Lewis, Tyson E., and Igor Jasinski. "Demand." *Rethinking Philosophy for Children: Agamben and Education as Pure Means*. London,: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 21–44. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350133600.ch-1>>.

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Demand

From the Sacred to the Profane

For critical theorist Ivan Illich, institutionalized schooling acts like a modernized, secular church, full of rituals and mystical incantations that have little to do with actual education and everything to do with preserving the sanctity of this most cherished institution through testing, accreditation, and graduation ceremonies. Illich writes, “The school system today performs the threefold function common to powerful churches throughout history. It is simultaneously the repository of society’s myth, the institutionalization of that myth’s contradictions, and the locus of the ritual, which reproduces and veils the disparities between myth and reality.”¹ For Illich the school, with its hidden curriculum, becomes an institution of mystification, a ritual performance whose outcome is addiction to compulsive teaching and thus passive submission to an external authority—the teacher—who acts as a “priest” looking out for the flock. The net result: “School makes alienation preparatory to life, thus depriving education of reality and work of creativity. School prepares for the alienating institutionalization of life by teaching the need to be taught.”² Stated differently, the major effect of schooling is the “progressive underdevelopment of self- and community-reliance.”³ Education is therefore no longer immanent to the self-regulation of the community by itself but rather a transcendental power to save a community from itself. Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons add another important dimension to this argument.⁴ For them, schools function as a form of secular baptism that offers children a *logos* or orientation for entering a specific world. For Masschelein and Simons, baptism leaves no room for the natality of newcomers, and in a sense, predetermines the course of an educational life. Although differing in terms of specific “recommendations,” Illich and Masschelein and Simons argue that the function of the teacher as priest (“sacrament of teaching”) and of schooling as baptism (“sacrament of learning”) need to be suspended in order for new

forms of educational life to be possible. And it is important to point out that the theological language deployed by these theorists is not merely metaphorical. Instead, it points toward a disavowed origin of the school, an ecclesiastical apparatus that has yet to be fully acknowledged.

In what follows, we will further this line of inquiry by focusing explicitly on the role of the teacher's Voice and of the oath in giving body to such sacraments. To do so, we will turn to the work of Agamben that, like those of Illich and Masschelein and Simons, concerns the entanglement of secular institutions with theological and economic discourses and practices. While Illich and Masschelein emphasize the ecclesiastical underpinnings of institutional forms (and the school in particular), Agamben turns toward the question of language and Voice, thus further developing the significance of Illich and Masschelein and Simons's work. For instance, in his book *The Sacrament of Language: An Archeology of the Oath*, Agamben analyzes the oath in order to understand the very origins and function of language.⁵ He states that the oath is "the historical testimony of the experience of language in which man [*sic*] was constituted as a speaking being."⁶ To show how Agamben's exploration of the function of oath is relevant to education, we will (1) explain how the historical significance of the oath (as a "sacrament of power") points to a more originary function, namely that of guaranteeing the truthfulness of language ("sacrament of language"), and why Agamben believes that the oath needs to be made inoperable through the work of philosophy. (2) As it is in the juridical, religious, political realms, the oath is an apparatus of the Voice (in this case, the Voice of the teacher as priest). (3) Lastly, we show how such operability can be suspended by building on what Agamben says about the role of philosophy and connecting it with the practice of P4I. It is our contention that the community of infancy can make the oath inoperable by silencing the Voice of the teacher. Again drawing on Agamben, we can describe this as a form of profanation (as opposed to secularization) in that it frees language from the sacred use in the oath and makes it available for new and different use, returning schooling to its original meaning as "free time"⁷ and thereby making possible new, profane forms of educational life beyond the teacher as priest and schooling as baptism. Along the way, we will redefine the role of the facilitator in the P4I community: no longer someone who blesses or curses but rather opens up a space and time for the demand of language to be felt by the community. In this sense, oath taking and making guaranteed by the authority of the Voice of the teacher are replaced with a more originary or infantile experience of the demand of language as such. The surprising upshot of this argument is that the teacher as priest is replaced by the teacher-as-not-teacher or teacher as clown with the job

of profaning the sacredness of his or her Voice so that the demand of language from within the community itself can be heard.

This problematic of the oath and Voice might sound unfamiliar to those within the P4C community. More often than not, the question of the relationship between teachers and students is cast in terms of a dialectic between teacher authority and student interests. For instance, Olivier Michaud and Riku Vålitalo argue that two extremes are to be avoided in P4C: traditional authority and anarchy. In the first instance, the teacher is in authority in the classroom by holding power over students as an authority figure, and in the second, the teacher abnegates such authority, allowing students maximum freedom to pursue their interests. Rejecting both options, the authors argue for a new notion of democratically constructed and shared authority in which authority is not a mere possession of the teacher nor is it rejected. Instead, authority is judiciously employed to structure the classroom so that students can “make decisions, express their opinions, follow their interests”⁸ without any of these being dictated in advance by the teacher’s authority. While we are sympathetic with this project, we would like to offer several revisions. First, we want to focus on the level of language and the ontology of language (infancy). To do so, we have to reposition the problem of “relationality” to the linguistic level of oath making and oath taking. Without this move, we fear that attempts to rethink authority will not actually escape the gravitational pull of the ecclesiastical origins of the school and of teaching as outlined above. On our reading, the only way out of a reinscription of the sacredness of education is a turn toward infantile speech (as speech that does not respond to a command from the authority of the Voice to take an oath so much as to a demand of language). Second, as will be addressed in the final chapter of this book, the privileging of democracy as a teleological destiny toward which the community ought to be directed is, on our reading, somewhat premature and actually obscures the more primary philosophical experience of the demand of infancy, which, in the last analysis, is anarchic. Instead of a democratic horizon offering salvation (through the blessed speech of reasonableness), what is at stake is the profane and common experience of the demand of infancy as a point of contact between teacher and student.

The Voice

At the heart of the philosophical enterprise rests the problem of the Voice and how the Voice always casts philosophy in relation to negation and destiny. In this

section, we will outline this problem of Voice and then articulate it in relation to Agamben's thoughts on the oath. For us, the experience of infancy can only happen when Voice and oath are rendered inoperative, creating a clearing for a positive experience of the potentiality for speaking (infancy).

