Chapter 13
Of (Auto-)Immune Life: Derrida, Esposito, Agamben

Michael Lewis

1 The Political Life

Why is there such a marked preference for speaking of bio-*ethics* rather than bio-*politics*, in traditional Anglophone analytic philosophy? It is as if life were something pure and unscathed, wholly natural and naturally whole, uncontaminated by politics, law, and power. It is the task of this essay to demonstrate that this is not the case and therefore it is not possible simply to address life on the level of the individual and the ethical. For life cannot be thought as whole and unscathed in its individual propriety. Life cannot be wholly immunised against what does not, properly speaking, belong to it. To think otherwise is to "naturalise" life, to think of life as a purely natural entity, which is to fall victim to ideology, since nature is never uncontaminated by culture, and life is never free of politics.

In speaking of the political nature of life we should immediately call to mind Aristotle's definition of man as "by *nature* a political animal" (*ho anthrōpos physei politikon zōion*) (*Politics* 1253a2–3, emphasis added) and Foucault's famous statement according to which a revolution has taken place in the history of this notion: "For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being into question" (Foucault 1990 [1976], p. 143).

Some of the ideas contained in this essay were first presented at the University of Brighton (28th March 2011), the University of Warwick (January 18th 2011), and—albeit obliquely—at Manchester Metropolitan University (26th February 2009). I must thank Darian Meacham for his help with the final version.

M. Lewis (✉)
University of the West of England, Bristol, UK
e-mail: Mike.lewis@uwe.ac.uk

D. Meacham (ed.), *Medicine and Society, New Perspectives in Continental Philosophy*, Philosophy and Medicine 120, DOI 10.1007/978-94-017-9870-9_13

One could approach the political life of man from one of two points of view: that of the power which comes ever more intimately to govern life, and that of the life steadily being overwhelmed. Here, partly due to the nature of the present volume, I shall examine the latter. To this end, let us ask the following question: what must life *be* if it is capable of rendering itself vulnerable to the incursion of political power? Our exploration of this question will revolve around the notions of *immunity*—the "immune system"— and auto-immunity. The immune system is that which, by rights, might have been thought to protect the individual against such intrusions into the "body proper," our own flesh, while "*auto*-immunity" describes the way in which this immunity can always turn against itself, undermining the organism's immune defenses, for better or worse.

Autoimmunity describes the origin of a breach in the supposedly impermeable boundaries of the individual which opens that individual self to its "other," rendering the immune individual inherently *communal*, which is to say *political in its very organismic life*.

Our task here is to show how the immunity of the human animal must be understood not to oppose but to first make possible the most basic form of community. Our guides will be the two thinkers who have most profoundly explored this notion of immune and autoimmune life: Jacques Derrida and Roberto Esposito. To conclude, we shall address some questions to the "immunitary paradigm" by describing an alternative conception of life and its relation to the political proposed by Giorgio Agamben.

2 Immunity and Identity: The Philosophical Importance of Immunity

The philosophical question at stake in the notion of immunity is the question of identity: it concerns the most basic ontological unit, the most primitive thing in existence, the individual substance, and we shall see that it ends up placing the substantial character of this individuality—its self-sufficiency or completeness—in doubt.

Philosophy has for the greater part of its history defined identity in an oppositional way, and that is to say in terms of the opposition between self and what is not self, self and other. In order to function, this definition must presuppose the principles of non-contradiction and excluded middle, according to which—in this case—one cannot be both one's self and an other at the same time, and hence—given that there is no third possibility—the exclusion of the other fully defines what the self is. Thus the identity of each individual is determined by being opposed to the identity of every other individual. The self radically excludes all otherness: individuals are individual *substances* which do not depend on others for their existence, and they are radically separated from these others.

The notion of immunity has, broadly speaking, two senses: a biological sense and a legal or political sense. The relation of immunity to the individual substance is most clear in the case of biological immunity: the immune system is what protects the *identity* of the vital substance. The immune system constitutes the (porous and shifting) *boundary* between what belongs properly to oneself and what does not.

