

St. Paul among the Philosophers



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Paul's Notion of *Dunamis*: Between the Possible and the Impossible

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Paul's writings on divine *dunamis* draw from the biblical message that what is impossible for us is possible for God. In various letters to the Corinthians and Romans, Paul invokes the transformative character of the possibilizing power of the Spirit (*dunamis pneumatos*). The radical nature of this message, I submit, lies in reversing the ontological *dunamis* of power in favor of an eschatological *dunamis* of possibility. This reversal is expressed in Paul's startling claim in 2 Corinthians 12:9 that "strength accomplishes itself in weakness." The *dunamis* announced by Christianity inverts, says Paul, the logic of worldly dominion and empire by liberating and redeeming the "least of creatures" (*elachistos*). "I came among you in weakness," as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:4, "in fear and great trembling, and what I spoke and proclaimed was not meant to convince by philosophical argument but to demonstrate the convincing power of the Spirit [*pneuma tes dunameos*], so that your faith should depend not on human wisdom but on the power of God [*dunamis theou*]." As Gerhard Kittel suggests in the *Dictionary of the New Testament*, this power of God is to be understood as the "divine possible" which "expresses itself as the support or gift of the Spirit which manifests itself in the *personal rapport* between Christ and man . . . accessible through faith."¹

Paul construes this *dunamis* accordingly as a divine call to become children of God. He sees it as ushering in a new concept of natality and filiality which understands progeny as eschatological rather than merely biological or tribal, as procreation from the future rather than causal generation from the past. As such, it points beyond divisions between Jew and gentile, Greek and non-Greek, Athens and Jerusalem to a new universal kingdom which includes each human creature as a son or daughter of the returning God. No

longer mere offspring of archaic ancestors or demi-gods, the faithful are now invited to become descendants of a future still to come, strangers reborn as neighbors in the Word, adopted children of the *deus adventurus*—the God of the Possible.²

The Messianic Possible

The Pauline notion of messianic possibility is prefigured in several scriptural passages. In Mark 10, for example, we are told that while entry to God's kingdom seems impossible for humans, all things are made possible by God: "For humans it is impossible but not for God; because for God everything is possible" (*panta gar dunata para to theo*) (Mk 10:27). In a similar vein, we are told in St. John's prologue that our ability to become sons of God in the kingdom is made possible by Christ: "Light shone in darkness and to all who received it was given the possibility (*dunamis*) to become sons of God." The term *dunamis* is crucial and can be translated either as power or possibility—a semantic ambivalence to which we shall return below. But perhaps the most dramatic instance of the term is found in the Annunciation scene where Mary is told by the angel that the *dunamis* of God will overshadow her and she will bear the son of God, "for nothing is impossible [*a-dunaton*] with God" (Lk 1).

In all these examples, divinity—as Father, Son, or Spirit—is described as a possibilizing of divine love in the order of human history where it would otherwise have been impossible. The divine reveals itself here as the possibility of the kingdom or as the *impossibility of impossibility*. This is a *deus capax* who in turn calls out to the *homo capax* of history in order to be made flesh, again and again—each moment we confront the face of the other, welcome the stranger, open ourselves to the incoming of the infinite in and through the finite here and now. A capacitating God who is capable of all things cannot actually be or become incarnate until we say yes.

Paul is clearly inspired by the early Christian idioms of eschatological promise. These figures almost invariably refer to a God of "small things," to borrow from the wonderful title of Arundhati Roy's novel. Not only do we have the association of the kingdom with the vulnerable openness and trust of little children, as in the Matthew 10 passage cited above, but we also have the images of the yeast in the flour (Lk 13), the tiny pearl of invaluable price (Mt 13), and perhaps most suggestive of all, the mustard seed (Mt 4)—a minuscule grain that blooms and flourishes into a capacious tree. T

kingdom of God, this last text tells us, is “like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade.”

I am tempted to read Paul’s eschatological reading of *dunamis*—as the last, least, or littlest of things—as a *micro-eschatology* to the extent that it resists the standard macro-eschatology of the kingdom as emblem of sovereignty, omnipotence, and ecclesiastical triumph. Crucial here are the frequent references in the Gospel accounts to the judgment of the kingdom being related to how we respond in history, here and now, to the “least of these” (*elachistos*) (e.g., Mt 25:40). The loving renunciation of absolute power by Christ’s emptying of the Godhead (*kenosis*) to assume the most vulnerable form of humanity (a naked infant repudiated by the world) is echoed by the eschatological reminder that it is easier for the defenseless and powerless to enter the kingdom than the rich and mighty. And I think it is telling—as Dostoyevsky reminds us in the Grand Inquisitor episode of the *Brothers Karamazov*—that the greatest temptation Christ must overcome, after his forty days in the desert, is the will to become master and possessor of the universe. This is a temptation he faces again and again right up to his transfiguration on Mount Tabor when his disciples want to apotheosize and crown him by building a cult temple there on the mountain (Lk 9). Instead, Christ proceeds to a second kenotic act of giving, refusing the short route to immediate triumph and embracing the *via crucis* that demonstrates what it means for the seed to die before it is reborn as a flowering tree which hosts all living creatures. As king, he enters Jerusalem not with conquering armies but “seated upon an ass’s colt” (John 12). He upturns the inherited hierarchies of force, fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy that he would bring justice to the world, not by “shouting aloud in the street” but as a “bruised reed that shall not break, a smoldering wick that shall not quench” (Isa 42:1–4).