In *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, Agamben takes pains to demonstrate the intricate relationship between philosophical thinking and negation via the Voice. Referencing Hegel and Heidegger as paradigms of metaphysical speculation in Western philosophy, Agamben finds in both a reliance on an ineffable and unsayable Voice as the foundation for the human experience of being in language. With reference to Heidegger, the problem is as follows. Animals have a natural voice that they spontaneously express (the call of birds, the chirping of crickets). Humans, on the other hand, have language that must be learned. Their language does not belong to them but must be inherited or transmitted. Because humans only have language, there is an essential gap or lack that defines their linguistic experience. There is *no necessary link* between language and voice in human experience. Between the two is only silence or a basic sense of negativity. From inside this negativity, Heidegger posits the Voice of conscience as an existential foundation. Such a Voice is not a vocalization. It has no content of its own. Instead it is a silent call. Agamben summarizes, "[W]ithout a voice in the place of language, Dasein [Heidegger's name for human beings] finds *another Voice*, even if this is a Voice that calls only in the mode of silence."⁹ Thus, we find in our human experience of language a double negation: the negation of the animal voice for language and the silent negation of the Voice of conscience (which is ineffable, lacking content of its own). On Agamben's interpretation, "the experience of Being is the experience of a Voice that calls without saying anything, and human thought and words are born merely as an 'echo' of this Voice."¹⁰ This opens a division in human experience defined by an essential negativity: on the one hand is the silent speech of the Voice of Being that, because of its silence, can never be spoken by human words; on the other hand is the world of human utterances as an echo of this unspoken and ultimately disavowed ground. The upshot of this Heideggerian interpretation of the relation between humans and language is that "discourse cannot speak its taking place"¹¹ because its origin lies outside of itself in the eternal mystery of the Voice.

Poetry, for Agamben, likewise is stuck in the metaphysics of negativity. Instead of the Voice of conscience, we find the Voice of the Muses as a stand-in for the ungraspability or unspeakability of the event of language. In the metrical-musical structure of poetry, the poem is caught in the negative sway of memory

and repetition that always misses its taking place. Muses step in to fill the void of this taking place as an external, mystical supplement. But because Muses are ineffable, the ground of poetic utterance remains within the negative register. Yet Agamben's careful analysis of the poem *L'infinito* by Giacomo Leopardi suggests that poetry, when it attempts to rigorously study its own form, can offer up a way out of this negativity. The last line of the poem gestures back to the first in the form of "sweet drowning." While drowning may appear to be another manifestation of an essential negativity, the negativity is positively redeemed as "sweet." What makes it sweet is a unification of the time of the poem in its utterance—a time that does not need Muses any longer but finds its own taking place sufficient for its grounding. In short, the poem ends with a return to its beginning. But this return is not a dialectical sublation nor is it simply a return to the same. Instead, the return is the shortest of journeys that *affirms* (rather than negates) its own event, its own potentiality for taking place. As Agamben summarizes, "[I]n this voyage the experience of the event of the word which opened its unheard silence and interminable spaces in thought, ceases to be a negative experience."¹² Nietzsche also gestures toward a post-philosophy of the "last man" who no longer hears any Voice or Muse and is thus abandoned to his relationship with language as such. "Thought," writes Agamben about Nietzsche,

after the end of philosophy cannot still be thought of the Voice, of the taking place of language in the Voice; nor can it be the thought of the death of the Voice [as that would merely reinsert negativity back into our relation with language]. Only if the human voice is not simply death but has never existed, only if language no longer refers to any Voice (and, thus, not even to a *gramma*, that is, to a removed voice), is it possible for man [*sic*] to experience a language that is not marked by negativity and death.¹³

When placed side by side, the philosophical poetry of Leopardi and the poetic philosophy of Nietzsche open up the possibility for thinking language freed from negativity: language in *infancy*. But before we elaborate on a positive experience of infancy through philosophical dialogue, let us turn briefly to destiny.

Negation is intimately connected with the problem of destiny. Destiny throws us into a particular tradition and language. It condemns us to a certain fate. But where does this destiny come from? Again, we find it in our inner Voice. In philosophy, Agamben argues that later Heidegger attempts to free Voice from negativity via the concept of *Ereignis* or event. Yet it does not seem that *Ereignis* is capable of this maneuver. Agamben summarizes his critique as follows: "In *Ereignis*, we might say, Voice shows itself as that which, remaining

unsaid and unsignified in every word and in every historical tradition, consigns humanity to history and signification as the unspeakable tradition that forms the foundation for all tradition and human speech.”¹⁴ In other words, *Ereignis* does not suspend negativity; it merely conceals it as the unnamed that destines humanity to a particular tradition and language. Destiny is therefore linked to a sense of negativity (as an unsaid excess outside language as an eventual horizon of signification). We, as human beings, are destined by negativity to a particular tradition and language, and this destiny is outside of the very traditions and languages that we have at hand to theorize, resist, or transform such destiny. Heidegger’s only response to this problem is that humans as mortals must await the arrival of new gods.

From Voice to Oath

At this point, we can pivot to Agamben’s theory of the oath. It is our contention that the oath is the way in which language can make operative the silence of the Voice. It is, in this sense, the *linguistic apparatus* of the Voice. And for this reason, the oath is an accomplice in destining humanity to its tradition and language (whatever these might be). At the same time, as Agamben would say, we cannot simply negate the oath in order to liberate ourselves from such a destiny. Instead, as we will see, the “solution” to the problem is to discover infancy within the operativity of the oath, animating it from the inside. To do so, Agamben attempts to deactivate the oath (as a curse or a blessing). But this is more complex than it would at first appear, as the mere inoperativity of the oath itself is not enough to truly profane this apparatus of the Voice. Instead, what Agamben will call for is a more radical gesture: the inoperativity of the inoperativity of the oath. While this might seem rather paradoxical (let alone foreign to educational concerns), it is important to remember the problem at hand: How can discourse speak its own taking place? How can discourse be found in its own positive potentiality to be spoken (rather than in the negativity of the Voice)?

