

Agamben, Badiou, and Russell

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Abstract Giorgio Agamben and Alain Badiou have both recently made central use of set-theoretic results in their political and ontological projects. As I argue in the paper, one of the most important of these to both thinkers is the paradox of set membership discovered by Russell in 1901. Russell's paradox demonstrates the fundamentally paradoxical status of the totality of language itself, in its concrete occurrence or taking-place in the world. The paradoxical status of language is essential to Agamben's discussions of the "coming community," "whatever being," sovereignty, law and its force, and the possibility of a reconfiguration of political life, as well as to Badiou's notions of representation, political intervention, the nature of the subject, and the event. I document these implications of Russell's paradox in the texts of Agamben and Badiou and suggest that they point the way toward a reconfigured political life, grounded in a radical reflective experience of language.

Keywords Agamben · Badiou · Russell · Russell's paradox · Set theory · Linguistic being

Some time in 1901, the young Bertrand Russell, following out the consequences of an earlier result by Cantor, discovered the paradox of set membership that bears his name. Its consequences have resonated throughout the twentieth century's attempts to employ formal methods to clarify the underlying structures of logic and language. But even beyond these formal approaches, as has been clear since the time of Russell's discovery, the question of *self-reference* that the paradox poses bears

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deeply on the most general problems of the foundations of linguistic meaning and reference. Recently, through an interesting and suggestive philosophical passage, the implications of Russell's paradox have also come to stand at the center of the simultaneously ontological and sociopolitical thought of two of today's leading "continental" philosophers, Giorgio Agamben and Alain Badiou. Tracing this passage, as I shall argue, can help to demonstrate the ongoing significance of the "linguistic turn" taken by critical reflection, within both the analytic and continental traditions, in the twentieth century. Additionally, it helps to suggest how a renewed attention to the deep aporias of language's reference to itself holds the potential to demonstrate fundamental and unresolved contradictions at the center of the political and metaphysical structure of sovereignty.

I

In its most general form, Russell's paradox concerns the possibility of constructing sets or groupings of any individual objects or entities whatsoever. Since the operation of grouping or collecting individuals under universal concepts or general names can also be taken to be the fundamental operation of linguistic reference, it is clear from the outset that the paradox has important consequences for thinking about language and representation as well. In its historical context, Russell's formulation of the paradox bore specifically against Frege's logicist attempt to place mathematics on a rigorous basis by positing a small set of logical and set-theoretical axioms from which all mathematical truths could be derived. One of the most centrally important and seemingly natural of these axioms was Frege's "universal comprehension principle" or "Basic Law V." The principle holds that, for *any* property nameable in language, there is a set consisting of *all* and *only* the things that have that property. For instance, if basic law V is true, the predicate "red" should ensure the existence of a set containing all and only red things; the predicate "heavier than 20 kg" should ensure the existence of a set containing all and only things heavier than 20 kg, and so on. As things stand, moreover, there is no bar to sets containing themselves. For instance the property of *being a set containing more than five elements* is a perfectly well-defined one, and so according to Frege's principle, the set of *all* sets that contain more than five elements ought to exist. But since it has more than five elements, the set so defined is clearly a member of itself.

In this case and others like it, self-membership poses no special problem. But as Russell would demonstrate, the general possibility of self-membership actually proves fatal to the natural-seeming universal comprehension principle. For if the comprehension principle held, it would be possible to define a set consisting of all and only sets that are *not* members of themselves. Now we may ask whether *this* set is a member of itself. If it is a member of itself, then it is not, and if it is not a member of itself, then it is. The assumption of a universal comprehension principle, in other words, leads immediately to a contradiction fatal to the coherence of the axiomatic system that includes it. Russell's demonstration of the paradox, which left Frege "thunderstruck," led him also to abandon the universal comprehension

principle and to reconsider the most basic assumptions of his axiomatic system.¹ He would subsequently work on the reformulation of the foundations of set theory, given Russell's demonstration, for much of the rest of his life; it is not clear, indeed, that he ever recovered from the shock of Russell's remarkable discovery.

In the 1908 paper wherein Russell publicized the paradox and offered his first influential attempt to resolve it, he points out its kinship to a variety of other formal and informal paradoxes, including the classical "liar" paradox of Epimenides, the paradox of the Cretan who says that all remarks made by Cretans are lies.² The paradox of the Cretan shares with Russell's the common feature that Russell calls *self-reference*:

In all the above contradictions (which are merely selections from an indefinite number) there is a common characteristic, which we may describe as self-reference or reflexiveness. The remark of Epimenides must include itself in its own scope ... In each contradiction something is said about *all* cases of some kind, and from what is said a new case seems to be generated, which both is and is not of the same kind as the cases of which all were concerned in what was said.³

Each of the paradoxes he discusses results, as Russell suggests, from the attempt to say something about a *totality* (whether of propositions, sets, numbers, or whatever) and then to generate, by virtue of the definition of this totality itself, a case which, being a case, appears to fit within the totality, and yet also appears not to. Thus the remark of the Cretan, for instance, attempts to assert the falsehood of *all* propositions uttered by Cretans; since the scope of what it refers to includes itself, the paradox results.⁴ Similarly, in Russell's own paradox, the apparent possibility of grouping together *all* sets with a certain property (namely, not being self-membered) leads directly to contradiction.

Putting things this way, indeed, it is clear that the paradox in its general form affects the coherence of many kinds of totality that we might otherwise suppose to be more or less unproblematic. The totality of the *thinkable*, for instance, if it exists,

¹ See Frege's letter to Russell of 22 June, 1902, reprinted and translated in Frege (1980).

² Russell (1908). The other paradoxes said by Russell to share roughly the same structure are: Burali-Forti's contradiction concerning the ordinal number of the size of all ordinals, a set of paradoxes concerning the definability of transfinite ordinals, integers, and decimals, and an analogue to Russell's paradox concerning the "relation which subsists between two relations R and S whenever R does not have the relation R to S."

³ Russell (1908, p. 61).

⁴ As has been objected, it is not immediately obvious that the Liar paradox involves covert reference to a totality. Russell's own way of assimilating it to the form of his own paradox involves taking the remark of the Cretan to quantify over *all* propositions uttered by Cretans, but it is not apparent that it must take this form, since it may also be put as the paradox of the Cretan who, employing indexicals or deictic pronouns, says "Everything I say is false" or simply "This sentence is false." Nevertheless, Priest (2003) has argued that putting the Liar sentence in a form that portrays it as making reference to a totality of propositions both conveys its actual underlying logic and demonstrates its similarity of structure to the other formal and "semantic" paradoxes. More generally, for all of these paradoxes, self-referential formulations involving deixis are readily convertible into formulations involving the totalities that Russell identified as problematic, and vice-versa. For more on the relationship of deixis and self-reference, see the discussion in Sect. II.

presumably also has thinkable boundaries. But then we can define an element of this totality, the thought of the boundaries themselves, that is both inside and outside the totality, and contradiction results. Even more fatefully for the projects of linguistic philosophy in the twentieth century, we may take *language* itself to comprise the totality of propositions or meaningful sentences. But then there will clearly be meaningful propositions referring to this totality itself. Such propositions include, for instance, any describing the general character or detailed structure of language as a whole. But if there are such propositions, containing terms definable only by reference to the totality in which they take part, then Russell-style paradox immediately results. By way of a fundamental operation of self-reference that is both pervasive and probably ineliminable on the level of ordinary practice, language's naming of itself thus invokes a radical paradox of non-closure at the limits of its nominating power.⁵

In each case, the arising of the paradox depends on our ability to form the relevant totality; if we wish to avoid paradox, this may seem to suggest that we must adopt some principle *prohibiting* the formation of the relevant totalities, or establishing ontologically that they in fact do not or cannot exist. This is indeed the solution that Russell first considers. Because the paradox immediately demands that we abandon the universal comprehension principle according to which each linguistically well-formed predicate determines a class, it also suggests, according to Russell, that we must recognize certain terms—those which, if sets corresponding to them existed, would lead to paradox—as not in fact capable of determining sets; he calls these “non-predicative.” The problem now will be to find a principle for distinguishing predicative from non-predicative expressions. Such a principle should provide a motivated basis for thinking that the sets which would be picked out by the non-predicative expressions indeed do not exist, while the sets picked out by predicative ones are left unscathed by a more restricted version of Frege's basic law V. Russell, indeed, immediately suggests such a principle:

This leads us to the rule: ‘Whatever involves *all* of a collection must not be one of the collection’; or, conversely: ‘If, provided a certain collection had a total, it would have members only definable in terms of that total, then the said collection has no total.’⁶

The principle, if successful, will bar paradox by preventing the formation of the totalities that lead to it. No set will be able to be a member of itself, and no proposition will be able to make reference to the totality of propositions of which it is a member; therefore no Russell-style paradox will arise. Nevertheless, there is, as Russell notices, good reason to doubt whether any such principle is even *itself* formulable without contradiction:

⁵ Cf. Priest (2003). In one of the first influential articles to interpret Russell's paradox, Ramsey (1925) argued for a fundamental distinction between “formal” paradoxes like Russell's, whose statement, as he held, involves only “logical or mathematical terms” and the “semantic” paradoxes such as the Liar, which involve reference to “thought, language, or symbolism.” But as Priest argues, there is no reason to think this is a fundamental distinction if the paradoxes on both sides can indeed be given a unified form.