But in addition to these *spatial* metaphors of the kingdom exemplified by little things—yeast, a mustard seed, a pearl, a reed, an infant, the “least of these”—a hermeneutic poetics of the kingdom might also look to the *temporal* figures of eschatology which Paul’s notion of messianic time foregrounds. These invariably take the form of a certain *achronicity*. I am thinking here of the numerous references to the fact that even though the kingdom has *already come*—and is incarnate *here and now* in the loving gestures of Christ and all those who give, or receive, a cup of water—it still always remains a possibility *yet to come*. This is what Emmanuel Levinas calls the “paradox of posterior anteriority,” and it is cogently illustrated in an aphorism of Walter Benjamin which combines the spatial figure of the portal with the eschato-

logical figure of futurity: "This future does not correspond to homogeneous empty time; because at the heart of every moment of the future is contained the little door through which the Messiah may enter."³

As "eternal," the kingdom transcends all chronologies of time. Christ indicates this when he affirms that "before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58); and again when he promises a second coming when he will return again. In short, the kingdom is both (1) *already* there as historical *possibility* and (2) *not yet* there as historically realized kingdom "come on earth." This is why we choose to translate the canonical theophany of God to Moses on Mount Sinai (*esher ayeh esher*) not only as "I am who am" (*ego sum qui sum*) but also as "I am who may be." God is saying something like this: I will show up as promised but I cannot *be* in time and history, I cannot become fully *embodied* in the flesh of the world, unless you show up—unless you answer my call "where are you?" with the response "here I am." I am the possibility of making the impossible possible in history, but you are the ones to realize it!

Aristotle and Aquinas

What kind of possibility is Paul speaking of exactly when he talks about the *dunamis theou*? It clearly takes its primary inspiration from Jerusalem. But is there a sense in which it might, contrary to received wisdom, also be inspired by Athens?

Aristotle outlines two different kinds of *dunamis* in the *De Anima*—generic and effective. An example of generic *dunamis* is the potentiality of a child to grow up and acquire the skill of a musician or mathematician. By contrast, effective *dunamis* refers to the potentiality of an adult who has acquired such skills to exercise them or not. In the first instance, the act of realizing the potency means abolishing and passing beyond *dunamis*, whereas in the second it means conserving (*soteria*) the potency in and through its actualization, as something of a gift of potentiality to itself (*epidosis eis heauto*). (We shall return to this distinction in the discussion of Agamben's reading of Paul below.) Whereas the standard metaphysical reading of *dunamis* talks of a potency which realizes and abolishes itself as act, the idea of effective *dunamis* is one which survives the passage into act and therefore sustains the moment of actualization within the larger horizon of possibilities—the possibility to play or not to play music, to continue playing or cease playing, and so on. (I suspect that Nicholas of Cusa has something quite similar, if more explicitly theological, in mind when h

suggests that the highest name for God is *Possest*, that is, the coexisting and combining of both *posse* and *esse*. In this manner divinity may be rethought as being *all that it is able to be*. We will return to this intriguing idea in the conclusion.)

Paul's reading of divine *dunamis* is more in line with this second sense, whereas most Christian readings of Aristotle focus on the former understanding of potency as a lesser and ultimately inferior state than act. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Aquinas, who defines God as pure act without possibility of any kind. In the first chapter of the *Summa Theologia*, entitled "What God Is Not," Thomas offers some of the most influential and persuasive arguments against the idea of divine *potentiality* or *posse*. He argues that "the starting point for all existence must be wholly real and not potential in any way" (*esse est id quod est primum ens esse in actu et nullo modo in potentia*; I.3.1). Aquinas rejects the idea that God could be material, or "matter under a certain form," for matter is defined by its potentiality to take on forms, while God is wholly realized (I.3.2). God, he claims, is the absolute, underived, immaterial form of pure activity. "Deus est actus purus non habens aliquid de potentialitate." Or again, "Impossible est igitur quod in Deo sit aliquid in potentia" (I.3.2).

In the second chapter of the *Summa*, Aquinas elaborates on this line of thinking in a section entitled "God Acts." Here he distinguishes between "active power," namely, the ability to act upon another, and "passive potentiality" or the "ability to be acted upon by another" (II.25.1). In this strict division of active and passive, God emerges as an omnipotency of pure act—impassive and invulnerable to all that is other than himself, human or otherwise. God is the *ipsum esse subsistens*. Pure agency without any potency whatsoever (*ergo agens primum, quod est Deus, est absque potentia*). Divinity is the thought that thinks itself. The cause that causes itself. The love that loves itself. The power that powers itself. Thomas's reasoning goes like this: "Active power is not contrasted with actuality but depends on it; things act only if actualized. But passive potentiality contrasts with actuality; things are acted upon only in the respects in which they are not yet actualized but potential. God then cannot have potentialities but must have active power. In God power and action are the same and both are his substance and existence" (II.25.1). To say that God is at once both act and potency (as Cusanus would do) is contradictory for Aquinas. And God cannot be in contradiction with himself. Thomas concludes by saying that "God is said to be all-powerful in the sense that he can do whatever can be done" (II.25.3). So what we have is a God that is pure *esse* with no need of *posse*. Pure power without the slightest trace of potentiality.