Simply stated, before the advent of either religious ritual or political institutions, the oath was a linguistic utterance that “confirm[ed] and guarantee[d]” the order of things (destined them).¹⁵ Drawing on the linguist Benveniste’s work on the oath, Agamben further defines its function as that which supports, guarantees, and demonstrates. The oath “I pledge,” for instance, is a way of “guaranteeing the truth and efficacy of language.”¹⁶ Stated differently, the oath sutures together words and actions, language and world so that meaning is guaranteed, not

unlike the work of the Voice. The Voice (of conscience) is precisely what steps in to reconcile nature and culture, voice and language, and thus to guarantee truth and meaning by providing speech with an unspeakable (and thus negative) ground outside of itself. Articulating the two, we argue that the Voice is the silent conscience behind the taking up of oaths (or what prompts the taking of the oath in the first place). On this reading, the oath is supported by but also conceals the negativity of the Voice.

The problem, as Agamben sees it, is that while the oath was created to prevent perjury, perjury is only a crime if the oath is presupposed. As such, perjury is *contained* within the very structure of the oath itself! In other words, even the person most faithful to the oath is still capable of an act of supreme perjury. But Agamben is quick to point out that this deficit is not merely a psychological critique of human beings who are incapable of keeping their word. Rather, Agamben argues that the fundamental fissure in the structure of the oath as containing within it both the potential of swearing and perjury indicates a “weakness pertaining to language itself”¹⁷ wherein words can always refer to multiple things they were not intended to refer to. The sacredness of the oath is therefore also already a profanity of the very guarantee, efficacy, and certainty that the oath was an attempt to secure.

But this is not merely an obscure point of relevance only to historians. Agamben’s archaeology of the oath reminds us that even this most archaic structure of the oath remains important for understanding language as such. As with all of Agamben’s work, the “origin” does not exist in the past; it is internal to the present. This is a nonchronological understanding of origins—one that forces us to confront a threshold of indistinction between now and then, between our secular institutions and their ancient origins in the sacredness of ritual. According to Agamben, “the contemporary interest of an archeology of the oath” lies in the fact that “[u]ltrahistory, like anthropogenesis, is not in fact an event that can be considered completed once and for all; it is always under way, because *Homo Sapiens* never stops becoming man [*sic*], has perhaps not yet finished entering language and swearing to his nature as a speaking being.”¹⁸ In short, the origin is always already operative when we take a position in language. Thus, whenever we stake a claim (and thus swear an oath) we also open ourselves up to the possibility of perjury.

Another aspect of the oath that Agamben identifies is its relationship to the curse (*sacratio* can mean curse; *sacramentum* is one of the Latin terms for oath, in Greek, *ara* can mean curse or prayer). According to Agamben, the oath has been seen as a “conditional curse,” insofar as “[t]o swear is first of all ... to curse

oneself in the event that one says what is false or does not do what has been promised.”¹⁹ In other words, the oath cannot be separated from its opposite, the curse. So there is not, first, the oath, then divine testimony, and then the curse. For instance, in ancient oaths, there is often expressed both a good omen and a bad omen so that the curse follows a blessing or vice versa. As an example, Agamben cites the following:

To those who swear loyally and remain faithful to their own, may children give them joy, may the earth grant its products in abundance, may their herds be fruitful, and may they be filled with other blessings, them and their children; but to perjurers may the earth not be productive nor their herds fruitful; may they perish terribly, them and their stock!²⁰

In this case, the blessing and the curse arrive together as co-originary possibilities within the oath. In short, curse and oath are epiphenomena of “one sole experience of language”²¹ as a kind of undivided unity of opposites, as a potentiality for saying this and saying that, of swearing this and perjuring that, of blessing this and cursing that. When one risks one’s self in the act of speaking, one therefore exposes the self to both truth and lying. The oath, which was supposed to guarantee the connection between word and action, language and world, is an unstable fault line that profanes itself in its most basic operations. Stated differently, the necessity of the oath gives way to the contingencies of language. The oath, as a linguistic apparatus of the Voice, cannot uphold the destiny of humans precisely because it has within it incompatible opposites that *un-destine* one another.

Blasphemy is then the symmetrical other to the sacred use of language in the oath. Whereas in the oath, the name of God guarantees the connection between words and actions (“In the name of God, I swear that I will ...”), in the act of blasphemy the efficacy of the name is cursed. Like perjury, blasphemy separates words from deeds/things. Summarizing, Agamben writes, “The name of God, released from the signifying connection, becomes blasphemy, vain and meaningless speech, which precisely through this divorce from meaning becomes available for improper and evil uses.”²² The undivided experience of language that we have in the oath is therefore split. The sole experience of language is lost when blasphemy takes precedence.

The contemporary result of this archeology of the oath throughout Western history is a coterminous splitting of language into logic and science on one side as pure management of statements and, on the other side, religion, art, and poetry as signifying surpluses. What is lost in both cases is an experience of

language as potentially *both* truth and error, blessing and curse *together before the split* without negation and without destiny. This would be a purely affirmative experience that says “yes” to the infancy of language as a pure potentiality to speak. Once split like this, language in its infancy—its potentiality uncoupled from negativity and destiny—can no longer be thought. Human language became possible when a living being

found itself co-originarily exposed to the possibility of both truth and lie, committed itself to respond with its life for its words, to testify in the first person for them. ... so also does the oath express the demand, decisive in every sense for the speaking animal, to put its nature at stake in language and to bind together in an ethical and political connection words, things, and actions. Only by this means was it possible for something like a history, distinct from nature and, nevertheless, inseparably intertwined with it, to be produced.²³

When the vanity of speech eclipses the oath, then human life as such is put in jeopardy—a radical nihilism opens up in the very heart of our relationship to language. This nihilism is the ultimate cost of the negativity of the Voice made fully manifest.