⁶ Russell (1908, p. 63).

The above principle is, however, purely negative in its scope. It suffices to show that many theories are wrong, but it does not show how the errors are to be rectified. We can not say: 'When I speak of all propositions, I mean all except those in which 'all propositions' are mentioned'; for in this explanation we have mentioned the propositions in which all propositions are mentioned, which we cannot do significantly. It is impossible to avoid mentioning a thing by mentioning that we won't mention it. One might as well, in talking to a man with a long nose, say: 'When I speak of noses, I except such as are inordinately long', which would not be a very successful effort to avoid a painful topic. Thus it is necessary, if we are not to sin against the above negative principle, to construct our logic without mentioning such things as 'all propositions' or 'all properties', and without even having to say that we are excluding such things. The exclusion must result naturally and inevitably from our positive doctrines, which must make it plain that 'all propositions' and 'all properties' are meaningless phrases.⁷

The attempt explicitly to exclude the totalities, whose formation would lead to paradox thus immediately leads to formulations which are themselves self-undermining in mentioning the totalities whose existence is denied. Even if this problem can be overcome, as Russell notes, the prohibition of the formation of totalities that include members defined in terms of themselves will inevitably lead to problems with the formulation of principles and descriptions that otherwise seem quite natural. For instance, as Russell notes, we will no longer be able to state *general logical laws* such as the law of the excluded middle holding that all propositions are either true or false. For the law says of *all* propositions that each one is either true or false; it thus makes reference to the totality of propositions, and such reference is explicitly to be prohibited.⁸ Similarly, since we may take 'language' to refer to the totality of propositions, it will no longer be possible to refer to language in a general sense, or to trace its overall principles or rules as a whole.⁹

II

The attempt to block the paradox simply by prohibiting the existence of the relevant totalities, therefore, risks being self-undermining; moreover, it demands that we explicitly block forms of reference (for instance to language itself) that seem quite natural and indeed ubiquitous in ordinary discourse. Another strategy is the one Russell himself adopts in the 1908 paper, and has indeed been most widely adopted in the subsequent history of set theory: namely, that of constructing the axiomatic

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "Whatever we suppose to be the totality of propositions, statements about the totality generate new propositions which, on pain of contradiction, must lie outside the totality. It is useless to enlarge the totality, for that equally enlarges the scope of statements about the totality. Hence there must be no totality of propositions, and 'all propositions' must be a meaningless phrase" (Russell 1908, p. 62).

basis of the theory in such a way that the formation of the problematic totalities which would lead to paradox is prohibited by the formal rules for set formation themselves. The attempts that follow this strategy uniformly make use of what Russell calls a "vicious circle" principle: the idea is to introduce rules that effectively prohibit the formation of any set containing either itself or any element definable solely in terms of itself, and thereby to block the vicious circle that seems to result from self-membership.¹⁰ The first, and still most influential, such attempt is Russell's own "theory of types." The theory aims to preclude self-membership by demanding that the universe of sets be inherently *stratified* into logical types or levels. According to the type theory, it is possible for a set to be a member of another, but *only* if the containing set is of a higher "type" or "level" than the one contained. At the bottom of the hierarchy of levels is a basic "founding" or "elementary" level consisting of simple objects or individuals that no longer have any elements; at this level no further decomposition of sets into their elements is possible.¹¹

In this way it is prohibited for a set to be a member of itself; similarly, it is possible for linguistic terms to make reference to *other* linguistic terms, but in no case is it possible for a linguistic term or expression to make reference to itself, and the paradox is blocked. Another attempt to prevent the paradox, along largely similar lines, is due to Zermelo, and is preserved in the axiomatic system of the standard "ZFC" set theory. Zermelo's axiom of "regularity" or "foundation" requires, of every actually existing set, that its decomposition yield a most "basic" element that cannot be further decomposed into other elements of that set or of its other elements. In this way, the axiom of foundation, like Russell's type theory, prohibits self-membership by requiring that each set be ultimately decomposable into some compositionally simplest element.¹² Finally, a third historically influential attempt, tracing to Brouwer, prohibits self-membership by appealing to the constructivist intuition that, in order for any set actually to exist, it must be *built* or *constructed* from sets that already exist. In this way, no set is able to contain itself, for it does not have itself available as a member at the moment of its construction.¹³

These devices all succeed in solving the paradox by precluding it on the level of formal theory; but the extent of their applicability to the (apparent) phenomena of self-reference in ordinary language is eminently questionable. Here, in application to the ability of language to name itself, they seem *ad hoc* and are quite at odds with the evident commitments of ordinary speech and discourse. For instance, it seems

¹⁰ "...fallacies, as we saw, are to be avoided by what may be called the 'vicious-circle principle'; i.e., 'no totality can contain members defined in terms of itself'" (Russell 1908, p. 75).

¹¹ Russell (1908, pp. 75–76).

¹² For the original formulation, see Zermelo (1908).

¹³ This intuition is also expressed in Zermelo's "axiom of separation," which holds that, *given* any existing set, it is possible to form the subset containing only the elements bearing any specific property. Nevertheless, since this axiom only *allows* the existence of certain sets (and does not prevent anything) it does not by itself *prevent* the existence of self-membered and "non well-founded" sets. For the theory of such sets that results if we allow the relaxation of the axiom of foundation, see Aczel (1988). For discussion of these ways of resolving Russell's paradox, see also Badiou (2004, pp. 177–187).

evident that expressions and propositions of ordinary language *can* refer to language itself; any systematic consideration of linguistic meaning or reference, after all, requires some such reference. Moreover, even beyond the possibility explicitly to *name* or *theorize* language as such, the problematic possibility of linguistic self-reference is, as Russell's analysis itself suggested, already inscribed in everyday speech by its ordinary and scarcely avoidable recourse to *deixis*—that is, to indexical pronouns such as “this,” “I,” “here,” and “now.” The presence of these pronouns inscribes, as a structural necessity of anything that we can recognize *as* language, the standing possibility for any speaker to make reference to the very instance of concrete discourse in which she is currently participating, as well as, at least implicitly, to the (seeming) totality of possible instances of discourse of which it is a member. Accordingly, even if we may take it that the restrictive devices of Russell, Zermelo and Brouwer have some justification in relation to a universe of entities that are inherently separable into discrete levels of complexity, or ultimately founded on some basic level of logical simples, it is unclear what could motivate the claim that ordinary language actually describes such a universe, or demand that we purge from ordinary language the countless deictic devices and possibilities of self-reference that seem to demonstrate that it does not. Even more generally, it seems evident not only that we *do* constantly make reference to language itself in relation to the world it describes, but that such reference indeed plays an important and perhaps ineliminable role in *determining* actual occurrences and events. For in contexts of intersubjective practice and action, we do not only transparently *use* language to reflect or describe the world; at least some of the time, we *refer* to language itself in relation to the world in order to evoke or invoke its actual effects.

Such reference occurs wherever linguistic meaning is at issue, and is as decisive in the course of an ordinary human life as such meaning itself. In prohibiting self-reference, the devices that attempt to block paradox by laying down axiomatic or ontological restrictions thus seem artificially to foreclose the real phenomena which, despite their tendency to lead to paradox, may indeed tend to demonstrate the problematic place of the appearance in the world of the linguistic as such. Seeking to preclude the possibility of formal contradiction, they foreclose the aporia that may seem to ordinarily render reference to language both unavoidable and paradoxical: namely that the forms that articulate the boundary of the sayable, and so define preconditions for the possibility of any bearing of language on the world, again appear *in* the world as the determinate phenomena of language to which ordinary discourse incessantly makes reference.

If the strategies of Russell, Zermelo, or Brouwer could be successful, both the occurrence of paradox and the phenomena of linguistic self-reference from which it arises could effectively be prohibited on the level of the sayable, ruled out by a privileged description of the structure of entities or a stipulative stratification of the levels of language. If, however, as the seeming ubiquity of these phenomena suggests, there is no motivated or natural way, consistent with the seeming commitments of ordinary language, to prohibit linguistic self-reference, then the possibility of paradox will remain pervasive on the level of ordinary language despite all attempts to prohibit it. The paradox of self-reference indicates the necessary failure of any attempt to enclose the totality of language within a

universal concept, or subsume its phenomena under a common name. But the necessary failure of the attempt to *state* the prohibition of the paradox on the level of the sayable will at the same time demonstrate, as the source of this necessity, the paradoxicality of language itself. As Russell's analysis already suggested, the root of this paradoxical status of language is its capacity to refer to itself, both explicitly and in the ordinary operations of deixis which inscribe, in any natural language, the constant possibility of reference to the very taking-place of concrete discourse itself.