The unequivocal exclusion of possibility from God is based accordingly on four main grounds: (1) God is immaterial; (2) God is impassive; (3) God is non-contradictory; and (4) God is omnipotent.⁴ To attribute possibility to the divine absolute would violate these four principles.

In short, the Pauline reading of *dunamis* presented above is clearly different from Aquinas's understanding of *potentia* in the *Summa* and in *De Potentia Dei*.

Badiou: Paul as Militant Subject

My reading of Pauline *dunamis* in terms of micro-eschatology is informed by an ongoing conversation with a number of recent thinkers who have stressed the vulnerability and powerlessness of the divine, for example, Stanislas Breton's reflections on the meontological mystery of the crucified Christ as *germen nihili*, Derrida's notion of a divine *désir au-dela du désir*, Caputo's weak God, and of course Levinas's God as trace and nudity of the stranger. These all derive, in their different ways, from certain debates within the phenomenology of religion (including its deconstructive guises). And in this respect I have also been influenced, as I acknowledge in *The God Who May Be* and elsewhere, by earlier phenomenologies of the possible found in Husserl and Heidegger. In this section, I wish to extend this conversation to two philosophers who have published what might be termed postmodern readings of Paul in a curiously a-theological and a-phenomenological style. I believe that both these thinkers—Badiou and Agamben—lend support to our own eschatological reading of Pauline *dunamis* while stopping short at some crucial points.

In *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Badiou highlights the revolutionary implications of Paul's power of weakness as it is pitted against the power of this world, namely, the power of empire and dominion. His reading is essentially political—with a certain psychoanalytic dash. Badiou argues that Christian resurrection is above all a subjective possibility that subverts the standard norms of history:

The Resurrection is not, in Paul's own eyes, of the order of fact, falsifiable or demonstrable. It is pure event, opening of an epoch, transformation of the relations between the possible and the impossible. For the interest of Christ's resurrection does not lie in itself, as it would in the case of a particular, or miraculous, fact. Its genuine meaning is that it testifies to the possible victory over death, a death that Paul envisages . . . not in terms of facticity, but in terms of subjective disposition. Whence the necessity of constantly

linking resurrection to *our* resurrection, of proceeding from singularity to universality and vice versa: "If the dead do not resurrect, Christ is not resurrected either. And if Christ is not resurrected, your faith is in vain" (1 Cor. I, 15–16). In contrast to the *fact*, the *event* is measurable only in accordance with the universal multiplicity whose possibility it prescribes. It is in this sense that it is grace, and not history.⁵

For Paul the basic wager of Christian *dunamis* is the good news that it is now *possible* to overcome the *impossible*—to defy what Heidegger would call the impossibility of possibility, namely *death*. Paul's discourse is one of fidelity to the "possibility opened by the event," that is, to the possibility of the impossible: victory over death.⁶ This faith transgresses and transcends knowledge as such, for we are dealing here with an unheard-of possibility, what Badiou following Kierkegaard calls a "subjective possibility," without logical proof, conceptual consistency, or empirical verification. Unlike the philosopher, the advocate of the Resurrection announces a radically novel discourse breaking with all inherited customs and categories. And this is why Paul declares that with the advent of the possibility of the resurrection, "knowledge disappears" (1 Cor 13:8).

Based on this line of thinking, Paul concludes that the ultimate *dunamis* of God is the power of the powerless, or, as he puts it, the strength of weakness: "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1 Cor 1:17–28). Thus the message of Christ crucified (and resurrected) represents both a stumbling block (*skandalon*) to the legalism of Jerusalem and a folly (*moria*) to the reason of Athens. But "to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, [it represents] Christ the power of God (*theou dunamin?*)" (1 Cor 1:17–28). Why? According to what logic? According to the logic of the eschatological *posse*: For "God chose the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and God chose the weak things of the world to confound the strong; God chose what is base and despised in the world, and even things that are not (*ta me onta*), to bring to naught things that are (*ta onta*), so that one might glorify himself in his presence."⁷

So what is this power (*dunamis*) of the cross that Paul speaks of? It is the surplus of Spirit which defies the laws of rational understanding, represented by the Greek philosophical *logos*. Invoking the language of Lacanian psychoanalysis, Badiou interprets this Christ-event in terms of the real which cuts across the law of language. And in the spirit of Heidegger he claims that this event exceeds the old metaphysics of being. In fact, Badiou holds that the Pauline profession of Christian *dunamis* amounts to an antiphilosophy

of radical subjectivity and decision which will be taken up later by certain existentialists. "That the Christ-event causes non-beings rather than beings to arise as attesting to God; that it consists in the abolition of what all previous discourses held as existing, or being, gives a measure of the ontological subversion to which Paul's antiphilosophy invites the declarant or militant. It is through the invention of a language wherein folly, scandal and weakness supplant knowing reason, order and power, and wherein non-being is the only legitimizable affirmation of being, that Christian discourse is articulated."⁸

Christ is read by Badiou, accordingly, as a radically new beginning which suspends the Law of the Father and invites us to a universal becoming-son. Through this event we are freed from slavery into filial equality. And it is this same logic which surfaces even more forcefully in 2 Corinthians 12:9–11: "The Lord said to me: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.' I will all the more gladly glory in my weakness, that the power of Christ (*dunamis tou christou*) may rest upon me . . . for when I am weak, then I am strong."