The problem today is that the efficacy of the oath as a performative speech act is in a constitutive crisis, and the resulting nihilism spreads throughout cultural and educational forms of life. When the co-originary structure of the oath is split from its internal relationship to the curse, then we have a split in the very life of the human experiment. On the one hand, we see ongoing examples of the living being reduced to bare life (the voice of pain and suffering). In Agamben’s work,²⁴ this is illustrated by a number of contemporary figures ranging from prisoners in concentration camps, to refugees, to coma patients. In all cases, there is a fissure that opens between survival and language. Bare life is a kind of invisible life, whose voice is mere *pathos*, lacking a *logos* that would make it relevant/intelligible to those who have a certain power or privilege to respond. On the other hand, we find the speaking being whose words are increasingly devoid of meaning or relevance. Here we find the sound bite, the slogan, or the circulation of amusing internet memes replacing the possibility of experiencing one’s self through the efficacy and truthfulness of giving one’s word. This condition might be referred to as communicative capitalism or a capitalism that capitalizes on the circulation of continual speech through social media and communication technologies.²⁵ Speech in this sense becomes absorbed into a spectacle. If industrial capitalism operated through the expropriation of labor power (work), now it expropriates symbolic power (communication). Agamben summarizes,

This means that a fuller Marxian analysis should deal with the fact that capitalism (or any other name one wants to give the process that today dominates world history) was directed not only toward the expropriation of productive activity, but also and principally toward the alienation of language itself, of the very linguistic and communicative nature of humans, of that *logos* which one of Heraclitus's fragments identified as the Common.²⁶

The results are as superficial as they are nihilistic: a playland of communication that is vacuous and incessant.

In short, the oath in contemporary society is largely inoperative. But this does not mean that Agamben calls for a mere return to the operativity of the oath as a solution to such problems as outlined above. Not only would this be simple nostalgia, but even worse, it would miss the central point of his archeology of the oath: that the preconditions for our current situation are internal to the very structure of the oath itself. Stated differently, we do not need new ritual baptisms so as to secure life and word, word and action. At the same time, to question the primacy of the oath, Agamben does not wish to abolish, negate, or destroy it. Rather, Agamben's strategy to break with the dialectic of blessing and curse, swearing and perjury is to suspend the suspension, to render inoperative the inoperativity of the oath in today's society. This is not a negation of a negation, but rather the suspension of the suspension of the linguistic apparatus (the inoperative oath) of a negation (the Voice) in the name of an un-destined form of life.

The means to enact this elaborate strategy can be found in philosophy (or at least a specific kind of poetic philosophy or infantile philosophy). At its heart, philosophy, according to Agamben, is precisely that which pronounces "yes" to language without swearing or cursing, without abiding in either truth or error, the sacred or the blasphemous. "Philosophy is," Agamben summarizes, "constitutively a critique of the oath: that is, it puts in question the sacramental bond that links the human being to language, without for that reason simply speaking haphazardly, falling into the vanity of speech."²⁷ Agamben's philosophical archeology of the oath thus has three movements to it. First, there is a speculative history that charts the operability of the oath and its constitutive aporias. Second, it pinpoints how the present moment has rendered the oath inoperable by splitting the word from action/life/things (the predominance of blasphemy). Third, he suggests that the role of philosophy is not to repair the oath and make it operable again, but rather to render inoperable that which is inoperative, to render indifferent that which has become indifferent. This is a kind of second-order level of indifference that, in turn, offers a "line of resistance and change."²⁸ Thus the nihilism of spectacle and the expropriation of language

become a “positive possibility”²⁹ to be used against this very condition. It is only when we let idle the oath and blasphemy, blessing and curse that philosophy can once again give us the experience of language as such without recourse to the negativity of the Voice. This would be a positive experience of the infancy of language.

From Taking an Oath to Responding to a Demand (of Language) in P4I

Now, we can return to our opening comments concerning education and its relation to the sacrament of baptism. Baptism is a sacrament, and a sacrament is a kind of oath. For Agamben, both ancient sources and most scholars agree that the oath should be seen as a form of *sacratio*. He refers, for example, to Festus, who writes that “[o]ne calls ‘*sacramentum*’ (one of the two Latin terms for oath) ... an act that is done with the sanction of the oath,” and to Benveniste, who observes that “the term *sacramentum* ... implies the notion of making ‘*sacer*’.”³⁰ According to what has been said before (Illich, Masschelein, and Simons), students in the typical classroom are being baptized by the teacher. The teacher is *sanctifying* (officiating/administrating/presiding over) the oath by speaking with a certain Voice and expecting the students to do the same (“Repeat after me: ...”). It is the students who actually *take* the oath (receive the sacrament/baptism) by repeating after the teacher, that is, by echoing the Voice of the teacher. But because, as we have seen, every oath contains an acceptance of the consequences should one fail to fulfill the pledge, the students are actually cursing *themselves* as they are performing the oath. Thus, they repeat the essential negativity of the Voice (of the teacher), this time directed at themselves at the precise moment they swear an oath to repeat.

The contemporary crisis in teaching is really a crisis in the structure of this oath. In this sense, we part ways somewhat with Illich and Masschelein and Simons. Instead of seeing the school and the teacher as sacred and education as a sacrament, we feel that the contemporary manifestation of the school, like most institutions, is dominated by blasphemy against the sacred. Standardization has split the Voice of the teacher from their word, resulting in a situation where the teacher can no longer stake their lives in the performance of their word (hence the teacher is no longer a priest or judge but rather a bureaucrat). There is no Voice of conscience underlying the teacher’s language, granting it a destiny. The “teacher” is merely a functionary position within the bureaucratic management

of learning. Teaching as a form of educational life has been rendered inoperative precisely by standardization, which makes teaching an empty form of life for the teacher. Whereas the oath once offered a linguistic space where one could stake one's life (find one's destiny), now the language of teaching is merely superficial ("Just take the test, don't ask me what it means") or blasphemous ("This is just a job, so I don't have to give a damn").

But this does not mean that we are calling for a return to the oath in order to save the profession of the teacher. Such a move, as outlined above, would only be a nostalgic fantasy that does not face the aporia of the oath itself. Hence a possible inadequacy in progressive and radical calls for a return to the autonomy of the teacher and an appeal to their conscience: without a problematization of the Voice of the teacher, the oath is simply reinstated without recognizing how the Voice always already indicates the sacred (and hence sacrificial) as negation and destiny.