The immune system thus maintains a boundary between the vital systems of which it is a part and the outside, or, perhaps better, between the vital system and what threatens it, and this is what it means to have an "identity." As Esposito will point out, however, this boundary does not need to be understood, and in the end cannot be understood as it was in the early days of immunological science, and perhaps since the inauguration of philosophy, as a rigid, impermeable boundary. Biology—and not just biology—has in recent times given us a more intriguing way to understand this boundary, as one of a regulated *permeability*. On this account, a certain measure of alterity (otherness) is incorporated into the very identity (sameness) of the organism and installed as an essential part of the protective apparatus itself, as if one could not protect the identity of the self without incorporating a certain measure of otherness within it.

Immunity takes many forms. Here we shall be concerned with "adaptive immunity," in which contact with pathogens stimulates the development of antigens. Thanks to its "memory," the immune system can respond appropriately in the event of any future encounters with the same pathogens, or ones similar to it. More specifically, we shall address the intentional manipulation of the immune system through inoculation, in which a pathogen is deliberately and artificially introduced in order to stimulate immunity by means of an appeal to "immune memory." A classic example of inoculation may be found in the smallpox vaccination, where the human immune system is exposed to a different virus, that of cowpox, in such a way as to cause it to develop an immune response that will protect it not just against cowpox itself, but also against the more dangerous smallpox.

Hence the very notion of immunity will provide us—at the level of philosophy—with a new way of understanding *identity*, a self-identity that cannot be *opposed* to the other, but which is, at the most basic level, in community with others. In this way, by taking its lead from biology, philosophy alights upon the idea of a hospitality to the other which is essential to the very constitution of the self.[1]

This essay is an attempt to determine precisely how this immunity should be understood and how, in light of this notion, we should modify our philosophical concepts, particularly that of identity.

[1]The way in which a biological affair extends its relevance to ontology (and that is to say, philosophy) is captured by Esposito as follows, in relation to the most extreme disease of immune deficiency: "What is affected by AIDS [Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome] is not only a health protocol but an entire ontological scheme: the identity of the individual as the form and content of its subjectivity. […] [T]he disease destroys the very idea of an identity-making border: the difference between self and other, internal and external, inside and outside" (2011 [2002], p. 162).

3 Auto-Immunity

We may approach a hospitable and non-hostile understanding of immunity by attending to the phenomenon of *auto*-immunity, immunity to one's self, which amounts to the self's attacking its own organs, tissues and processes, including the very immune system which was to have protected it and its identity. Autoimmunity would therefore be an immunity against one's *self*. I am specifically interested in the concept in the precise sense of the self's attacking the system which renders the maintenance of this self possible by separating it rigorously from its other—an immune response that weakens or destroys the organism's immunity.

We should here distinguish between the way "autoimmunity" is used in biology and the more basic ontological sense which philosophy gives to it. In the latter, the self undermines its own completeness, and this incompleteness means that the self is open to everything *other* from the very beginning. This openness and relationality is a permanent ontological state. This philosophical or ontological notion of autoimmunity finds expression in the biological sense of "autoimmunity" as the possibility that the organism might misrecognise certain parts of itself (cells, tissue, even entire organs) as foreign or threatening and hence to be rejected; but at the same time, the organism can also be deceived into misrecognising something foreign as its own, thus making possible the act of transplantation and all manner of artificial grafts. The difference between the philosophical sense of autoimmunity and the biological sense is that philosophical autoimmunity describes a permanent state that characterises all substances, while biological autoimmunity is a *possibility* which may or may not be actualised in a particular organism.

The reason why a substance and—more narrowly speaking—an organism might have this tendency towards autoimmunity can be clarified by considering the way in which immunisation functions in the form of inoculation: by deploying a non-lethal form or dose of a certain pathogen in order to build up an entity's defense *against* that very pathogen or ones similar to it—as in the case of the smallpox vaccine.

When it comes to poisons and pathogens, if the immune defenses are not instituted in this way, the borders of the individual will be subject to all manner of ingressions, and eventually the boundary will become obscured by continual trespass, before vanishing altogether: this is the moment of ontological disintegration and biological death.

4 Derrida on Autoimmunity

In our investigation of immunity and autoimmunity, we shall begin with Derrida. This is for at least two reasons: One is that he is the most prominent and important thinker to deploy this vocabulary, and he uses it to speak of the rethinking of the ontology of *substance* that deconstruction was engaged in from the very beginning.