There is, of course, a profound paradox here: strength in weakness, power in powerlessness, glory in folly, meekness, and non-being. But that is precisely Paul's point. And rather than retreat into mystical silence before the unfathomable, unutterable, unimaginable enigma, Paul resolves to speak out, to invent a new discourse of the naked event, of radical beginning. He determines to declare the irreducible aporia that "power is fulfilled in weakness itself."⁹ Again, his is no ordinary *dunamis*—caught in the ontology of potency and act—but an unprecedented *dunamis* that goes beyond all metaphysical and historical categories of possible-impossible to declare another kind of power altogether: "For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal," Paul hastens to remind us, "but they have divine power to pull down strongholds" (2 Cor 10:4–5). Interestingly, Badiou considers these aporias and paradoxes to be completely irreducible to hermeneutic mediation of any kind.

For all the evangelical rhetoric, however, Badiou is more interested in making a militant structural subject out of Paul than an apostle of divine *caritas*. If Badiou were a believer—which he does not profess to be—it would be more in the spirit of Cromwell than St. Francis. The truth of Christ is converted into what he calls the fable of Christianity. Revelation becomes the blind rupture of the event and the subjective decision that it provoke. And law is equally so sacrificed. So Badiou's Paul, we might say, supersedes both the *logos* of the Greeks and the law of the Jews. He steers an uncharted path beyond Athens and Jerusalem. Badiou is, it seems, an atheist of event

rather than a theist of advent. More militant than mystic. More a follower of Lacan and Lenin than of Eckhart or Eriugena.

Agamben: On Potentiality

In his commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans, entitled *The Time That Remains*, Giorgio Agamben offers a more arcane, if equally postmodern reading of Pauline *dunamis*. Taking his cue from Paul's claim that strength accomplishes itself in weakness (*dunamis en astheneia teleitai*; 2 Cor 12:9), Agamben interprets the exigency of messianic potentiality in terms of what he calls impotentiality.¹⁰ Where Leibniz, as well as the metaphysical tradition generally, construed possibility as something that demanded to be realized, Agamben reverses the formula and sees existing realities as exigencies to become possible! Relating this to the Christian notion of salvation, he sees Paul's preference for what is not (*ta me onta*) over what is (*ta onta*) as a way of overcoming traditional notions of human power and potency in favor of a redemption of our sinful being—an impotentiality which becomes miraculously possible in and through the *dunamis* of God, that is, through the powerless power of Christ's resurrection. This co-existence of impotentiality with potentiality is, he argues, precisely what characterizes the paradox of messianic time.¹¹ Just as the forgotten demands to be unforgettable, so too the fallen, sinful, finite time of this world demands to be redeemable. Impotentiality demands the potentiality (*dunamis*) of Spirit and is indispensably precontained within it.¹²

Agamben stresses that what mattered for Paul was less the historical Jesus of flesh and blood than the Messiah, "who in terms of the spirit and of holiness was designated Son of God in *dunamis* by resurrection from the dead" (Rom 1:3–4). This is a *dunamis* which unrealizes the realized and realizes the unrealized. This is a "potentiality" which is accomplished and actualized not as force (*ergon*) but as weakness (*astheneia*). This messianic inversion of the traditional metaphysical relationship between potency and act—*dunamis en astheneia teleitai*/when I am weak then I am strong (2 Cor 12:19–20)—is, for Agamben, the kernel of Paul's revolutionary reading of *dunamis*.¹³

But what is the *telos* of this potency which accomplishes itself as weakness? Agamben asks this question in relation to the passage about the word of faith in Romans 10:9–10 as a "potentiality which exists as potentiality" (*puissance qui existe comme puissance*). Guided by Origen, Agamben returns here to a much-neglected Aristotelian insight that impotentiality (*adunamis*) or privation (*steresis*) is, in spite of all, a species of potentiality. As we already

had occasion to mention, there are two passages in the *Metaphysics*—1019b, 9–10 and 1046a, 32—where Aristotle claims that potentiality and impotentiality can *co-exist* in one and the same person or thing. He spells this out in the *De Anima* (417a, 21), as also noted, when he distinguishes between generic and effective *dunamis*. In this latter case of effective *dunamis*, according to Agamben, the potentiality of the Word is preserved in the act of realization alongside its impotentiality.

Origen had used this differentiation between generic and effective *dunamis* to distinguish between the virtual proximity of the divine Word to each creature, and the effective existence and expression of this word through the mouth of the believer who has received this Word and professed the resurrection of the dead.¹⁴ The word of messianic faith thus presents itself as the effective experience of the pure potentiality of saying, which goes beyond all functions of denotation or proof. And it is in this sense that the goal of messianic potentiality (*dunamis*) finds its strength (*dunamis*) in weakness. Such a profession of faith, in other words, is not about formulating true propositions about God and the world nor about prescribing juridical principles.