So to suspend the suspension of the Voice of the teacher, they have to abandon the oath (sacred speech) and blasphemy (vain speech), that is, in some way make inoperative the constitutive relation and subsequent non-relation between praising and cursing. This would mean that the Voice of the teacher no longer speaks the language of true and false without falling into mere haphazard nonsense either. But what is left when teachers no longer swear or curse at their students? What is left when the teacher has no Voice? Here, we suggest one alternative is to theorize the relation between teaching and silence, or, at least, the silencing of the silence of the Voice of the teacher. By this, we do not mean lack of language or lack of speaking, but rather the suspension of the Voice that renders language a game of oath taking, of blessing or cursing.

One attempt to do so might be P4C. In the classic model of P4C, the teacher is a mere facilitator of the community of inquiry. For example, when discussing the use of the philosophical novel in the classroom for jumpstarting community of inquiry, Lipman makes the following observation concerning the role of the teacher (or lack thereof):

But if the model is a novel, what happens to the live teaching in the actual classroom—isn't he or she supposed to be the model of thinking for the live pupils, and of thinking about thinking and all those other good things as well? My own opinion is that classroom teachers have seldom been in a position to provide their pupils with a model of inquiry into inquiry or learning to learn, nor is it essential that they think they need to be in such a position. The responsibility for such modeling can be appropriately delegated to the novel and the classroom community of inquiry.³¹

Lipman downplays the role of the teacher in fostering a community of inquiry. Another way of stating this is that he is rejecting both the traditional authority of the teacher and anarchy in favor of a shared authority. Shared authority is mediated through the novels themselves. As such, Lipman is keen to silence the Voice of the teacher, and by extension, the teacher's authority no longer commands oath taking by students. This is certainly true, and a valuable attempt to separate the position of the teacher from that of the sacred role of the one who baptizes. At the same time, it is important to note that the Voice has not disappeared; it has merely been displaced into the novel, which now speaks *on behalf of the teacher*. The teacher is no longer a teacher with a Voice because the book has assumed this role. The Voice ventriloquizes through the novel, which embodies the sacredness of a certain kind of language and discourse "blessed" by the laws of reasonableness traditionally enforced by the teacher. Or, perhaps even more interestingly, Lipman's observation that other children in the community will act as a model of normative behavior does not seem to solve the question of the Voice either. Instead, the normative authority of the novel's Voice is merely taken on by the community itself through slow habituation. In both cases, the children in the community must take an *oath* to the model of the novel or of exemplary behavior of members of the group that are most reasonable in their responses in order to be baptized into a deliberative democratic community. The children therefore *respond* to a command "repeat after me" that constitutes their identity within the community through an oath. But to do so repeats the aporia of the oath that is always already a curse.

In sum, Lipman's fundamental critique is correct. He is asking us to think the speaking of the P4C facilitator beyond swearing ("This is the right answer!" Or: "Listen to me because I know what I am talking about") or cursing ("Don't say that, it is not allowed"). This would also be an experience of the teacher's speech without therefore turning it into blasphemous or meaningless speech ("You should do it because I TOLD YOU SO!" or "Say whatever you want, there is no truth, no justice ... it's all the same to me!"). Yet the sacrament of language and the ritual of baptism into a community of inquiry are not problematized enough in Lipman's comments. Indeed, they are implicitly smuggled back into the secular, liberal model as "solutions" to the rise in dominance of blasphemous speech.

Are we thus trapped? Or is there a way to *profane the speech of the teacher* in such a way that does not simply displace the problematic of the Voice and the oath? Is there an experience and experiment with language that does not bless or curse in the classroom but is purely an affirmation of language (a saying

“yes” to infancy)? It is our contention that P4I can do so, silencing the Voice of the teacher without displacement, thus effectively neutralizing the problematic of the oath in relation to an educational practice. To give a simple illustration, the teacher speaks without a Voice when he or she whispers: “Repeat after me, I do not know how to talk but I cannot not speak!” Notice that this is radically different from the typical understanding of shared authority. Shared authority, as it is conceptualized in P4C, means that the teacher states, “Repeat after me, I do not know what I am saying” and thus models fallibility and epistemological humility. Yet while this teacher might not know what they are saying, he or she still knows how to speak (according to the laws of reasonableness to which an oath has been taken). This position is best summarized by Maughn Rollins Gregory who writes that the P4C facilitator “isn’t teaching *what* to think, but *how* to think [and] exchanges content expertise for procedural expertise.”³² Renouncing certainty for fallibility does not render inoperative the apparatus of the oath, as the facilitator has still pledged themselves to a certain procedure for which they are held responsible. This, in turn, allows the facilitator to “bless” certain philosophical moves (rather than positions) made by students so that they can remain on the path toward reasonableness (as a telos of deliberative, communal inquiry).

“Repeat after me, I do not know how to talk but I cannot not speak!” not only suspends the oaths associated with how and what to speak. It also *positively* expresses *that* one can speak. It is a response to a certain demand (as we will see below) that one speak, full stop. There is no destiny orienting this speech nor is there any way to bless or curse it. Instead, there is only the affirmation of a certain arrival of speech that cannot not be spoken (that demands to be spoken). The teacher-as-not-a-teacher does not make or command an oath to this appearance of speech. Rather he or she simply testifies to its occurrence, carving out a space and a time in the classroom where speaking *can be noticed at its point of infancy* (before it is routed toward what and how to speak). Pointing toward one’s own conditions of speaking does not collapse the position of the teaching to that of the student, as students barely notice *that* they speak. Instead, they are most often oriented toward what to say and how to say it, as these are the dimensions of speaking that are privileged by the laws of learning.