In a far-ranging 1990 analysis, Giorgio Agamben treats the worldly existence of language, as it is revealed through the endurance of the paradoxes of self-reference, as the potential site of a "community" of singulars that would no longer be definable either in terms of a commonly shared *identity* or the subsumption of individuals under the universality of a *concept*.¹⁴ The underlying basis of this "coming community" is the possibility of grasping and appropriating the paradoxes of linguistic meaning:

The fortune of set theory in modern logic is born of the fact that the definition of the set is simply the definition of linguistic meaning. The comprehension of singular distinct objects *m* in a whole *M* is nothing but the name. Hence the inextricable paradoxes of classes, which no 'beastly theory of types' can pretend to solve. The paradoxes, in effect, define the place of linguistic being. Linguistic being is a class that both belongs and does not belong to itself, and the class of all classes that do not belong to themselves is language. Linguistic being (being-called) is a set (the tree) that is at the same time a singularity (the tree, a tree, this tree); and the mediation of meaning, expressed by the symbol \in , cannot in any way fill the gap in which only the article succeeds in moving about freely.¹⁵

If the totality of language cannot, on pain of paradox, be named, and yet its naming cannot be prohibited by any mandate or stipulation on the level of the sayable, then its appearance in the world will recurrently define the place of a fundamental gap or aporia between the general name and the individual things it names. In the case of any particular thing, if we should attempt to describe its "linguistic being" or its capability of being-named, we will then find, as a result of Russell's paradox, that this capacity is itself unnameable. The very condition for the nameability of any thing is its liability to be grouped with like others under a universal concept, but this condition is, by dint of the paradox itself, without a general name. The paradox thus reveals, behind the possibility of any belonging of individuals to a universal set in terms of which they can be named, the paradoxical nonbelonging of the name itself.

It is in terms of this nonbelonging that Agamben describes the "whatever being" or *quodlibet ens* that, neither object nor concept, defines the being of a singularity as simply the *being-such* (*quale*) of any thing:

Whatever does not ... mean only ... "subtracted from the authority of language, without any possible denomination, indiscernible"; it means more

¹⁴ Agamben (1990a, p. 1).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

exactly that which, holding itself in simple homonymy, in pure being-called, is precisely and only for this reason unnameable: the being-in-language of the non-linguistic.¹⁶

Defined by the non-belonging of the name to the totality it names, "whatever being" is not, according to Agamben, either universal or particular; instead it characterizes any singularity in a way that "reclaims" it *from* belonging to any class or set in order that it can simply be such as it is. In thus escaping the "antinomy of the universal and the particular," its place is akin to that of the paradigm or *example* in relation to the category it exemplifies.¹⁷ The example used to illustrate or demonstrate a general category stands, in paradoxical fashion, for the entirety of that category despite being itself nothing more than an indifferent element among others. Thus being neither simply inside nor outside the category it exemplifies, but rather bearing witness to it through its indifferent membership, the example demonstrates, according to Agamben, the "empty space" of a purely linguistic kind of being in which singulars are not defined by any property other than their pure being-called, their pure entry into language. The community or communication of singularities without identity in the empty space of the example is therefore, according to Agamben, the unfolding of a "linguistic life" that is both "undefinable" and "unforgettable;" subtracted from any identity or belonging to particular classes, its exemplars appropriate to themselves the identifying power of language itself.¹⁸ In this appropriation they define, according to Agamben, the potentiality of the community to come, a community of beings without discernible identity or representable common properties. Irrelevant to the State and so incommensurable with its logic, the possibility of this community will define the political or post-political struggles of the future for a redeemed human life that is simply its own linguistic being.¹⁹

The implications of Russell's paradox and the associated issues of self-reference therefore allow Agamben to characterize the significance of the twentieth century's determinate philosophical recourse to *language* as that of the discovery or revelation of something like a universal presupposition to all discourse whose problematic existence nevertheless marks the limit or threshold of the concept of identity as it has traditionally organized political and philosophical thought.²⁰ With this revelation, the singularity of every being's being-such, marked obscurely in the "as such" that, according to an established phenomenological discourse, defines the

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 75.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 8–10.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 84.

²⁰ Agamben puts it this way in Agamben (1984a): "Contemporary thought has approached a limit beyond which a new epochal-religious unveiling of the word no longer seems possible. The primordial character of the word is now completely revealed, and no new figure of the divine, no new historical destiny can lift itself out of language. At the point where it shows itself to be absolutely in the beginning, language also reveals its absolute anonymity. There is no name for the name, and there is no metalanguage, not even in the form of an insignificant voice... This is the Copernican revolution that the thought of our time inherits from nihilism: we are the first human beings who have become completely conscious of language..." (p. 45).

structure of apophansis, comes to light as an explicit determination of the being of every being.²¹ The basis of this revelation is simply the disclosure of language itself as that which, as Agamben puts it in a series of texts, has no name of its own.²² The consequent anonymity of linguistic being defines the nameless presupposition of the name, the bare belonging of singulars as such that preconditions every possible naming of them. The anonymous place of this precondition, which never defines a real predicate of beings, can then be seen, Agamben suggests, as that of what a traditional philosophical discourse recognizes as transcendence, or as the hitherto obscure basis for Plato's identification of the idea as the anonymous power that defines each singular thing, not indeed as individual thing under the unity of the concept, but indeed as "the thing itself."²³

As Agamben clarifies in the 1980 text *Language and Death*, the empty place of language is marked incessantly, in language's everyday *praxis*, by the presence of those indexical and demonstrative expressions that Jakobson, drawing on Benveniste's earlier analysis, termed "shifters."²⁴ According to Jakobson, these pronouns (such as "this," "I," "here," and "now") have no proper meaning of their own, since their meaning shifts or alters on each new occasion of use. Rather, their significance in each case depends on the concrete context of their utterance, on the actual linguistic performance or instance of concrete discourse in which they figure. It is in this sense, according to Agamben, that the constant occurrence of shifters in ordinary discourse bears witness, within that discourse, to the problematic taking place of language itself:

The proper meaning of pronouns—as shifters and indicators of the utterance—is inseparable from a reference to the instance of discourse. The articulation—the shifting—that they effect is not from the nonlinguistic (tangible indication) to the linguistic, but from *langue* to *parole*. Deixis, or indication—with which their peculiar character has been identified, from antiquity on—does not simply demonstrate an unnamed object, but above all the very instance of discourse, its taking place. The place indicated by the demonstration, and from which only every other indication is possible, is a place of language. Indication is the category within which language refers to its own taking place.²⁵

The constant presence of shifters within ordinary discourse thus bears witness, according to Agamben, to the problematic capacity of ordinary language to make

²¹ Cf. Heidegger (1927, Sect. 33).

²² In other places, Agamben has specified the reason for this as what he calls, adapting a story from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, the "White Knight's paradox." According to the paradox, it is impossible for "the name of an object [to] be itself named without thereby losing its character as a name and becoming a named object..." (Agamben 1990b, p. 69). The difficulty may be seen to be, as well, the root of the problem that Frege found with referring to the concept "horse." The ordinary device of naming names by quoting them does not solve the problem; see discussion by Reach (1938) and Anscombe (1957).

²³ Cf. Agamben (1984b).

²⁴ Jakobson (1971), Benveniste (1974). In the context of analytic philosophy, Kaplan (1989) has argued for a similar context-dependence of the reference of indexical and demonstrative terms.

²⁵ Agamben (1980, p. 25).

oblique reference to its own taking-place, to that constant presupposition for the possibility of sense that Western philosophy, Agamben suggests, has also long figured as "being."²⁶ It is in this connection between the demonstrative and the taking-place of language itself that Agamben sees the ultimate significance of Heidegger's definition of our own kind of being as "Da-sein" as well as Hegel's description, at the beginning of the *Phenomenology*, of the demonstrative form of "sense-certainty" as the origin of the entire dialectic of universality and particularity. In both cases, the linguistic structure of the deictic makes possible reference to the pervasive dimension of latency that itself preconditions any possibility for the articulation of sense. The linguistic reflection that reveals this dimension as that of linguistic being, or of the actual taking-place of concrete discourse itself, then also reveals the place of this precondition as that of the very paradoxes of self-reference that Russell first demonstrated. Like the example, deixis bears pervasive witness, within ordinary language itself, to the paradoxical status of what is constantly presupposed in the everyday production of any kind of meaningful speech whatsoever, yet must remain itself incapable of successful designation: the "place" of language itself, the passage from abstract *langue* to concrete *parole* in the ever-renewed practice, use, or "application" of language in the concrete instance of discourse.