Believing in Christ the Messiah is not about believing something about him (*legein ti kata tinous*) . . . The potentiality of saying (*puissance de dire*) is messianic and weak in that it remains close to the word, exceeding not only every spoken thing, but equally the very act of saying, the performative power of language. It is the remainder of potency which does not exhaust itself in actualization, but is each time conserved and preserved in its acts. If this remaindered or remaindering potency is in this sense weak, if it cannot be accumulated into a knowledge or dogma, nor impose itself as a law (*droit*), it is neither passive nor inert: on the contrary, it operates precisely by virtue of its very weakness, in *rendering the world of the law inoperative*, in de-creating and deposing the conditions of fact and law, which means becoming capable of their liberal usage. *Katargein* and *Chresthai* comprise the act of a potency which accomplishes itself in weakness. But the fact that this potency finds its very *telos* in its weakness does not mean that it remains simply suspended in infinite deferral; on the contrary, returning onto itself, it accomplishes and deactivates the very excess of signification in every signified, the “falling silent of languages” (I Cor 13, 8); and it bears witness accordingly to what, non-expressed and non-signified, remains forever within the close usage of the word.¹⁵

The potential not to be is, for Agamben, the secret of the Aristotelian doctrine of potentiality, as later radicalized by Paul in the light of revelation. Agamben makes much of Aristotle's claim in the *Metaphysics* (1050b, 1) that what is “potential can both be and not be.” This potential not to be

transforms every potentiality in itself into an impotentiality, says Agamben. Something cannot be capable of something else if it is not also and at the same time capable of its own incapacity. In *On Potentiality*, Agamben interprets this to mean that in its originary structure, potentiality (*dunamis*) is the potential to be in relation to its own incapacity.¹⁶ Agamben offers this reading: “If a potential to not-be originally belongs to all potentiality, then there is truly potentiality only where the potential to not-be does not lag behind actuality but passes fully into it *as such*.”¹⁷ Actuality may thus be seen as nothing other than the full realization of the potential not to be.¹⁸

Actuality is thus indistinguishable from potentiality—in a manner similar to Cusanus’s *possess*—to the extent that it preserves and redeems potentiality. For if “all potentiality is originally impotentiality, and if actuality is a conservation of potentiality itself, then it follows that actuality is nothing else than a potentiality to a second degree, a potentiality that, in Aristotle’s phrase, ‘is the gift of the self to itself.’”¹⁹ In the final analysis, therefore, actuality turns out to be simply a potential-not-to-be turned back on itself in an act of double negation, namely, capable of *not* not being—and thereby granting the existence of what is actual. Pure potentiality and pure actuality thus become two faces of the same thing—and what is possible and what is real can no longer be clearly distinguished. It is only because language is capable of not saying that it is truly sayable; so that to speak is, in fact, the capacity to suspend one’s own incapacity or impotentiality to speak. Just as it is only because our memory can forget that we can truly remember. Likewise the realization of the kingdom, as the promise of divine *dunamis*, is nothing other than the self-suspension of its own potentiality to not-be. This, one could argue, is a sure guarantee against the omnipotent theodicy of metaphysicians such as Hegel and Leibniz.

The coming community of the kingdom, announced by Paul in specifically eschatological and messianic terms, reveals itself accordingly as pure potentiality. For Paul messianic potentiality does not exhaust itself in its *ergon*, but remains capacitating (*puissante*) under the guise of weakness. Commenting on Paul’s statement that “God chose the weak things of the world to confound the strong” (1 Cor 1:27), Agamben concludes that “Messianic *dunamis* is in this sense constitutionally ‘weak’—and it is precisely through its weakness that it exercises its effects.”²⁰

But before signing off on this subject, Agamben identifies additional and quite intriguing instances of messianic inversion, namely, the fact that the messianic *dunamis* renders the law (*nomos*) and its works inoperative without annulling them. The messianic restores acts to their potency or

non-operativeness not to destroy them but to elevate them to their higher purpose. This is why Paul can say at one and the same time that the Messiah (1) deactivates (*katargese*) every power and authority (1 Cor 15:24), and (2) constitutes the *telos* of the law (Rom 10:4). It is only by transmuting the law from actuality to a renewed sense of potentiality that it can represent the *telos* of the law as both end and accomplishment. For the Messiah is, Paul tells us, the fulfillment of the deactivated (*telos tou katargoumenou*), the promise to accomplish what is liberated from act back into potency. That is what Paul means, according to Agamben, when he declares in Romans 3:31: "Are we saying that the law has been made pointless (*katargoumen*) by faith? Not at all: we are saying that the law has been placed on its true footing." To re-potentialize the *energeia* of law is not to deny it but to reestablish it in view of its true fulfillment. Or as John Chrysostom put it, the Pauline sense of deactivation (*katargesis*) should not be understood as a destruction but as a "growth and gift towards what is better," as an "accomplishment (*plerosis*) and an addition towards the best (*pros to meizon epidosis*)."²¹ In short, Paul's notion of messianic *katargesis* should be construed less as abolition *tout court* than as a catalyst of fulfillment in a process of active capacitating.

This marks a clear departure from Badiou's reading of Pauline universalism as a repudiation of the politics of difference which, according to Badiou, infects the universal with laws, signs, and particularities (i.e., the legacy of Jerusalem). For Agamben, by contrast, Paul's notion of *katargesis* is less about an "indifference to differences" (Badiou's position) than an "indistinction of differences" that serves to respect the notions of law and wisdom which Christ supersedes by re-capacitating them in their Messianic *dunamis*. In sum, the Pauline Christ does not dispense with law and wisdom but restores them to their pure potentiality. It reveals the *logos* as *sayable* before it is said, *expressible* before it is expressed, *communicable* before it is communicated. It exposes the hidden "to be able" at the heart of reality. Paul's Messiah thus becomes the "to be capable" par excellence.