But what if the students decide to stay quiet, fall silent (following the lead of the teacher to actually be silent—as one option)? Put differently, what makes them want to break their silence and talk at all? If there is no model to guide the speaking, and if there is no oath to hold participants accountable to this model, then what drives the inquiry? Classically, it is student interests that hold open

the place of inquiry. Yet it is not clear to us that this is actually what happens when teachers do philosophy with children. Think here of a simple situation in which a rather strange question is proposed—one that is decisively out of the ordinary, abstract, or downright weird to students (such as “what is time?”). This question might not be of any compelling interest to students, yet suddenly the question takes off, and students become impassioned. They feel a certain pressure to speak and sometimes cannot constrain themselves from speaking (sitting on hands or inflating cheeks only lasts for so long). Intervening in the ensuring dialogue by a teacher exerting their Voice might interrupt the flow, causing the pressure to speak to dissipate. What might be sacrificed is precisely the urgency that one cannot not speak in such a moment. It is this pressure for speech to speak itself without guarantees, in its infancy, that is negated when a greater lesson in reasonability takes precedence, commanding an oath to a certain procedure of inquiry that preexists the event of speaking. “I *must* speak even though it probably doesn’t make sense and I don’t know exactly what I am about to say!” The urgency of infancy expresses itself as an impotentiality: the student simply cannot *not* bear to speak; they are suddenly bursting at the seams with the overriding sensation of *speakability* or infancy. Just as such urgency cannot be commanded by a Voice of the teacher’s authority (which interrupts infancy by pausing to reaffirm an oath), it is equally inadequate to describe it in terms of student interests. Interests might emerge out of the dialogue, they might be produced by the community, but this can only happen insofar as the common demand of infancy is taken up in the first place.

At this point, we take recourse to Agamben’s notion of the *demand* (the original Italian, *esigenza*, can also be mean necessity, urgency, or need). There is a demand at the heart of P4I (not a command to take an oath). But this demand does not come from the teacher or from following interests. Notice a shift: the teacher does not administer/command an oath or simply allow students to speak about whatever they are interested in but rather allows for a demand to be exposed through testifying to one’s infancy, which does not have recourse to the unspeakable authority of the Voice. As such, the demand does not contain within it the potential to curse or to bless (according to the authority of the Voice) but rather merely opens up (occurs/manifests itself in) a space where speaking can happen, or more aptly, where speaking can experience its own taking place in the constitution of a community. In other words, the operation at stake here is that the *ethical* dimension of oath taking is suspended in order to discover how a demand is more ontologically primary. It is what is in common that makes the community of infancy possible in its infancy (rather than for a specific destiny).

For Agamben, the demand is an ontological category (rather than merely a linguistic one, or rather, it demonstrates how language—infancy—is itself ontologically primordial). In other words, it highlights the necessary and sufficient condition underlying existence in general. The book *The Use of Bodies* charts the history of the demand from Spinoza's *conatus* (striving) to Leibniz's *vinculum substantiale* (substantial bond), uncovering an alternative to the ontology of substance and essence wherein existence is demand. Citing Agamben, "what the possible demands is not to pass to the act, but to materialize itself, to become matter."³³ The possible (or potential/infancy) *demands* that it materialize itself *now*, not through negation of what is or through the actualization of a destiny, but as the affirmative repotentialization of what is. All substance responds to the demand and, in so doing, expresses an impotentiality (an ability to not *not* be). This is not a command issued from an external source nor is it an interest (as interests already assert the existence of the subject who has interests). Weirdly, this demand is impersonal and disinterested insofar as it preexists the arrival of subjects with specific characteristics and interests defining them as "individuals." It is rather an ontological pressure to strive. Stated differently, existence is its own *immanent cause* (necessity), its own patient and agent, cause and effect, potentiality and act. Matter *exposes* its immanent cause when it does not negate itself but shows itself in its potentiality. Instead of overcoming itself (through negation), existence must become itself through an impotent response to the demand to become. The same applies to speaking. The infancy of speech (speakability) demands to be spoken in such a way that it does not exhaust its infancy but rather continually repotentializes itself in relation to this infancy.

As Agamben states, "[I]n demand, things are contemplated."³⁴ Contemplation is not concerned with the problematic of reasonableness so much as with ontological questions or the logic of existence. Hence the charge of P4I is not to teach skills or dispositions or civic virtues so much as to return to the most basic ontological experience: the demand of infancy for infantile speech (or speech that exposes its own impotentiality to not *not* be spoken). The demand turns us toward this sayability and thus provides space for contemplation, and contemplation repotentializes what is sayable in the demand, producing an immanent relation of cause and effect.

Applying this to P4I—as a practice of contemplating the sayable and saying the contemplable—we can now offer a number of conclusions. In responding to the demand of language, the community speaks its own taking place and therefore assumes its own infancy as a positive condition of its striving. The demand is the immanent cause of the community as it feels the necessity to

constitute itself out of itself, using the only medium at its disposal: language. Given this structure of the demand, the community is equally passive and active in that participants respond to a demand that their very interaction makes possible in the first place. On this interpretation, the silencing of the teacher's Voice is not so participants can listen to each other's interests and cultivate reasonableness through deliberative evaluations and judgments according to the oath that has been taken. Instead, in P4I, the idea is to listen to the impersonal and disinterested demand of language as such. The P4I circle is therefore not just the circulation of reasoned viewpoints on a topic of shared interest but rather a space for a demand to be experienced and experimented with without knowing how the experiment will go or how it should go or where it should go. In sum, if P4C emphasizes logical talk, P4I emphasizes ontological talk, or talk that hits upon and responds to the demands of language as such.

Again, while this might all seem rather abstract, it actually describes a very real phenomenon for anyone who has facilitated a P4I session: Children feel compelled to respond to a demand that is not reducible to their interests or desires. There is an excitement in being *taken up* or *carried away* by a demand that one does not fully understand or comprehend but nevertheless is compelling. And if this sounds overly passive, the key point is that the community itself, through dialogue, is the agent that carries itself away from itself! This demand calls forth language in its infancy, as an experiment in speaking that constitutes the self and the community without recourse to negation (of the unreasonable for the reasonable) or any telos or destiny (as a guarantor of legitimate speech). Instead, there is only the loop between demand and contemplation that drives dialogue this way and that. The teacher exposes the demand that allows the students to speak, to repotentialize their speaking so that the infancy of speaking can materialize itself. In turn, the community responds to the demand through its own *use of itself* or its auto-affection in the form of rule generation (as will be explored in the next chapter). Rules on this interpretation are precisely the technique a community uses to carry itself away, to take itself up.