In taking up the radical effects of this problematic appearance of linguistic being in the world, Agamben can thus cite the demonstrative structures of deixis and the example as paradoxical markers of what underlies and founds the possibility of naming itself; together they offer an ongoing structural reminder within the order of the universal and the particular of the unthematizable operation or function that founds this order itself. In summoning a representative that is fully individual and yet stands for the whole universal class, the structure of the example is that of a kind of "exclusive inclusion," a demonstration of the general structure of inclusion within what is normal that nevertheless operates by excluding the exemplary, in the very moment of demonstration, from the normal case. Its exact inverse is then what Agamben elsewhere calls the "exception." Whereas the example demonstrates membership by choosing an individual member that it simultaneously excludes, the exceptional demonstrates non-membership or exclusion by reference to the class from which it is excluded. In *Homo Sacer* (1995), Agamben takes up the structural consequences of this symmetry for the question of the founding of the linguistic operation of set membership itself:

From this perspective, the exception is situated in a symmetrical position with respect to the example, with which it forms a system. Exception and example constitute the two modes by which a set tries to found and maintain its own coherence. But while the exception is, as we saw, an *inclusive exclusion* (which thus serves to include what is excluded), the example instead functions as an *exclusive inclusion*. Take the case of the grammatical example ... the

²⁶ "Linguistics defines this dimension as the putting into action of language and the conversion of *langue* into *parole*. But for more than two thousand years, throughout the history of Western philosophy, this dimension has been called being, *ousia* ... Only because language permits a reference to its own instance through shifters, something like being and the world are open to speculation" (Agamben 1980, p. 25).

paradox here is that a single utterance in no way distinguished from others of its kind is isolated precisely insofar as it belongs to them ... What the example shows is its belonging to a class, but for this very reason the example steps out of its class in the very moment in which it exhibits and delimits it (in the case of a linguistic syntagm, the example thus shows its own signifying and, in this way, suspends its own meaning ... The example is thus excluded from the normal case not because it does not belong to it but, on the contrary, because it exhibits its own belonging to it ...

The mechanism of the exception is different. While the example is excluded from the set insofar as it belongs to it, the exception is included in the normal case precisely because it does not belong to it ... And just as belonging to a class can be shown only by an example—that is, outside of the class itself—so non-belonging can be shown only at the center of the class, by an exception.²⁷

In other words, while both exemplarity and exceptionality depend on a crossing of the traits of belonging and non-belonging, and thus demonstrate the paradox at the basis of the operation of grouping or the property of belonging itself, they do so in inverse fashion, evincing the power involved in grouping or naming from opposite directions. Whereas the example exhibits its own belonging to the set by being an *indifferent* element that is paradoxically singled out as non-indifferent by the very act of exemplification, the exception exhibits its non-belonging to the set by the very fact of its *not* being indifferent to it, by being an exception to the very set that it is excepted from.

In the crossing that they both thus involve between the universal and the particular, both help to demonstrate the normally obscure but inherent complication of the operation of set grouping itself. Like the paradoxes of linguistic self-reference, they bear witness to a constitutive power of the name in presenting things that ordinarily hides itself in the order of things presented. This power is the power of language, or of the ordinary constitution of the common that groups distinct individuals under general names and subsumes individual cases under concepts. Agamben sees in this power of grouping whose basic ambiguities are shown by the opposed figures of the exception and the example, indeed, not only the basic operation of linguistic naming but the underlying basis of the *force of law* itself. For the originary power of language to subsume individuals under general concepts, beyond making possible the linguistic naming of anything at all, also underlies the *application* of laws, rules, or norms (which are naturally general in their scope) to the particular cases of fact or action that fall under them. Here, as Agamben emphasizes, the operation of force depends not simply on any general logical or conceptual function that itself could be specified in abstract terms, but on the actual activity of a speaking subject in passing from the abstract rule to the particular case:

The concept of application is certainly one of the most problematic categories of legal (and not only legal) theory. The question was put on a false track by being related to Kant's theory of judgment as a faculty of thinking the particular as contained in the general. The application of a norm would thus be

²⁷ Agamben (1995, pp. 21–22).

a case of determinant judgment, in which the general (the rule) is given, and the particular case is to be subsumed under it. (In reflective judgment it is instead the particular that is given, and the general rule that must be found.) Even though Kant was perfectly aware of the aporetic nature of the problem and of the difficulty involved in concretely deciding between the two types of judgment (as shown by his theory of the example as an instance of a rule that cannot be enunciated), the mistake here is that the relation between the particular case and the norm appears as a merely logical operation.

Once again, the analogy with language is illuminating: In the relation between the general and the particular (and all the more so in the case of the application of a juridical norm), it is not only a logical subsumption that is at issue, but first and foremost the passage from a generic proposition endowed with a merely virtual reference to a concrete reference to a segment of reality (that is, nothing less than the question of the actual relation between language and world). This passage from *langue* to *parole*, or from the semiotic to the semantic, is not a logical operation at all; rather, it always entails a practical activity, that is, the assumption of *langue* by one or more speaking subjects and the implementation of that complex apparatus that Benveniste defined as the enunciative function, which logicians often tend to undervalue.²⁸

The operation of the application of law, referred by Kant to a faculty of judgment capable of mediating between the general and the particular, thus depends in each case on the same structure of subsumption that defines linguistic being as such. In both cases, the movement from the general to the particular depends on the appropriation of a power of grouping that allows the passage from the abstract structure of *langue*, the system of rules constituting and governing language as such, to the concrete reality of actual speech and decision. The inverse structures of the example and the exception, in demonstrating the paradoxical basis of this power, also help to show how its concrete exercise, in each particular case, depends upon an obscure operation of *praxis* that is normally concealed within the ordinary speaking of language or functioning of the law. The reflection that demonstrates the paradoxical foundations of this operation by marking its place, then, also points out the problematic practical basis of the specifically constituted power that underlies the force of the law in each particular case.²⁹

In *Language and Death*, Agamben, again following Benveniste, connects this necessary “enunciative function” carried out by the subject in the movement from abstract *langue* to concrete *parole*—or from the abstract law to its concrete instance—to the paradoxical place of the taking-place of language, as indicated, if obscurely, by the deictic pronouns. It is only by way of the capacity for deixis, for saying “here,” “now,” and above all “I,” that a subject indicates its own assumption of the enunciative function, its own paradoxical capacity (which remains without name) to move from the abstract reality of the rules of *langue* to the actuality of their real application in concrete discourse. In this way, for Agamben,

²⁸ Agamben (2003, p. 39).

²⁹ Derrida “Force of Law”.

the problem of the nature of language is linked, on a fundamentally semantic level, with the problem of the constitution and nature of the subject who speaks.³⁰ That the enunciative function assumed by the subject in moving from the generality of abstract rules to the particularity of individual cases cannot be subsumed to a purely logical function means, as well, that the problem of the *application* of general rules, norms or structures—what can also be seen as the fundamental question of the normativity of rules in their application to concrete cases—cannot be foreclosed by any purely logical analysis.³¹ This application, whether conceived as a matter for concrete, individual decision in each particular case, or as founded upon the pre-existing force or authority of more general laws or reasons, always involves the concrete taking place of language whose problematic status the paradoxes of linguistic self-reference make clear.

This necessary link of the enunciative function to the problems of linguistic being also helps to clarify the deep analogy that Agamben asserts between the linguistic power of naming and the normative force of law in relation to concrete judgment. In both cases, the passage from generality to particularity amounts to the concrete occurrence of language, its paradoxical taking-place in the space obscurely indicated, without proper name, by deixis and the other paradoxical phenomena of linguistic self-reference. Here, in relation to the passage from abstract, synchronic *langue* to concrete, diachronic *parole*, the subject's power of naming, assumed anew in each case of the subject's assumption of the enunciative function, is simply the more general form of what appears in a more narrowly legalistic or political register as the subject's capacity to decide on the correct or justified application of a law, norm, or principle to the new case at hand. Whether what is at issue is the explicit rendering of legalistic decision or the less explicit movement from general rules or principles conceived as normative for linguistic meaning to the reality of their application in concrete discourse, the crossing of this gap involves the subject's paradoxical capacity to accomplish the passage from abstract generality to concrete particularity, to accomplish the taking place of language itself. The paradoxes of linguistic being mark the place of this taking place as void, and so demonstrate the inherently paradoxical and unstable linguistic foundations of the power of the subject considered capable of speaking, reasoning, and rendering judgment. We have seen that, according to Agamben, the structure of the example, in operating as a kind of "exclusive inclusion," also offers to demonstrate the paradoxical crossing of the general and the particular in which any possibility of grouping particulars into types, or deciding on their status, is ultimately grounded. But it is in terms of the inverse structure, that of the exception, that Agamben is most directly able to specify and develop a far-ranging and topical analysis of *sovereign power* in its underlying constitution, limits, and effects. In *Homo Sacer* and the more recent *State of*

³⁰ For more on the problems of the first-person pronoun in relation to the (originally Indo-European) grammar underlying discussion of the "self," see Agamben (1982).

³¹ The problem here is also evidently closely related to the problem of the relationship between rules and their application that Wittgenstein poses in the *Philosophical Investigations*, and to which the famous "rule-following considerations" respond. Here as well, the problem of the relationship between linguistic rules and their use bears deep consequences for our understanding of the structure of the thinking and speaking subject.