Agamben's analysis opens many intriguing perspectives on Paul's notion of *dunamis*. He revivifies these oft-quoted passages from Romans and Corinthians and restores, in accord with my own modest efforts, the power-possibility paradox of Pauline eschatology at the center of contemporary thinking about religion. But I have three main reservations.

First, I feel that his emphasis on deficit terms like "impotentiality," "activation," and "non-signifiability" lends a certain negativity and pessimism to his conclusions, not altogether different from the apocalyptic found in certain postmodern thinkers who privilege the impossible o

the possible. Moreover, his seeming preference for idioms of apocalypse, negation, and privation serves to deflect Pauline *dunamis* from the existing paths of history and reconciliation in favor of alternative options of sublime rupture. This theory of the impotential leads in Agamben's other writings to an ethics and politics of what he calls "bare life," which while admirably engaged with the "least of these," seems to embrace a scenario of impossible citizenship and disinheritance—bordering at times on a morbid obsession with the dehumanized and disenfranchised. I have some problems with this ethics of the abject, though I admit I may be missing something here. One almost longs for more of Badiou's militant universalism!

Second, it is not clear (at least to me) from Agamben's analysis that the question of atheism or theism actually matters. For someone who dwells at such length on the importance for Paul of *commitment* to the news of the resurrection, the author himself seems remarkably non-committed. If I put the hermeneutic question to Agamben's text—*d'ou parlez-vous?*—I am not certain I hear a response. But again, maybe I need to be attuned to a finer acoustic.

Third, and perhaps not unrelated, it is not clear to me what kind of human subject we are talking about in Agamben's messianic atheology. In marked contrast to Badiou's militant revolutionary of the kingdom, and my own notion of an ethically committed person/persona, Agamben's messianic witness often seems so destitute and passive as to be utterly inactive and impotent. But in spite of these reservations, what I share with both Badiou and Agamben is a commitment to a new understanding of the eschatological relationship between power and possibility latent within Paul's notion of *dunamis*.

Conclusion: Toward a Micro-Eschatology of the Possible

I conclude by looking at a number of religious thinkers down through the centuries who have developed notion of "possibility" in line with the Pauline legacy. Unlike metaphysical thinkers who presuppose an ontological priority of actuality over possibility, these more poetic or mystical minds reverse the traditional priority and point to a new category of possibility—divine possibility—*beyond* the traditional opposition between the possible and the impossible.

Let me begin with the intriguing maxim of Angelus Silesius: "God is possible as the more than impossible." Here Silesius—a German mystical thinker often cited by Heidegger and Derrida—points toward an eschatological notion of possibility which might be said to transcend the three conventional concepts of the possible: (1) as an epistemological category of modal

logic, along with necessity and actuality (Kant); (2) as a substantialist category of *potentia* lacking its fulfillment as *actus* (mainstream Aristotle and the scholastics); and (3) as a rationalist category of *possibilitas* conceived as a representation of the mind (Leibniz and the idealists). All such categories fall within the old metaphysical dualism of possibility versus impossibility. But Silesius intimates a new role for the possible as a ludic and liberal outpouring of divine play: "God is possible as the more than impossible. . . . God plays with Creation/All that is play that the deity gives itself It has imagined the creature for its pleasure." Creation here is depicted as an endless giving of possibility which calls us toward the kingdom.

I think the early medieval Jewish commentator, Rashi, also had something like this in mind when he interpreted Isaiah's God calling to his creatures, "I cannot be God unless you are my witnesses." He takes this to mean, "I am the God who will be whenever you bear witness to love and justice in the world."²² Holocaust victim Etty Hillesum was gesturing toward a similar notion when, just weeks before her death in a concentration camp, she wrote, "You God cannot help us but we must help you and defend your dwelling place inside us to the last."²³ Both Rashi and Hillesum were witnessing to the *dunamis* of God as *the power of the powerless*. This clearly is not the imperial power of a sovereign; it is a dynamic call to love that possibilizes and enables humans to transform their world by giving itself to the least of these, by empathizing with the disinherited and the dispossessed, by refusing the path of might and violence, by transfiguring the mustard seed into the kingdom, each moment at a time, one act after another, each step of the way. This is the path heralded by the Pauline God of "nothings and nobodies" (*ta me onta*) excluded from the triumphal pre-eminence of totality (*ta onta*)—a kenotic, self-emptying, crucified God whose weakness is stronger than human strength (1 Cor 1:25). It signals the option for the poor, for non-violent resistance and revolution taken by peacemakers and dissenting "holy fools" from ancient to modern times. It is the message of suffering rather than doing evil, of loving one's adversaries, of no enemies, of soul force (*satyagraha*). One thinks of a long heritage ranging from Isaiah, Jesus, Siddartha, and Socrates to such contemporary figures as Gandhi, Vaclav Havel, Dorothy Day, Jean Vanier, Ernesto Cardinal, Thich Nhat Hahn, and Martin Luther King, among others. The God witnessed here goes beyond the will to power.