Here is but one example. During a P4I session with college students in a class titled "Inquiry and Dialogue in the Arts" one of us (Tyson) put up on the screen Magritte's famous painting *Ceci n'est pas une Pipe* (1929). No one showed any interest in the image whatsoever, and there was silence in the room. Finally Tyson asked, "What questions does this painting ask of us?" Notice how this question directed attention toward what the image demanded (not toward interests students might have in the image). The image was demanding several

kinds of questions such as “what is an image?” or “what is a pipe?” or “are there not different kinds of pipes with degrees of ‘reality’?” or “what makes something the kind of thing that it is anyway?” The students responded to these demands through dialogic contemplation, the source of which was nothing more than their capacity to speak (their collective infancy). And through the course of the dialogue, they started to formulate rules and procedures for answering these questions that were not dictated by any laws of reasonability predicated beforehand but rather by the seeming “irrationality” of the image itself (by and through their exposure to a demand). There was no Voice there to ensure a separation between blessed from cursed speech (and thus ensure a certain telos toward the correct procedure or the correct answer), and students did not take an oath to only speak “reasonably” (thereby prematurely cursing themselves in the process). They were taken up and carried away by the image—not *toward* a specific destination (as prescribed by the teacher’s Voice), but rather *around* the questions the image demanded of them. As such, there was only the self-propelling striving (toward what, we don’t know) of continually repotentializing the dialogue through the only resource at hand: the infancy of speech in relation to a demand placed upon the community by the image.

What Then of the Facilitator in the Community of Infancy?

Dilan: There’s a difference between time and how we keep track of time. Time is going on. Without time we would all be frozen, like one frame in a movie.

Noopur: (Agrees.) There are scientific reasons for 24-hour day. In Egypt time is what balances life. Without time there would be series of events without stopping.

At this point a P4I facilitator feels compelled to intervene: “But Noopur, how could there be a ‘series of events’ without time? What do you think of Dilan’s distinction between time and how we measure time? Does everybody agree that without time we would all be frozen?” This intervention would certainly appear reasonable, considering that it allows the facilitator to point out an apparent contradiction (series of events without time) and to identify an important distinction (two types/uses of time) that may otherwise go unnoticed. And indeed, if the primary goal is to improve students’ thinking skills according to the ultimate criterion of reasonableness, the facilitator would need to intervene to ensure the movement toward the intended goal. The facilitator must make

the question *function* in accordance with a certain telos (destiny). The teacher must sanctify the language of the students through a certain form of linguistic baptism. And yet there is a deep sense that this process is valuable in itself as an experience in and with language and that any kind of intervention would take away from the experience, leading students from language taking place to language as it is destined to become: rational, democratic discourse.

This is where the facilitator has to make a decision. It is the decision between inquiry and infancy. Intervention means continuing the ritual of teaching by reaffirming the Voice as the guarantor of reasonableness—stepping in from outside the dialogue to keep the dialogue on track, maintain its course onward toward its destiny in reasonableness and fair judgment. Only if the teacher opts not to intervene (as a priest, blessing the process), becomes *in-fans*, as it were, can they keep open the experience of infancy for the students. If we want to preserve what we believe to be the unique contribution of P4C to education, that is, the experience of infancy, we, as teachers, need to lose our Voices, suspend the sacrament of language, and abandon the oath and the curse as modes of discoursing with students. We also cannot simply project the Voice outward (into the novel or the community of inquiry itself, both of which are proposed by Lipman). Once the Voice (in whatever form) is neutralized and the demand released from the oath, the students can finally speak and hear the event of their speech taking place. They are thrown back upon themselves (abandoned, as it were), without a frame of reference that would permit them to compare or evaluate their individual contributions in relation to some higher authority. (This also means that the students understand that whatever is being said, however factually wrong, illogical, or contradictory it may be, is not sanctioned by the facilitator.)

But what kind of speech does the teacher offer the community when his/her Voice is de-activated? What happens after the demand is exposed and has opened up a space for speaking to take place? On our account, the facilitator does not simply disappear. Indeed, the demand is faint and easily lost on the members of the community. The facilitator must *continue to hold a space for the demand* even after the space is opened. This is a risky position as one must assert the taking place of language without recourse to truth or falsehood, without the guarantee of an oath to the laws of reasonableness to point the way toward desirable outcomes. But if this is a risky position, it is also somewhat comical as the teacher-as-not-a-teacher continually undermines their Voice by asserting the positivity of language in its infancy. Here we would like to argue that speech of the teacher-as-not-a-teacher takes on the performative characteristics of the

clown. The clown is a paradoxical figure who remains close to the laws of the schoolhouse, and, at the same time, abdicates all authority when it comes to the sacredness of language (what and how to speak). The clown is, simply put, the one who cannot not speak despite a lack of content or procedural knowledge. They do not take oaths or utter blasphemy (as they would certainly be killed or excommunicated). Instead, their speech is infantile, without guilt and blame, without curse or blessing. “Repeat after me, I do not know how to talk but I cannot not speak!” is itself a special kind of parody that enacts the taking and making of an oath while also profaning it in the very same gesture. But what does such speech look like in practice?

The first form is the question. On this point, we agree with P4C theorists and practitioners such as Lipman and Sharp, yet with a difference. In traditional P4C the question has a function, as defined by the ultimate criterion of reasonableness. The teacher’s questions manifest an oath to this criterion and work to maintain the directionality of the speech of the students. These questions are ultimately blessed by the laws of reasonableness that they uphold. And in turn, by answering them, the students likewise make an oath (also cursing themselves). Like P4C, Agamben seems to favor the question as a privileged mode of philosophical dialogue. Indeed, several of his book titles are questions (*What Is an Apparatus?* and *What Is Philosophy?*). Yet these questions have *no function*. They do not manifest an oath to reasonableness. Instead, these questions only have a use. Use, for Agamben, is “completely emancipated from every relation to a predetermined end, in order to affirm itself.”³⁵ Use precedes and exceeds any given function. Such questions do not know in advance where the inquiry *ought* to lead or even how it will be pursued (according to certain laws of reasonableness or democratic processes of deliberation). It rather opens up speaking to the possibility of contemplating its own infancy, its own potentiality to be spoken (which is also its impotentiality to not *not* be spoken). It is a pure affirmation of speaking that does not separate truth and lie at the onset through certain, unquestioned criteria (such as reasonableness) that determine which questions are appropriate and when it is appropriate to ask them. Instead, it is a true adventure in speaking made possible by the suspension of the sacrament of language.