This is significant for us since our concern here is precisely the way in which the notion and structure of immunity might force us to rethink identity or substantiality.

The second reason is that an investigation of Derrida will lead us onto the work of the contemporary Italian philosopher, Roberto Esposito, who takes up the problem of immunity where Derrida left off and then carries it in two important new directions and into two new contexts: the *historical* unfolding of immunity in relation to the problem of biopolitics, and the relation between immunity and *community*.

But first we need to become acquainted with the philosophical relevance of immunity as Derrida understands it. The *loci classici* for Derrida's comments on autoimmunity were all written in the last decade of his life: "Faith and Knowledge" (1996), "Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides" (2001), and *Rogues* (2002).

In "Faith and Knowledge," from 1996, Derrida describes the way in which both religion and science (faith and knowledge) in their traditional forms rely on the notion of an absolute instance that would remain "immune" in the sense of "unscathed," untouched by otherness, and invulnerable to ingression: in other words, an instance of the purest sovereignty.

Derrida attempts to demonstrate the impossibility of such an immune instance by attending to the very logic of immunity itself, according to which it is always possible for immunity to turn back on itself and become *auto*immunity. In this way, the supposedly complete totality perforates and breaches its own totality. From the very start, deconstruction was concerned to show that anything which presents itself as a totality cannot do so without referring to some other thing from which it distinguishes itself; in other words, the substance has to enter into *relation* from the very beginning, and this is the very source of its own possibility. The necessity of such a recourse inevitably contaminates the pure autochthony and autarchy of any totality. The reference of the same—finite totality—to the other is a necessary relation. And this other in turn must refer to *another other* in order to constitute its own identity. And this process of referring will go on to infinity. Thus the identity of the same can never be entirely stabilised, determined once and for all. This means that the reference to the other lays one open to a loss of identity, an identity which one will never in truth have had. The novelty of "Faith and Knowledge" is its describing this self-undermining or self-deconstruction of an only putatively absolute instance in terms of *immunity* and its *autoimmune* recoil.

I shall cite three passages from this text in order to demonstrate that Derrida begins by speaking of the notion of immunity in the context of faith and knowledge, before going on to show how the same notion functions in the contexts of politics, law, Christianity, and biology. He will then suggest that, if one takes one's mark from the biological context, the notion of (auto)immunity can be generalised without limit to all identities.

Here are Derrida's words, which introduce the idea of the impossibility of absolute immunity in the case of religion:

> The same movement that renders indissociable religion and tele-technoscientific reason in its most critical aspect reacts inevitably *to itself*. It secretes its own antidote but also its own power of auto-immunity. We are here in a space where all self-protection of the unscathed, of the safe and sound, of the sacred (*heilig*, holy) must protect itself against its own

> protection, its own police, its own power of rejection, in short against its own, which is to say, against its own immunity. It is this terrifying but fatal logic of the *auto-immunity of the unscathed* that will always have associated science and religion. (Derrida 2002 [1996], pp. 79–80)[2]

These lines may be taken to describe the starting point of Roberto Esposito's project, and indeed the latter cites this passage in *Immunitas* (2011 [2002], pp. 52–53). In this connection, one should also note that Derrida here inserts a footnote on the *political* relevance of the notion of immunity, which associates immunity with *community* on exactly the same (etymological) grounds as Esposito: "The 'immune' (*immunis*) is freed or exempted from the charges, the service, the taxes, the obligations (*munus,* root of the common of community)" (Derrida 2002 [1996], p. 80n27).[3]

Derrida goes on to speak of the way in which the idea of immunity is then transplanted into the domains of law ("diplomatic immunity," for instance) and Christianity (the legal inviolability of the space of the temple), before moving on to the example which is most crucial to us here, a chronologically later use of the term "immunity" in the context of biological life. Here Derrida ventures an extremely helpful and clear definition of *auto*-immunity. In this passage, we should heed the way in which the reference to biological immunity *in particular* seems to authorise Derrida in asserting the *generality* of autoimmunity:

> It is *especially* in the domain of biology that the lexical resources of immunity have developed their authority. The immunitary reaction protects the "indemnity" of the body proper in producing antibodies against foreign antigens. As for the process of *auto*-immunisation, which interests us particularly here, it consists for a living organism, as is well known and in short, of *protecting itself against its self-protection* by destroying its own immune system. As the phenomenon of these antibodies is extended to a broader zone of pathology and as one resorts increasingly to the *positive* virtues of immuno-depressants destined to limit the mechanisms of rejection and to facilitate the tolerance of certain organ transplants, we feel ourselves authorised to speak of a sort of *general logic of auto-immunisation*. (Derrida 2002 [1996], p. 80, emphases added)[4]

---

[2]At least two important works in English have in recent years made the notion of autoimmunity their central focus: Martin Hägglund's *Radical Atheism* and Michael Naas's *Miracle and Machine*.

[3]Derrida gives a succinct account of this part of "Faith and Knowledge" in *Rogues*: "The formalisation of this autoimmune law was there carried out around the *community* as *auto-co-immunity* (the common of community having in common the same duty or charge [*munus*] as the immune), as well as the auto-co-immunity of humanity" (2005 [2003], p. 35).

[4]Here Derrida is perhaps abbreviating the full scope of "auto-immunity" in the biological sense: it refers not only to the immune system's attacking itself, but also to the immune system's attacking *other* parts of the organism and other processes that are taking place within it. That said, later in the same passage, Derrida might be seen as gesturing towards this when he speaks of the rejection of transplants, which at least seems to imply that an organism's immunity to itself can extend to parts other than the immune system itself. I am here indebted to Darian Meacham for his clarification of the biological sense of "auto-immunity".

It is crucial to note the way in which Derrida shifts from a negative to a positive version of autoimmunity: autoimmunity makes it possible for the integrity of the organism to be destroyed, it can precipitate the end of life, but it also opens up the possibility of prosthetic grafts, transplants, and implants, which can prolong life. The "intruder" to which one is hospitable may turn out to be an enemy or a friend. It is this duplicity in value that Derrida uses to authorise his *generalisation* of the logic of autoimmunity. The justification of this generalisation will become clearer as we go along.

In "Autoimmunity," six years later, in 2001, called upon to discuss the attacks of September the eleventh, Derrida recalls and redeploys this logic in the context of democracy and the anti-democratic threat to democracy which appears to come from outside but which is in fact an intrinsic consequence of democracy itself (in this context, American democracy).

Democracy will perhaps end up becoming the example of autoimmunity that Derrida privileges, even more than the biological, and indeed we might surmise that while it was the *double* (positive and negative) connotations of the biological sense of immunity that allowed him to generalise the notion, one of the most important results of this will have been that it allows him to understand the *political* form of autoimmunity to be found in democracy. Before himself quoting the passage I have cited on "the *auto-immunity of the unscathed*" (2002 [1996], pp. 79–80), Derrida comments on his earlier text as follows: "I there proposed to extend to *life in general* the figure of an autoimmunity whose meaning or origin first seemed to be limited to so-called natural life or to life pure and simple, to what is believed to be the purely 'zoological,' 'biological,' or 'genetic'" (2003 [2001], p. 187n7).

In his later quotation, to reflect the particular context into which this passage has been transplanted, Derrida underscores the word "terrifying" and goes on to suggest that, according to the logic of auto-immunity, the greatest threat of terror comes from within, in that destruction of the immune system which allows the relatively strict border between one's self and the outside to collapse, and along with it one's very identity, not because of an external enemy's attack, but as a result of internal corruption. "My vulnerability is thus, by definition and by structure, by situation, without limit. Whence the terror. Terror is always, or always becomes, at least in part, 'interior.' And terrorism always has something 'domestic,' if not national, about it. […] [T]he enemy is *also always* lodged on the inside of the system it violates and terrorises" (2003 [2001], p. 188n7).