Nicholas of Cusa offers some radical insights into this eschatological God when he declares that "God alone is all he is able to be" (*Triologus de Possesit*).²⁴ Unlike the God of metaphysical omnipotence, underlying the perverse logic of theodicy which seeks to justify evil as part of the divine will,

this notion of God as an “abling to be” (*posse* or *possest*) points in a radically different direction. Let us pause for a moment to unpack the phrase, “God is all he is able to be.” Since God is all good, God is not able to be non-good, that is, non-God—defect or evil. In other words, God is *not* omnipotent in the traditional metaphysical sense understood by Leibniz and Hegel. The Divine is not some being able to be all good *and* evil things. That is why God could not help Etty Hillesum and other victims of evil. God is not responsible for evil. And Hillesum understood this all too well when she turned the old hierarchies on their head and declared that it is *we* who must help God to be God.

Was Hillesum not in fact subscribing here to a long—if often neglected—biblical heritage? After all, if Elijah had not heard the still small voice of God in his cave, we would never have received the wisdom of his prophecy. If a young woman from Nazareth had said no to the angel of the Annunciation, the Word would not have become flesh. If certain fishermen, tax collectors, and prostitutes had not heard the call to follow the Son of Man, there would have been no Son of God—and no gospel witness. So too, if Hillesum and others like her had not let God be God by defending the divine dwelling place of *caritas* within them, even in those most hellish moments of Holocaust horror, there would have been no measure of love—albeit as tiny as the mustard seed—to defy the hate of the Gestapo. For if God’s loving is indeed unconditional, the realization of that loving *posse* in this world is conditional upon our response. If we are waiting for God, God is waiting for us. Waiting for us to say yes, to hear the call and to act, to bear witness, to answer the *posse* with *esse*, to make the word flesh—even in the darkest moments.

I think Dionysius the Areopagite could be said to add to our understanding of this great enigma when he speaks, in book 7 of the *Divine Names*, of a “possibility beyond being” (*hyperousias dunameos*) which engenders our desire to live more abundantly and seek the good. “Being itself,” he writes, “only has the possibility to be from the possibility beyond being.” And he adds that it is “from the infinitely good *posse* (*dunamis*) of what it sends to them (that) they have received their power (*dunamis*).”²⁵ I am tempted to relate this notion of an infinitely good possibilizing of God to another extraordinary passage in the *Divine Names*—this time book 9, section 3—where Dionysius writes of the God of little things, “God is said to be small as leaving every mass and distance behind and proceeding unhindered through all. Indeed the small is the cause of all the elements, for you will find none of these that have not participated in the form of smallness. Thus, smallness is to be interpreted with respect to God as its wandering and

operating in all and through all without hindrance 'penetrating down to the division of the soul, spirit, joint and marrow', and discerning thoughts and 'intentions of the heart', and indeed of all beings. 'For there is no creation which is invisible to its face' (Heb 4, 12). This smallness is without quantity, without quality, without restraint, unlimited, undefined, and all embracing although it is unembraced."²⁶ Is this extraordinary passage by Dionysius not a passionate invitation to embrace a micro-theology of the kingdom? Is it not a solicitation to embrace an eschatology of little things—mustard seeds, grains of yeast, tiny pearls, cups of water, infinitesimal everyday acts of love and witness? It appears so.

Moreover, I think it is just this kind of micro-theology that Gerard Manley Hopkins had in mind when he recorded God's grace in small and scattered epiphanies of the quotidian, for example, God's "pied beauty" being manifest in various "dappled things," from "finches wings" and "rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim" to "all things counter, original, spare, strange;/Whatever is fickle, freckled—who knows how?" ("Pied Beauty"). For Hopkins, it is not the mighty and triumphant Monarch that epitomizes the pearl of the kingdom ("immortal diamond") but, contrariwise, the court fool, the joker in the pack, the least and last of these. Here is Hopkins's take on the eschatological kingdom:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am,
And
This Jack, Joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood,
Immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond.

Hopkins's Deity is one of transfiguration rather than coercion, of *posse* rather than power, of little rather than large things.²⁷ I suspect Paul might have cited this poem in one of his letters to the Corinthians or Romans had he had the opportunity to read it.

Notes

1. Cited and commented in Richard Kearney, *Poétique du Possible* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984).
2. See the chapter entitled "Possibilizing God" in Kearney, *God Who May Be* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 80f.
3. Walter Benjamin, "Theologico-Political Fragment" (1921), in *One Way Street*

(London: NLB, 1979), 155f.

4. These points are elaborated by Aquinas in greater detail in *Questiones Disputatae De Potentia Dei/On the Power of God* (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1952). See especially Question 1, VII, "Is God Almighty?"

5. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003), 45.

6. Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 45.

7. Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 45.

8. Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 47.

9. Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 52.

10. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005). My own translations and paginations below are from the earlier French edition, *Le Temps qui Reste*, ed. Judith Revel (Paris: Bibliothèque Rivages, 2000), 65f.

11. "Celui qui se tient dans la vocation messianique . . . sait que, dans le temps messianique, le monde sauvé coïncide exactement avec le monde perdu . . . il sait qu'il doit vivre réellement dans un monde sans Dieu et qu'il ne lui est en aucun cas permis de camoufler cet être-sans-Dieu du monde, car le Dieu qui le sauve est le Dieu qui l'abandonne . . . Le sujet messianique ne contemple pas le monde comme s'il était sauvé. Pour reprendre les mots de Benjamin, il ne contemple le salut que dans la mesure où il se perd dans ce qui ne peut être sauvé. L'expérience de la *klesis* est aussi compliquée que cela; et demeurer dans l'appel est aussi difficile que cela" (*Le Temps qui Reste*, 72).

