in the improper that is the language. What makes Pulcinella's speech his own voice is his way of using it in his own way. He uses it to communicate but the communication fails because he understands the language according to his own thoughts.

Agamben continues his discussion on comedy by passing from the consideration of language to that of human action in general. He states: "The comic is not only an impossibility of saying exposed as such in language but also an impossibility of acting exposed in gesture" (Agamben 2018, p. 65). He also states that a *commedia dell'arte* mask like that of Pulcinella gives way to the expression of the body and its gestures (ivi, p. 84). In Pulcinella the impossibility of acting is justified by argumentation that all the actions of the character, i.e. all the actions of a comic mask, do not have their origin in the will of the living being who could then be held responsible for its actions. As we have seen, if actions were conceived as originating from the nature of an individual being, there would be a risk of tragic guilt if they happened to be against the law of the community. But when the action is

only the action of a *character* (gr. *ethos*), which also determines his or her *form of life* (gr. *ethos*) (see Agamben 2018, p. 104) that which is condemned by the law is the character, not the living being. The living being cannot act because it is only performing the way of life of its character.

This already implies the justification for the argument about the impossibility of living a character. A living being can only imitate its character and repeat the character's actions as its form of life (see *ibid.*). In the impossibility of living, there is no life that is not separated from its form. On the contrary, there is a stubborn dwelling of a living being in the place of its condemned character. This is the comicality of the impossibility of living in which there is a difference between a form of life and a living being but what makes this difference comical is the innocence and happiness of that being, who cannot live its character but accepts it and makes it as its own face, and forgets it, like Pulcinella.

The comicality of the impossibility of living a character

The impossibilities of speaking, acting and living can be made apparent by using techniques of comic representation. In the following I will focus on the impossibility of living a character and techniques of its representation by providing examples from Molière's comedies and from celebrity and specialist interviews by Ali G, a comic character played by Sacha Baron Cohen.

One technique for showing the impossibility of living a character is to interrupt the performance of a character, thus making a character appear without his or her usual ways of acting that constitute his or her character. The effect on the audience is the experience of the difference between a living being and his or her character. According to the theory of superiority, we laugh at the characters who are lower than ourselves. For example, in classical character comedies, we laugh at the characters who are ruled by their vices and weaknesses, and who fail to recognise what would be proper ways of acting and speaking in their social conditions. We do not laugh at the social power relations that determine the roles and the proper ways of acting. But, when there is an interruption of the performance of a ridiculous character, there appears a gap between a living being and his or her character. I propose that there appears also a living being who cannot live his or her character and the character appears as a power-determined construction, a form of life that is inappropriate for a living being who nevertheless aims to live it, and in so doing lets his or her character be judged by the norms and laws of the community.

In comedy, or in real life, the difference between a living being and his or her character can become apparent when the characterising ac-

tion of a person is interrupted or rendered impossible. For example, in Molière's comedies *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (1670) and *Le Malade imaginaire* (1673), the protagonists' character turns impossible for them to live when their normal actions are interrupted by a carnivalesque ceremony, in which their aims that are against social norms and social reason, are surprisingly fulfilled, albeit in a topsy-turvy reality. In these ceremonies, the comic protagonists, a bourgeois and a hypochondriac, appear as living beings, whose characters are condemned as ridiculous in the social reality because of their irrational aims. On the other hand, the protagonists now appear as "ridiculous kings", who believe that they are now really living their new character, whether it is a Turkish nobleman or a doctor. However, both carnivalesque ceremonies are presented as theatre within theatre. This is to say that the acts of ennoblement and doctoral promotion are turned to gestures that do not produce the ends that they are determined to produce in the actual world, in the theatre of real power structures. Therefore, it can be argued that there appears a happy living being in the place of the protagonist's former character, the one he cannot live. He cannot live his new character either, because it is not "real", but only like a new mask in his own private theatre.