In *Rogues*, from the following year, 2002, the value of this generalised sense of autoimmunity for thinking about democracy becomes more clear. Here, Derrida shows in detail how the threat to democracy does not simply approach from outside, and neither is it merely a contingent defect of certain (totalitarian or imperialistic) democracies; rather, it is inherent to the very *idea* of democracy itself. Accordingly, he speaks of two (autoimmune) possibilities for a democratic process, two ways in which a democracy by its very nature is susceptible to becoming *non*-democratic:

(1) The first possibility is that the democratic process may elect a non-democratic party who have vowed, if elected, to abolish the very democratic process itself. Here the threat issues from the outside but is nevertheless a possibility that democracy lays itself open to as a result of its very essence.
(2) The second possibility is that democracy, in order to ward off this threat, suspends its own democratic character and cancels an election in which this eventuality is likely to occur (as was the case in Algeria in 1992). Thus democracy renders itself temporarily non-democratic in order to protect its identity *as* democratic. It infects itself with a measured dose of the poison which it is trying to immunise itself against.

One might think of these two autoimmune possibilities of democracy as the negative and positive values inherent to the very concept of democracy, since one would allow it to be abolished, while the other would temporarily hold it in abeyance in order ultimately to reinstate it. The two possibilities are not dissociable: that democracy *can* be suspended means that it can disfigure its own identity in order to preserve that identity, but always at the risk of losing it altogether (2005 [2003], pp. 30–3, cf. ibid. p. 35).

Derrida himself speaks explicitly of "immunisation" and then "auto-immunisation" in this context:

> [in Algeria, in 1992,] they decided in a sovereign fashion to suspend, at least provisionally, democracy *for its own good,* so as to take care of it, so as to immunise it against a much worse and very likely assault. […] [T]he hypothesis here is that of a taking of power, or rather, of a transferring of power (*kratos*) to a people (*dēmos*) who, in its electoral majority and following democratic procedures, would not have been able to avoid the destruction of democracy itself. Hence a certain suicide of democracy. Democracy has always been suicidal, and if there is a to-come for it, it is only on the condition of thinking life otherwise, life and the force of life. […] [/] There is something paradigmatic in this autoimmune suicide. (2005 [2003], p. 33)

5 Roberto Esposito: Legal and Biological Immunity

Roberto Esposito, along with Giorgio Agamben, is one of the most significant philosophers to have emerged from Italy in the last century. He takes Derrida's thought of immunity as his point of departure and immediately begins to develop it in a somewhat different direction, or at least to take it further than Derrida himself did, in a way that is inflected by the work on community undertaken by Derrida's friend, Jean-Luc Nancy.[5]

[5]This hesitation between a new direction and an explicitation reflects an ambivalence in Esposito's own position: "the category of immunisation that Derrida only hints at *or* takes in another direction is ushered back into the foreground, but in a new light" (Esposito 2011 [2002], p. 55, translation modified, emphasis added).

Esposito focuses on two aspects of the word "immunity," the legal and the biological, and, in a way that is reminiscent of Derrida's generalisation of immunity on the basis of its biological sense, Esposito will use a certain characteristic of the biological notion to rethink immunity, while taking it somewhat beyond Derrida in the direction of the relation between immunity and *community*.

Let us begin with the legal sense of immunity. The intrinsic relation between immunity and community is perhaps the most crucial insight of Esposito's work. This link is suggested by etymology, in that both words include the Latin root, "*munus,*" which Esposito defines as "an office—a task, obligation, duty (also in the sense of a gift to be repaid)" (Esposito 2011 [2002], p. 5).

The Latin language has at least two words for "gift": *munus*, which refers to a gift that is *given*—rather than a gift *received*, which is designated by the word "*donum*":[6] "the *munus* indicates only the gift that one gives, not what one receives" (Esposito 2010 [1998], p. 5, cf. ibid. p. 139). The *munus* is also a gift that, once given, obliges the recipient to reciprocate (2010 [1998], p. 5). This reciprocal obligation is what binds individuals together to form a *community* (*communitas*). By contrast, in the context of this *munus,* those who are "immune" are those exempt from this obligation to reciprocate, because they have not received the gift in the first place: they have no offices to perform. The immune are thus removed to a place outside of the community (2011 [2002], p. 5).