The second form of speech offered by the facilitator is the parable. They do not curse or praise, as these are forms of speech that promote learning: cursing indicates what went wrong and praising indicates what went right. Yet parables teach *nothing*. They are radically inoperative forms of speech. As Franz Kafka argues, “Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely parables and

of no use in daily life,”³⁶ hence the need for Jesus to tell the apostles the parable of the sower: because his previous parables were pedagogical “failures.” The lesson of the parable seems to be silenced, and as such, educationally suspect. Yet Agamben finds in the parable a redemption of speech itself. In a biblical context, parables build similarities between this reality and the Kingdom. The Kingdom is therefore put in close proximity to what is at hand in our everyday world. The mystery and ineffability of the Kingdom become present to us through the parable, which simultaneously works to sanctify the everyday and to profane the sacred. They are, in this sense, paradoxical formulations that separate and conjoin opposites without sacrifice. Just as Jesus’s parables make the beyond of the Kingdom present in this life, the parable enables us to speak that which is beyond language (language’s speakability) without negation. Summarizing, Agamben writes,

The parable on the “word of the Kingdom” is then a parable on language, that is, on what still and always remains for us to understand—our being speakers. Comprehending our dwelling in language does not mean knowing the sense of words, with all its ambiguities and subtleties. It rather means noticing that what is at stake in language is the proximity of the Kingdom, its similarity to the world—the Kingdom is so close and so similar that we struggle to acknowledge it.³⁷

On our reading, the Kingdom is language’s infancy, which is so close that it is easily sacrificed by language in the name of communicating this or that sense. Whereas Lipman’s articulation of P4C emphasizes philosophical growth, progress, and development through the questioning of the ambiguities and subtleties of words—or in Lipman’s formulation, “help children make better use of more familiar words”³⁸—it is precisely the ambiguities and subtleties of parables that are to be preserved by the facilitator without Voice that ensures children have a philosophical experience of infancy. The parable thus leaves only questions that are not directed toward a destiny (learning reasonability). Instead they abandon the participants to infancy itself.

Both questions and parables expose the demand to speak (without the support of the Voice as an ultimate arbiter of truth or falseness). They are modes of speech that are infantile and thus embody, *at the same time*, both the potentiality of the lie and the truth *before* such distinctions are instituted in the form of laws of reason. They are also speech without authority that nevertheless does not abandon the position of the teacher (teacher-as-not-a-teacher, teacher as clown). Furthermore, for Lipman and Sharp, the teacher’s questions are motivated by the

need to help children *learn* certain dispositions oriented toward certain predetermined outcomes. The questions fulfill the oath to reasonableness. Yet in asking infantile questions and offering up parables, facilitator's speaking is not motivated by reasonable *ends*. Such speaking has no ends in sight beyond the experience of the demand to speak speaking's speakability with others. Thus what is "discovered" through P4I is not the ability to achieve an end (a destiny) so much as the forgotten means (infancy) that open language up to free use.

To conclude, we can once again return to the experience above concerning the image *Ceci n'est pas une Pipe*. In this dialogue, Tyson embodied the paradoxical location of the teacher-as-not-a-teacher. He embodied the laws of the schoolhouse by calling the class to session and by putting the image on the screen. At the same time, he rendered inoperative the authority of his own Voice by gesturing away from himself toward the image and *its* demand. Throughout the ensuing dialogue, he did not insert questions to keep students on track to learn specific dispositions in reasonability. Instead, his questions were prompts for the students to continue to use their own linguistic infancy to keep listening to the demand (even despite a lack of personal or shared interest). Thus, he was abnegating the professional role of the P4C facilitator whose mission it is to baptize certain kinds of speech as legitimate (as reasonable and democratic) and to model such speech through their questions. Instead, he was clowning with the students, offering strange paradoxes ("what if an actor held a pipe and pretended to smoke it, would that be a pipe or something else?" or "if an animated cartoon smoked a pipe would the drawing be a pipe because if was fulfilling its function as a pipe for the animated character?") that were themselves responses to the dialogue of the community. Like the court jester, he was in service to the use of the community but only insofar as he remained *irresponsible* toward the sacrament of language.

The Profanity of Infancy

The community of infancy is neither a sacred baptism nor merely a meaningless and empty blasphemy (of communicative capitalism). Instead of rejecting the current state of suspension by a return to the sacredness of the oath, the community of infancy offers a paradoxically profane alternative. If we are living in the eclipse of the sacrament of language, then a community of infancy offers a suspension of this suspension through an experience that no longer functions within the dialectic of the blessing and curse, of truth and falsity, of pledging and

perjury. As an alternative to either the sacred Voice of the teacher (as the one who knows and thus is granted the authority to baptize) or the empty, nihilistic speech of the teacher as merely a jaded bureaucrat, what we have here is the speech of the teacher-as-not-a-teacher or as a hollow in language that keeps open the possibility for engaging in a communal experience of language's unspeakable speakability demanding to be spoken. Rather than a paradigm for the sacred function of speech, in the community of infancy language is now freed from its sacred function (based on the sacrament of language) and made available for the students to be used in new and different ways, allowing for a profane form of educational life.

This also means that educational philosophy—as an ontological inquiry into education—is always already a parody of philosophy. While philosophy attempts to reinstate the sacrament of language (and thus divide truth from falsehood, or at least provide certain analytic and empirical laws to follow on the quest), educational philosophy as a parody of this process gives philosophy an education in its own potentiality to be otherwise than the gatekeeper of truth. What we find in the philosophical practice of community of infancy is a minor practice or weak practice that does not speak the truth but rather explores what is possible when the demand (the need/necessity) of infancy carries practitioners away. On this view, the community of infancy is precisely the hinge through which education can become philosophical and philosophy can become educated. The rest of this book is one such experiment.