12. Agamben returns to this difficult but decisive paradox of *dunamis* in a later section of the book entitled *euaggelion* or "the announcement." The epistle to the Romans, he argues, is the impossibility of separating the Good News and its content. The declaration of the promise of salvation is identical with salvation itself. The announcement is thus inextricably linked with the response of faith (*pistis*). "The Gospel is the possibility (*dunamis*) of salvation for all those who believe (*Rm I, 16*). This definition seems to imply that the *euaggelion*—as *dunamis*—potentiality . . . needs faith in order to be effective. Paul is well aware of the opposition—perfectly Greek and which plays at once on both the categories of language and of thought—between potency (*dunamis*) and act (*energeia*), and makes reference to it in several passages (*eph 3, 7; ph 3, 21*). What is more, Paul often places faith and *energeia*, *being-in-act*, beside each other: vis-à-vis potency, faith is 'energumene' par excellence, the principle of actuality and enactment (Gal 5, 6 refers to faith that is actualized by love; Col. 1, 29: 'according to its *energeia*—of the Messiah—that which operates (*energoumene*) in my potency'). But this principle is not for Paul something external to the announcement; it is rather that which actualizes the potency (Gal 3,4: 'That which actualizes your potencies—*energon dunameis*—comes from the harkening of faith') and can therefore be presented as the content of the announcement (Gal 1, 23 . . .). That which is announced, it is faith which realizes the potency of the announcement itself. Faith is being in act, the *energeia* of the Gospel" (p. 145). Citing Paul's example of Abraham, Agamben goes on to observe the necessary connection between the promise and its realization. Abraham was someone fully convinced that the one who promised was equally capable of doing. Agamben concludes that "the announcement is the form that the promise takes in the contraction of messianic time" (p. 146).

13. On this Pauline notion of the "weakness of God," see John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); and Joseph S. O'Leary, "The Empty Christ," in *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth* (Edinburgh:

Edinburgh University Press, 1996).

14. Origen, *Commentarii in Epistulam ad Romanos*; cited in Agamben, *Le Temps*, 213.
15. Agamben, *Le Temps*, 213–14.
16. Agamben, *Potentialities* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 16.
17. Agamben, *Potentialities*, 17.
18. For potentiality to pass over into actuality it must set aside its own impotential to be. That is, it must suspend its potential not to be potential any longer. Therefore to set im-potentiality aside in this way is not to destroy it but to fulfill it, to “turn potentiality back upon itself in order to give itself to itself.” Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 46.
19. Agamben, *Potentialities*, 18.
20. Agamben, *Potentialities*, 155.
21. John Chrysostom, *On the Incomprehensibility of God*; cited in Agamben, *Potentialities*, 157–58.
22. Rashi, *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary* (New York: Mesorah, 1997). It would be interesting to relate Rashi's rabbinical interpretation with Isaac Luria's Kabbalist reading of God in terms of a generous withholding or “withdrawal” (*zimzum*) which invites human creatures to subsequently retrieve and reanimate the fragments of the broken vessels of divine love which lie scattered like tiny seeds throughout the created universe. This reading, which exerted a deep influence on Hassidic thinkers as well as on philosophers like Simone Weil, seems to confirm our own account of God's refusal to impose himself on creation—as some kind of omnipotent fulfilled being (*Ipsum Esse subsistens*), Sufficient Reason or Supreme Cause (*ens causa sui*)—preferring instead to relate to humans in the realm of the possible rather than of the purely actual or necessary. I am grateful to my Boston College colleague, Marty Cohen, for bringing the insights of the Lurianic Kabbala to my attention. See Cohen, “Sarach's Harp,” *Parabola*, Fall 1997.
23. Etty Hillesum, *An Interrupted Life* (New York: Owl, 1996), 176.
24. Nicholas of Cusa, *Dialogus de Possest* in *A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 69. The original Latin reads: “Deus est omne id quod esse potest.”
25. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, trans. J. D. Jones (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 182. For a further exploration of the link between neo-Platonic negative theology and our micro-eschatology, see Stanislas Breton, *The Word and the Cross* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 8–11, 49–50, 60–70, 80–91, 112–14. See in particular Breton's radical claim that we must give to God the being he has not, qua thirsting, kenotic, crucified stranger (121–22). The *dunamis* of God is here identified with the *germen nihili* or “power of nothing” that reveals itself as a double nothingness and powerlessness which liberates those oppressed by the power of *ta onta*, sowing the seed of non-being epitomized by the Beatitudes so that the eschatological tree of love and justice may flower and flourish (pp. 80–84; xxiv–xxvi). For it is in and as a seed of non-being that, in Eckhart's resonant phrase, “God becomes verdant in all the honor of his being” (p. 80).
26. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Divine Names*, 188.
27. See the illuminating reading of Hopkins in Mark Patrick Hederman, *Anchoring the Altar: Christianity and the Work of Art* (Dublin: Veritas, 2002), 131f.