Exception, Agamben develops the connection first drawn by Carl Schmitt between sovereignty and exceptionality. According to Schmitt, the sovereign power defines the space of the political by its power of *deciding on the exceptional case*.³² The ordinary application of law depends on the constitution of an order of normality in which the law is conceived as applicable. But for this order to be founded, it is first necessary, according to Schmitt, for a sovereign power to constitute itself as sovereign by deciding on what counts as normal and what counts as exceptional.³³ This implies, as well, that it remains a permanent and structurally necessary prerogative of the sovereign to decide when facts or circumstances demand the *suspension* of the entire normal juridical order. It is, indeed, the sovereign's power to decide when an exceptional case of facts or "emergency" circumstances justifies the suspension of the entire order of law that marks the sovereign's original and founding position as simultaneously both *inside* and *outside* the order of law which it founds.³⁴

This paradoxical position of the sovereign with respect to the order of the law actually makes possible, according to Schmitt, the application of the law to pass judgment on particular facts in each particular case of the law's "ordinary" functioning.³⁵ This functioning requires in each case, a passage from the abstract universality of the legal norm to its determinate, concrete application, and the possibility of this passage cannot be ensured by the norm itself. It relies, instead, on the essential capacity of the sovereign to *decide*, to constitute the particular case as subject to the law or exceptional to it by determining whether and how the law is to be applied to it. In Schmitt's analysis, the maintenance of the order of law even in the most ordinary cases is thus revealed as dependent upon the existence of an absolute and pure power of decision that first constitutes that order. At the same time, the sovereign is able to preserve this power only by reserving to itself the power to (under certain circumstances) suspend the laws and thereby decide in favor of the existence of the "state of exception," or "emergency" in which its power again operates

³² Agamben (1995, pp. 15–17); cf. Schmitt (1934, pp. 19–22).

³³ "The exception is that which cannot be subsumed; it defies general codification, but it simultaneously reveals a specifically juristic element—the decision in absolute purity. The exception appears in its absolute form when a situation in which legal prescriptions can be valid must first be brought about. Every general norm demands a normal, everyday frame of life to which it can be factually applied and which is subjected to its regulations. The norm requires a homogenous medium. This effective normal situation is not a mere 'superficial presupposition' that a jurist can ignore; that situation belongs precisely to its immanent validity. There exists no norm that is applicable to chaos. For a legal order to make sense, a normal situation must exist, and he is sovereign who definitely decides whether this normal situation actually exists" (Schmitt 1934, p. 13).

³⁴ "[The sovereign] decides whether there is an extreme emergency as well as what must be done to eliminate it. Although he stands outside the normally valid legal system, he nevertheless belongs to it, for it is he who must decide whether the constitution needs to be suspended in its entirety" (Schmitt 1934, p. 7).

³⁵ "Every concrete juristic decision contains a moment of indifference from the perspective of content, because the juristic deduction is not traceable in the last detail to premises and because the circumstance that requires a decision remains an independently determining moment ... The legal interest in the decision as such ... is rooted in the character of the normative and is derived from the necessity of judging a concrete fact concretely even though what is given as a standard for the judgment is only a legal principle in its general universality. Thus a transformation takes place every time. That the legal idea cannot translate itself independently is evident from the fact that it says nothing about who should apply it. In every transformation there is present an *auctoritatis interpositio*" (Schmitt 1934, p. 30).

directly without proceeding through the mediation of constituted laws.³⁶ A typical example of this suspension of the ordinary rule of law—which, once performed, tends to become irreversible—can be found in Hitler's 1933 suspension of the articles of the Weimar Constitution protecting personal liberties, which essentially created the Nazi state.³⁷ But in the politics of the twentieth century, the total or partial suspension of the rule of law in favor of the state of exception is not, Agamben suggests, limited to those states identifiable as "totalitarian," but has become "one of the essential practices" of a wide variety of states, including those that describe themselves as democratic.³⁸ Contemporary politics, Agamben suggests, indeed tends to make the "state of exception" increasingly ubiquitous and thereby constitute the space of the political as a growing zone of indeterminacy or ambiguity between "public law and political fact." Within this zone, the application of law to the determination and control of life becomes both pervasive and radically indeterminate, leading to the contemporary situation of "global civil war" in which state powers struggle both to produce and to control the "bare life" of the living being as such.

The paradoxical structure of sovereignty, upon which is founded its power to determine the distinction between the normal and the exceptional, law and fact, is in fact formally identical to the Russell paradox. The sovereign, on Schmitt's analysis, is that which must be able to decide, in each possible case of fact or action, on the normalcy or exceptionality of the particular case. But in reserving to itself the power to declare a state of exception, and thus to suspend the entirety of this order, the sovereign demonstrates its exceptional position with respect to the entirety of ordinary distinction between normalcy and exceptionality itself. The very power to choose is neither normal nor exceptional; like the Russell set, it both includes and does not include itself.³⁹ It follows that the very power that

³⁶ "Confronted with an excess, the system interiorizes what exceeds it through an interdiction and in this way 'designates itself as exterior to itself' ... The exception that defines the structure of sovereignty is, however, even more complex. Here what is outside is included not simply by means of an interdiction or an internment, but rather by means of the suspension of the juridical order's validity—by letting the juridical order, that is, withdraw from the exception and abandon it. The exception does not subtract itself from the rule; rather, the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as a rule. The particular 'force' of law consists in this capacity of law to maintain itself in relation to an exteriority" (Agamben 1995, p. 18).

³⁷ Agamben (2003, p. 2).

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ More rigorously, we can put the paradox this way. Within a specific legal order, consider the set of all normal and exceptional acts; call this O . Then for every subset x of O , let $d(x)$ be the act that decides, of each element of x , whether it is normal or exceptional. (We can think of $d(x)$ as the "decider" for x , the act of enacting the law or prescription that decides normalcy within x). Then we have the following consequences:

- (1) For any x , $d(x)$ is not an element of x [ARGUMENT: No act can decide its own normalcy].
- (2) For any x , $d(x)$ is an element of O [ARGUMENT: The act that decides normalcy is itself an act].

Now, we consider the application of the "decision" operation to the totality of the legal order. This application is the sovereign's power to "decide on the state of exception," suspending the entire legal order, which is also, on Schmitt's analysis, the original foundation of such an order. We can symbolize the sovereign decision on the totality of the legal order as $d(O)$. Now, we have: $d(O)$ is not an element of O by (1); but $d(O)$ is an element of O , by (2) (Contradiction). This formulation derives from discussions with Tim Schoettle and is influenced by the "Inclosure Schema" of Priest (2003).

decides between the normal and the exceptional, and hence applies the law to determinate cases, rests on a foundation of paradox even in its most ordinary operation. The seeming prohibition of this paradox, within a specific, constituted legal order, makes it possible for law to function without its paradoxical foundations coming to light. Correspondent to the gesture of Russell, Zermelo, and Brouwer, the stipulative or axiomatic sovereign interdiction of the paradox makes it possible for the ordinary operation of decision or grouping to appear to function routinely without the fundamental instability that actually underlies the normal order appearing as such. At the same time, the actual ineliminability of the underlying paradox is nevertheless shown in the arbitrariness and lack of motivation of this interdiction itself. Under the condition of an actual exercise of the power that the sovereign always reserves to itself (that is, an actual declaration of the state of emergency or exception) the paradoxical structure underlying sovereign power again comes to light explicitly and comes to determine the field of politics as a growing zone of indistinction between law and fact.

The basis of the sovereign power in its capacity to decide on the exception, once laid bare, thus also evinces, behind the ordinary operations of set membership or grouping that constitute the individual as a member of the category to which it belongs, a more complex and paradoxical structure of force. Because of the way in which the exceptional both structurally interrupts and founds the ordinary logic of subsumption or application according to which laws apply to particular instances or cases at all, it inscribes a fundamental aporia at the center of the ordinary application of law that can be obscured only through an interdiction that itself must ultimately appear as groundless. This aporia, as Agamben suggests, is the same as the paradox of the foundation of language as a system in relation to the determinate instances of its speech. Whereas sovereignty, by reserving to itself the power to decide on the state of exception, stabilizes the sphere of law by paradoxically including itself in, and removing itself from, the scope of the law's application, the ordinary use of language to describe language itself points to the paradox at the basis of all ordinary linguistic use or application.⁴⁰ The structure of this basis is again discernible in the problem of the

⁴⁰ "We have seen that only the sovereign decision on the state of exception opens the space in which it is possible to trace borders between inside and outside and in which determinate rules can be assigned to determinate territories. In exactly the same way, only language as the pure potentiality to signify, withdrawing itself from every concrete instance of speech, divides the linguistic from the nonlinguistic and allows for the opening of areas of meaningful speech in which certain terms correspond to certain denotations. Language is the sovereign who, in a permanent state of exception, declares that there is nothing outside language and that language is always beyond itself. The particular structure of language has its foundation in this presuppositional structure of human language. It expresses the bond of inclusive exclusion to which a thing is subject because of the fact of being in language, of being named. To speak [*dire*] is, in this sense, always to 'speak the law,' *ius dicere* (Agamben 1995, p. 21).