In real life, the moments when attempts to live a character are interrupted can be surprising situations or encounters. They can be irritating, frightening, or even tragic. But usually, they can be seen in the comical light, as situation-based comedy, at least, when one does not feel humiliated. To experience the comicality of momentarily losing one's character and appearing as a living being, requires seeing oneself as playing a social role but not fully identifying oneself with that role. In the contemporary comic performances, the interviews of Ali G, played by the actor Sacha Baron Cohen, we can see both persons who assimilate themselves with their social roles and persons who can differentiate themselves from the characters whom Ali G interviews. To the audience, both kinds of interviews appear amusing but for different reasons. If the interviewees take their role too seriously and assimilate themselves with it, they appear as living beings who try to live their character but appear as rigid masks who repeat the replies and actions that are part of their usual social role. Their mannerisms are highlighted, and with that, the inappropriability of their characters for themselves as living beings. Alternatively, if the interviewees are puzzled or amused when they encounter such an ignorant interviewer as Ali G, without knowing that he is not a real person, the skilfully created and performed mannerisms of Ali G are highlighted. The interviewees may also become aware of their own mannerisms, and thus also of their own character, that they are supposed to perform. They may even experience an impossibility to perform their character because the unexpected behaviour, ignorant and inappropriate ques-

tions of the interviewer hinder them from acting according to their accustomed habits. They may feel themselves as suddenly separated from their characters and revealed as bare living beings. Yet they may try to find appropriate ways to manage the situation without completely losing their “masks”. The audience may be fascinated and amused by this ‘masquerade’ in which there is a tension between a living being and his or her mask and a tangible risk of failing to perform that mask. If there is a happiness in this masquerade, it is found in accepting one’s mannerisms and presenting oneself in them. This is to accept that there is no authentic self but only a being who presents him- or herself by using the habits of his or her character and exposing their inappropriability in his or her mannerism.

Conclusion

In this article, I discussed the meaning of comedy in Agamben’s philosophy as a means to think the human being in a way that would enable happiness, and that would dismantle the Western biopolitical separations between life and human life, and between a living being and a human being. I proposed that conceiving human beings as comic characters, who play their roles in the theatre of the human world, conducted by the structures of power, is a way to find happiness without losing humanity. The happiness that is found in this way occurs in the moments in which we accept our characters and their ways of life, make them our own by renouncing our presupposed responsibility for their being and action. In these moments, we accept that we are neither those characters nor exist somewhere beyond them. To make those characters and their forms of life as our own is to reflect their inappropriability to us by happily presenting ourselves through our personal mannerisms.

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La commedia dell'esistenza umana

L'esistenza umana può essere concepita come l'interpretazione di un personaggio comico nel «teatro» del mondo umano, diretto dalle strutture del potere. Questa è una delle proposte di Giorgio Agamben per pensare l'umanità senza operare una distinzione tra essere umano ed essere vivente. Nel presente articolo, esamino la riflessione di Agamben sulla commedia alla luce dei suoi concetti di stile e manierismo. Propongo che, in particolare nel manierismo, che è l'opposto dello stile, vengano enfatizzate la potenzialità e l'impotenzialità umane. Il manierismo deriva dalla resistenza di un essere individuale al proprio personaggio e alle azioni di quest'ultimo, che rimangono sempre inappropriabili per quell'essere. Tuttavia, il gioco deliberato e autoriflessivo di un personaggio è il punto di indifferenza tra un essere vivente e un essere umano. Ciò può anche essere visto sia come la fonte della commedia sia come la comicità dell'esistenza umana.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Agamben, commedia, essere umano, personaggio, manierismo

Comedy of the human being

Human existence can be conceived as playing a comic character in the "theatre" of the human world, which is directed by the structures of power. This is one of Giorgio Agamben's suggestions for thinking about humanity without making a difference between a human being and a living being. In the article, I examine Agamben's discussion of comedy in light of his concepts of style and mannerism. I propose that particularly in mannerism, which is the opposite of style, human potentiality and impotentiality are emphasised. Mannerism stems from an individual being's resistance to his or her character and to the character's actions, which always remain inappropriable to that being. However, the deliberate and self-reflective play of a character is the point of indifference between a living being and a human being. This can also be seen as both the source of comedy and the comicality of human existence.

KEYWORDS: Agamben, comedy, human being, character, mannerism