sovereign power's application to itself; here, what is paradoxical is precisely the seeming capacity of language to refer to the principles and rules of its own use.⁴¹

III

In Agamben's text, the paradoxes of self-reference therefore tend to demonstrate the place of that "linguistic being" which, in problematizing the order of the universal and the particular, also defines the position from which this order can be seen as founded on a fundamentally paradoxical gesture of prohibition. In his own comprehensive ontological and meta-ontological project, Alain Badiou, in a fashion that is at once both deeply parallel to and nevertheless at odds with Agamben's result, has similarly theorized the real occurrence of linguistic self-reference as decisive in producing the intercession of the singular being of the indiscernible—what Badiou terms the *event*—into the determinate order of the universal and the particular.⁴² Like Agamben, Badiou considers this order to be constituted by the operation of set grouping. Badiou calls this operation the "count-as-one." For Badiou, collection in a set indeed underlies any *presentation* whatsoever; any individual being is presentable only insofar as, and because, it can be counted as an element in a larger set. The formal apparatus of set theory allows Badiou, moreover, to distinguish between presentation and *representation*, by means of which any element appears under the heading of this or that identity. For if a set contains a number of elements, it is also possible to regroup these elements into a number of subsets or "parts" of the initial set. For instance, the set that contains Alain, Bertrand, and Cantor has just those three elements, but it has eight subsets or parts. The set containing only Alain and Bertrand is one of these parts; another is the set containing only Cantor. The set of all these subsets is termed the *power set* of the initial one. For Badiou, an item is *represented* if and only if it is an element of the power set, or in other words if and only if it was a *subset* (rather than simply an element) of the initial set. In taking the power set, the original elements are

⁴¹ Again, we can express this paradox using the formal symbolism of set theory. For any sentence or set of sentences x , let $d(x)$ be a sentence that expresses a criterion for the meaningfulness of everything in x ; such a sentence, for instance, might express a rule determining which of the sentences within x are meaningful and which are meaningless, or which are applicable or usable in a given situation and which are not. Now, consider the set of all sentences; call this L (for "language"). Then we have, as before (cf. footnote 39):

- (1) For any x , $d(x)$ is not an element of x [ARGUMENT: No sentence can decide its own meaningfulness].
- (2) For any x , $d(x)$ is an element of L [ARGUMENT: The sentence that decides meaningfulness is itself a sentence].

Then, as before $d(L)$ is not an element of L by 1; but $d(L)$ is an element of L by 2 (Contradiction). Any sentence that, referring to the totality of language, appears to determine a criterion or rule of meaningfulness for terms in the language as a whole, cannot itself be either meaningful or meaningless. This way of formulating the paradox has clear implications for our understanding of the history of twentieth-century attempts to analyze language by describing the structure of its constitutive rules or practices. For more on this history, see Livingston (2008).

⁴² Badiou (1988).

recounted in a faithful but nevertheless productive way into the subsets defined by all of their possible groupings. The operation of grouping together the subsets of the initial, presenting set thus can be taken to produce all the possibilities of their representation.

This distinction between presentation and representation in terms of the apparatus of set theory proves essential to Badiou's definition of the *event* as that which, quite heterogeneous to the order of being, nevertheless can under certain determinate conditions intercede within it and produce the genuine novelty of historical change or action. Exploiting a deliberate and suggestive political metaphor, he calls the representative re-counting or power set of an initially given situation the "state" of that situation: it contains whatever, given the elements initially presented in a situation, can then be re-counted and re-presented as a one in representation. It is possible to demonstrate that the power set, or representative re-counting, will always contain *more* elements than the original set; in this sense there is, according to Badiou, always a certain potentially productive excess of representation over presentation, of that which is re-counted by the state over what is simply presented.

A central axiom of Badiou's entire project is the identification of *ontology* itself with mathematical set theory. The axioms or principles of set theory that found mathematics will, according to Badiou, amount to a formal theory of whatever simply is. This identification proves essential not only to his description of the form and limits of a "fundamental ontology" of being, but to defining the possibility of the event as that which, heterogeneous to being, nevertheless can occasionally intervene in it to bring about radical historical change. As we shall see, the underlying structural key to the possibility of the event is, in fact, the actual possibility of self-membership or self-reference which is *prohibited* by the fundamental axioms of set theory, and so defines, if it takes place, a position essentially outside the scope of the ontological order they define. Within the universe of ontology thus defined, both Russell's paradox and the phenomena of self-membership or self-reference that lead to it are, as we have seen, barred by fundamental axioms. Zermelo's axiom of foundation requires that every set be ultimately decomposable into some compositionally simplest element; in no case, then, is it possible for a set to contain itself or any set defined in terms of itself. Along similar lines, Frege's original axiom of comprehension, which held that there is a set corresponding to every linguistically well-formed predicate, is replaced with the more limited "axiom of separation," which holds only that, given any well-formed predicate, we can draw out all and only the elements that fall under the predicate *from within an already existing set*; it will accordingly be impossible to derive from the apparent formulability of predicates of self-membership the existence of any paradoxical set. In this way the threat of paradox is blocked within an axiomatic system that, as Badiou suggests, may also be taken to capture the fundamental structures underlying the being of whatever simply is.

The axioms of foundation and separation that most directly block, within ontology, the Russell paradox from arising do so by demanding that, in order for a set to be formed, there must already be some other existing being or beings from which it can be composed. They thus express, according to Badiou, the necessity that, in order for any determinate thing to be presented, there must already be

something else; their role in the fundamental axiomatics of set theory demonstrates that the description of whatever is cannot establish, but must simply presuppose behind the description of whatever is, a more fundamental "there is..." of being itself.⁴³ The simplest such element demanded by the axioms of set theory is the so-called *empty set*, the set containing nothing; its existence and uniqueness are assured by another fundamental axiom. The empty set, in containing nothing, is the compositionally simplest element that assures that there is something in existence already, before anything else can be named or constructed. In this sense, Badiou suggests, the empty set, what we may take to be the "name of the void," sutures or ties the universe of set theory to the basic assumption of being, thus constituting the order of ontology. The introduction of this name depends, however, on a fundamental act of *self-reference* or *auto-nomination*:

Naturally, because the void is indiscernible as a term (because it is a not-one), its inaugural appearance is a pure act of nomination. This name cannot be specific; it cannot place the void under anything that would subsume it—this would be to reestablish the one. The name cannot indicate that the void is this or that. The act of nomination, being a-specific, consumes itself, indicating nothing other than the unrepresentable as such. In ontology, however, the unrepresentable occurs within a presentative forcing which disposes it as the nothing from which everything proceeds. The consequence is that the name of the void is a pure proper name, which indicates itself, which does not bestow any index of difference within what it refers to, and which auto-declares itself in the form of the multiple, despite there being nothing which is numbered by it. Ontology commences, ineluctably, once the legislative Ideas of the multiple are unfolded, by the pure utterance of the arbitrariness of a proper name. This name, this sign, indexed to the void, is, in a sense that will always remain enigmatic, the proper name of being.⁴⁴

Within the universe of what is, the empty set preserves a kind of mute reminder of what founds existence, the bare auto-nomination that introduces a first element from which everything else can be built. The axioms that block Russell's paradox by prohibiting self-reference within ontology thus nevertheless necessarily introduce a non-specific element that can only have come to exist through a paradoxical self-nomination. This element, summoning forth existence from the void, preserves in ontology the mark of what precedes or exceeds it, the nothing that cannot be presented as such in any of its multiples.

In this way the power of auto-nomination to call forth existent sets, though explicitly prohibited within ontology by its fundamental axioms, nevertheless proves essential in grounding its most basic presupposition, the presupposition of a "there is..." of being prior to any determinate set or property. Beyond this, according to Badiou, the name's power of self-reference, prohibited within ontology, will indeed prove to be the most essential single characteristic that marks the self-reflexive structure of the *event* which, beyond being, nevertheless

⁴³ Ibid., p. 47.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 59.

occasionally intervenes within it. Within ontology, as we have seen, the axioms of foundation and separation guarantee the existence, in the case of each existent set, of a simplest or most basic element. In the doctrine of the event, however, this constraint is suspended. If we relax it, sets can indeed be infinite multiplicities that never “bottom out” in a compositionally simplest element. This infinite multiplicity is in fact, according to Badiou, essential to the event’s production of novelty. For the schema that portrays the infinite potentiality of the event breaks with the axiom of foundation by *explicitly asserting* that the event is a member of itself. This self-membership will simultaneously make the event indiscernible to ontology and assure the role of a paradoxical self-nomination in calling it forth from what must *appear to ontology* to be the void.⁴⁵ For the event is not simply constituted out of already existing elements, but rather, in recounting these already existing elements, calls itself into existence through its own power of auto-nomination.

To demonstrate how this works, Badiou develops the example of the French Revolution. The name “The French Revolution” encloses or refers to a vast variety of the individual “gestures, things, and words” that occurred in France between 1789 and 1794. But its ability to determine these various and multiple facts and circumstances as counting as one in the unity of an event depends, as well, on the moment at which the revolution names itself, and so calls itself into existence *as* the event it will have been:

When, for example, Saint-Just declares in 1794 that ‘the Revolution is frozen’, he is certainly designating infinite signs of lassitude and general constraint, but he adds to them that one-mark that is the Revolution itself, as this signifier of the event which, being qualifiable (the Revolution is ‘frozen’), proves that it is itself a term of the event that it is. Of the French Revolution as event it must be said that it both presents the infinite multiple of the series of facts situated between 1789 and 1794 and, moreover, that it presents itself as an immanent resume and one-mark of its own multiple ... The event is thus clearly the multiple which both presents its entire site, and, by means of the pure signifier of itself immanent to its own multiple, manages to present the presentation itself, that is, the one of the infinite multiple that it is.⁴⁶

The event’s occurrence will therefore depend on its grouping together or recounting as one both various elements of the situation in which it intervenes (Badiou

⁴⁵ “In the construction of the concept of the event ... the belonging to itself of the event, or perhaps rather, the belonging of the signifier of the event to its signification, played a special role. Considered as a multiple, the event contains, besides the elements of its site, itself; thus being presented by the very presentation that it is.

If there existed an ontological formalization of the event it would therefore be necessary, within the framework of set theory, to allow the existence, which is to say the count-as-one, of a set such that it belonged to itself: $a \in a$... Sets which belong to themselves were baptized extraordinary sets by the logician Miramanoﬀ. We could thus say the following: an event is ontologically formalized by an extraordinary set.

We could. But the axiom of foundation *forecloses extraordinary sets from any existence, and ruins any possibility of naming a multiple-being of the event*. Here we have an essential gesture: that by means of which ontology declares that the event is not” (Badiou 1988, pp. 189–190).

⁴⁶ Badiou (1988, p. 180).

calls the set of these elements the event's *site*) and, by a fundamental operation of auto-nomination, it itself. According to Badiou's schema, given any eventual site X , the *event* for that site can therefore be defined thus⁴⁷:

$$e_x = \{x \in X, e_x\}.$$

The event is the set composed of, on the one hand, all the elements of its site, and on the other, itself. The self-inclusion of the event allows it to summon forth a novelty previously indiscernible to the situation, to designate itself and so to call itself into existence as what will have taken place, its own appearance in the historical situation its occurrence will have transformed.

The self-inclusion or self-reference of the event also proves essential to answering the question Badiou next takes up, namely whether the event will already have been *presented* as a term in the situation in which it intervenes. The question is a decisive one; because of the event's logic of self-inclusion, the answer to it will determine the happening of the event itself, whether it will have taken place within the situation or whether it will remain forever exterior to what is. But also because of this logic of self-inclusion, nothing on the level of the existent situation can, by itself, decide this decisive question. For any element presented in the already existing situation to be the event, it would have to be clear that it includes itself. But this is just what cannot be clear on the level of the situation. It is possible only, as Badiou argues, to trace the consequences of the two divergent hypotheses, that the event will, or will not, have taken place in the situation.⁴⁸ If the event *does* take place, then it will be singular in the situation. For it presents the elements of its site, and these elements are not individually presented in the situation itself. The event, if it will have taken place, is therefore nevertheless not represented; it is indiscernible to the state and its representative re-counting. Recounting or representation can never verify its having taken place; nothing representable on the level of the situation will be able to demonstrate it as being the event that it is. Nevertheless, on the assumption that it does take place, its having taken place will allow it to add itself to its site, "mobilizing" the elements of this site in a way that is essentially indiscernible to representation. It remains, however, perfectly consistent to maintain the opposite hypothesis: that the event has not taken place, that it has not been presented in the situation. If this is the case, then the event presents nothing that is also presented in the situation (not even itself); so from the perspective of the situation, it presents only the void. On this hypothesis, *nothing* will after all have taken place; if the signifier or name of the event nevertheless succeeds in being spoken, in adding itself to the situation, *nothing* will be named by it.⁴⁹ In either case, whether we assume the event to have taken place or not, the question of whether it will have taken place cannot be settled in any regular way from the perspective of the situation. It follows, according to Badiou, that "only an interpretative intervention can declare that an event is presented in a situation."⁵⁰ Such an

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 179.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 181.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 181–183.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 181.

intervention will amount to a decision on what is, from the perspective of the situation, undecidable; it will itself force the taking-place of the event that it itself calls into existence. It operates by drawing from the evental site an *anonymous* or *indifferent* "name" or signifier, which is then declared to be the name of the event itself. Such an operation of decision or interpretative intervention will thereby summon the event into existence from what seems to be, from the perspective of the situation, only the void; it amounts to "the arrival in being of non-being, the arrival amidst the visible of the invisible."⁵¹ Having thus been introduced, the event's existence will also elicit various consequences, now (because of the event) presented in the situation itself. Badiou terms the operation of tracing out these consequences, or recognizing them within the situation, *fidelity*. Finally, in a radical inversion of traditional substantialist or transcendental theories, the *operator* of fidelity, what traces or discerns the infinite consequences of the event within the situation, is termed the *subject*. As Badiou recognizes, the biggest possible threat to the doctrine of the event, thereby defined, will be posed by the claim that the event's paradoxical self-nomination is indeed impossible. A systematic basis for this objection can indeed be found in the orientation of thought that Badiou, generalizing the program of Brouwer and Heyting, calls *constructivism*. The essential intuition of constructivism is that what can be said to exist at all is controlled and determined by what is *nameable* in a well-defined language:

What the constructivist vision of being and presentation hunts out is the 'indeterminate', the unnameable part, the conceptless link ... What has to be understood here is that for this orientation in thought, a grouping of presented multiples which is indiscernible in terms of an immanent relation *does not exist*. From this point of view, the state legislates on existence. What it loses on the side of excess it gains on the side of the 'right over being'. This gain is all the more appreciable given that nominalism, here invested in the measure of the state, is irrefutable. From the Greek sophists to the Anglo-Saxon logical empiricists (even to Foucault), this is what has invariably made out of it the critical—or anti-philosophical—philosophy par excellence. To refute the doctrine that a part of the situation solely exists if it is constructed on the basis of properties and terms which are discernible in the language, would it not be necessary to indicate an absolutely undifferentiated, anonymous, indeterminate part? But how could such a part be indicated, if not by constructing this very indication? The nominalist is always justified in saying that this counter-example, because it has been isolated and described, is in fact an example ... Furthermore, within the constructivist vision of being, and this is a crucial point, *there is no place for an event to take place*.⁵²

For the constructivist, the universe of existents is limited to that which can already be named among what already exists. The power of the event's faithful operator to discern the indiscernible, to pick out the anonymous part of the situation that will be named as the event, and so called into existence, is thereby explicitly precluded. The

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 181.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 288–289.

constructivist orientation can, moreover, be schematized precisely; it allows for the construction of a universe of sets which, though infinite, are restricted to the condition that each existing set must be constructible out of already existing ones by means of the predicates already existing in a language. Somewhat in the spirit of Russell's theory of types, the constructivist orientation therefore prohibits Russell's paradox by prohibiting the construction of any self-membered set. If its claims about being and language are correct, there will never have been any event, since no set will have the event's almost paradoxical structure of self-membership.

The remaining burden of Badiou's analysis in *Being and Event* is therefore to demonstrate the limitations of the constructivist orientation by demonstrating rigorously the possibility of the event's auto-nomination of what is indiscernible to ontology. He accomplishes this by invoking the technically formidable apparatus of "forcing" developed by Cohen in 1963. With this apparatus, it is possible to demonstrate the existence, given any universe of sets and the language that names them, of an *indiscernible* set which, though it exists, is absolutely unnameable by any predicate or combination of predicates of the language. The demonstrable existence of the indiscernible allows the faithful action of the subject, overcoming constructivism, to "force" the event at the point of its unrecognizability, to summon forth the self-nominating event from the void and trace its radical consequences in the world.

IV

In *Homo Sacer*, in an explicit discussion of the set-theoretical framework of Badiou's thought of the event, Agamben describes its implications in terms of the essential *excess* or *surplus* of representation over presentation, an excess which also figures in the everyday life of language as a constitutive excess of sense over reference:

Badiou's thought is ... a rigorous thought of the exception. His central category of the event corresponds to the structure of the exception ... According to Badiou, the relation between membership and inclusion is also marked by a fundamental lack of correspondence, such that inclusion always exceeds membership (theorem of the point of excess). The exception expresses precisely this impossibility of a system's making inclusion coincide with membership, its reducing all its parts to unity.

From the point of view of language, it is possible to assimilate inclusion to sense and membership to denotation. In this way, the fact that a word always has more sense than it can actually denote corresponds to the theorem of the point of excess. Precisely this distinction is at issue both in Claude Levi-Strauss's theory of the constitutive excess of the signifier over the signified ... and in Emile Benveniste's doctrine of the irreducible opposition between the semiotic and the semantic. The thought of our time finds itself confronted with the structure of the exception in every area. Language's sovereign claim thus consists in the attempt to make sense coincide with denotation, to stabilize a

zone of indistinction between the two in which language can maintain itself in relation to its denotation by abandoning them and withdrawing them into a pure *langue* (the linguistic 'state of exception').⁵³

We can understand the excess of signification that Agamben describes as the incapability of the meaning or sense of any term ever to be exhausted by any (finite) number of its instances in concrete speech. It underlies the perennial and constitutive failure of parallelism between signifier and signified in which structuralists and post-structuralists, drawing out the consequences of Saussure's structuralist picture of language, have located the very life of language itself.⁵⁴ Although in a certain sense a direct consequence of Saussure's original segmentation of the totality of language into the two parallel but distinct strata of signification and denotation, the positive structural possibility of such a failure was first described in detail by Levi-Strauss in connection with his analysis of social phenomena as drawing upon an irreducible and structurally necessary "surplus" of signification over the signified.⁵⁵ In the 1990 article *Pardes*, Agamben describes Jacques Derrida's complex deconstruction of the metaphysics of the sign as arising from a certain problematic *experimentum linguae*, or experience with language, that itself arises from the structural necessity of such an excess of signification, whereby "intentionality always exceeds intent and signification always anticipates and survives the signified."⁵⁶ The problematic and "undecidable" status of some of Derrida's central terms, "différance," "supplement," and above all "trace," Agamben suggests, arises directly from this excess, and yields the complex strategy of deconstruction in its reading of the tradition of metaphysics as committed to its foreclosure. Once again, the central paradox to which these terms respond is one of the failure of linguistic self-reference: that there is, as Agamben puts it, no "name of the name," and hence no possibility for straightforwardly describing the taking-place of language itself.⁵⁷ Agamben treats this overriding paradox of linguistic being as calling for the replacement of the metaphysical conception of the sign, and the grounding concept of "meaning" that runs through Western metaphysics, with Derrida's complex critical deployment of "undecidable" terms that are themselves problematically self-referential.⁵⁸ Thus, the project of deconstruction or "grammarology" inscribes the concepts of the undecidable, which, naming the unnameable constitutive excess of signification that is itself a mark of the paradox of linguistic

⁵³ Agamben (1995, p. 25).

⁵⁴ For the origins of this picture, see Saussure (1913).

⁵⁵ See, e.g., Levi-Strauss (1950). Something similar is discussed in Lacan (1957).

⁵⁶ Agamben (1990c, p. 212). The implications of Levi-Strauss's notion of the excess of signification for the project of deconstruction are discussed in detail in Derrida (1966).

⁵⁷ Agamben (1990c, pp. 213–214).

⁵⁸ "What is unnameable is that there are names ('the play which makes possible nominal effects'); what is nameless yet in some way signified is the name itself. This is why the point from which every interpretation of Derrida's terminology must depart ... is its self-referential structure ... Deprived of its referential power and its univocal reference to an object, the term still in some manner signifies itself; it is self-referential. In this sense, even Derrida's undecidables (even if they are such only 'by analogy') are inscribed in the domain of the paradoxes of self-reference that have marked the crisis of the logic of our time" (Agamben 1990c, p. 211).

being, are themselves, paradoxically, neither concepts nor names.⁵⁹ This positive re-inscription of the undecidable in the very place of language which formed the locus of the claim of metaphysics to decide sense is, according to Agamben, the key to any possibility of thinking its transformation and closure.

Deconstruction's fundamental recognition of the constitutive excess of signification over the signified, what Derrida figures in paradoxical fashion with his terminology, therefore provides the basis for any possibility of an intervention that transforms and opens the closure of the metaphysical concept of the sign and the metaphysical picture of meaning that it has long organized.

For both Badiou and Agamben, then, the (seeming) phenomena of linguistic self-reference remain, even if prohibited or rejected as impossible or meaningless within the constituted order of what can be said, permanent markers of the paradoxical structure of the constituting basis of this order itself. Within the order of ontology, metaphysics, or the sayable, self-reference will never really have taken place, for its taking place will immediately lead to contradiction and so to the destruction of the consistency of any axiomatic that attempts to define this order. The name will have no name; language will not exist *in* the world for it will be impossible for language to name itself. Nevertheless the very sentences that would articulate this impossibility themselves fall victim to the unsayability of the original prohibition that, ruling out self-reference, itself made the order of the sayable possible. Like Russell's own attempt to introduce a theory of types or Zermelo's introduction of the axioms of set theory that rule out self-reference, the axiomatic prohibition of self-reference that founds the possibility of meaningful language is itself revealed as unstateable. It will always be possible, by means of the introduction of determinate rules or prohibitions, to guarantee that linguistic self-reference and Russell's paradox do not "really" arise; but as soon as the prohibition has sense, its negation is also conceivable, and we begin to glimpse the underlying paradoxicality of the founding structure of the order of the sayable itself.

From this perspective, the sovereign decision that constitutes language and continues to underlie its usual functioning is now visible as the ultimately futile attempt to guarantee a stable passage from the universal to the particular through a constitutive prohibition of self-reference. The prohibition calls forth the order of the universal and the particular, constituting the norm through its decision on the exception. But the trace of the underlying paradox remains in the crossing between the universal and the particular shown by the inverse structures of the exception and the example, in the constitutive and ineliminable excess of sense over reference in the everyday use of language, in the unforclosable openness of linguistic rules or laws to their concrete application, in the everyday phenomena of deixis, and most decisively in the ordinary appeals and expressions in which language seems regularly and paradoxically to name itself, to make reference to the existence of a totality that will never have been given, on pain of paradox, within the order of what is.

⁵⁹ "The concept 'trace' is not a concept (just as 'the name "différance" is not a name'): this is the paradoxical thesis that is already implicit in the grammatological project and that defines the proper status of Derrida's terminology (Agamben 1990c, p. 213).

In this way, Badiou and Agamben's common recourse to Russell's paradox in gesturing toward the paradoxical structure of the sovereign or axiomatic decision that founds the order of the sayable suggests a surprising and new way of recovering at least one important result of the twentieth century's distinctive philosophical turn to language. Specifically, by returning to the paradox that inaugurates the linguistic turn by marking the site of language's self-reference as the void site of contradiction, they suggest a reading of the twentieth century's recourse to language as having formally and rigorously defined the *empty* place of that which remains indiscernible to the order of universals and particulars, what remains inscrutable in the order of what is. The most ordinary reference to "language" can then be seen as signaling the latency, within each everyday moment of discourse, of the paradoxical event of linguistic being. And the philosophical discourse that systematically reflects on the determinate form of language, the order of its terms and the logic of its structure in relation to the world that it grasps or names, will mark this void place incessantly, tracing it in the negative mode of contradiction and paradox that defines its major results.

In historical retrospect, the twentieth-century attempt to grasp language as a determinate philosophical resource and a distinctive object of investigation always had its basis in a problematic attempt to separate language itself, as an abstract structure of rules, from the concrete instances of speech they were also seen as determining.⁶⁰ The most significant results of this sustained inquiry, largely negative in character, have recurrently demonstrated the essentially aporetic character of this conception, the ultimate incapability of theoretical reflection to explicate the passage from universal rule to concrete fact that takes place at every moment of language's everyday life.⁶¹ The common root of all of these paradoxical results is the failure of linguistic self-reference; the results that demonstrate this failure also show the necessary absence of a metalanguage with which to describe the passage from language to speech.

Thus, even if, as Badiou has repeatedly suggested, the thought of the event demands a fundamental break with the nominalist or critical methods of a "critique of language" that would, in tracing and defining the bounds of sense, limit the real to what can be named in a tractable language, the results of those critical methods may nevertheless be seen as demonstrative, in a different direction, of the "political" implications of the problematic being of language in its everyday life. At the aporetic end of constructivism's attempt to submit the being of what is to the authority of a describable language, the paradox of self-reference instead demonstrates language as that which cannot be delimited since its is already at and beyond its limits in the most everyday instances of concrete speech. It would then be the surprising result of the twentieth-century critique of language (one largely unmarked by the current analytic practitioners of its methods, if not without precedent in the tradition's own original concern with the relationship of the logical

⁶⁰ For more on the history and foundations of this attempt, see Livingston (2008), especially Chaps. 1 and 9.

⁶¹ These negative results include not only Russell's paradox and the two incompleteness theorems of Gödel, but also Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of translation and Wittgenstein's 'rule-following' paradox.

structure of language to everyday life and *praxis*) to have demonstrated, if only in the negative modes of the failure and non-passage of its most typical guiding theoretical picture, the possibility of an everyday linguistic life that remains unrecognizable to the law and impervious to its force.

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