The real key to Esposito's account, however, is the biological interpretation of immunity, for he will use a certain interpretation of the biological immune system to rethink the relation between immunity and community in light of an *historical* situation characterised by an extreme immunisation affecting all areas of *social* life.

Esposito defines biological immunity as "the refractoriness of an organism to the danger of contracting a contagious disease" (2011 [2002], p. 7). And the way in which this is achieved is through "an attenuated form of infection [that] could protect against a more virulent form of the same type. From here came the deduction, proven by the effectiveness of the various vaccines, that the inoculation of non-lethal quantities of a virus stimulates the formation of antibodies that are able to neutralise pathogenic effects at an early stage" (2011 [2002], p. 7).

Already we can see that the immune system forms a boundary of a strange kind: in order to protect the integrity of the self, it gives entry to the forces of dissolution. In this way, the immune process is "structurally aporetic"[7] (2011 [2002], p. 8, cf. ibid. p. 159). Life can remain alive only by incorporating death. The opposition between life and death is thus no longer rigorous. Indeed, in philosophy, "life" has always tended to perturb the rigour of oppositions.

[6]Although, strictly speaking, *munus* may be understood as a *species* of the genus *donum* (Esposito 2010 [1998], p. 4).

[7]Esposito also says "homeopathic," since the cure for the poison is itself (something similar to) the poison or infecting agent (2011 [2002], p. 8).

6 The Two Interpretations of Biological Immunity

For Esposito, it is of crucial importance that biological immunity can be interpreted in two different ways: either as a militaristic defense against the foreign, or as an hospitable relation to the other.

To understand the importance of this, we need to know something of Esposito's broader project. Esposito's task is a political one, and it is a task which has been lent urgency by the historical moment in which we find ourselves. The solution to the problem can be given only if the problem is correctly interpreted, and throughout his great trilogy, *Communitas* (1998), *Immunitas* (2002), and *Bios* (2004), Esposito tries to show that the "key" which allows us to discern and explain the most significant phenomena of our situation is "immunity."

Once in possession of this key, we should be able to recognise that the way immunity is functioning today in the social world is based on a misunderstanding or disambiguation of the notion, which has led to its relationship with *community* being distorted. This misuse of immunity might be summarised under the heading of "security" or "defence," the way in which the securing of national and social life against a supposedly dire threat has become the primary concern of government. Esposito thus speaks of "the hypertrophy of the security apparatuses that are increasingly widespread throughout contemporary societies" (2011 [2002], p. 16).

Esposito interprets this as a destructive and self-destructive form of immunisation, in which the immunisation has accelerated to such a pace that it has begun to outrun the very threat which it was originally intended to ward off: "Instead of adapting the protection to the actual level of risk, [the "self-protective syndrome"] tends to adapt the perception of risk to the growing need for protection—making protecting itself one of the major risks" (ibid. p. 16). He concludes: "As in all areas of contemporary social systems, neurotically haunted by a continuously growing need for security, this means that the risk against which the protection is meant as a defense is actually created by the protection itself" (ibid. p. 141, translation modified). This is the point at which immunisation, understood as the construction of a rigid barrier between self and other, turns against itself and starts to endanger the very identity which it was supposed to be securing.

This exacerbation might be understood to result from a misunderstanding of the nature of the immune system according to the first of the *biological* interpretations that Esposito identifies: the immune system as a militaristic defense mechanism, absolutely refusing entry to all otherness (cf. ibid. p. 152). This is the misuse or disambiguation of "immunity" to which we referred earlier. This obsolete understanding may well be at the root of our political problems.

In any case, by means of this hyperbolic attempt at immunisation, the community ends up becoming autoimmune, attacking its own defences and leaving itself vulnerable to the forces that would bring about its disintegration. The excess of immunisation affects all levels of society from the international "globe," to the national community, to the individuals whose increasing privatisation and isolation from one another have been persistently analysed by Slavoj Žižek, amongst others,

in terms of a "pathological narcissism" which results in an acute "fear of the other" (cf. Žižek 1994, pp. 7–8).

In light of this, the question that confronts us is how to restore community. Since community and immunity are inherently bound together, the answer to this question will need to tell us what community must be if it is not opposed to immunity. An immune system is indeed necessary to the integrity of the individual, and this integrity is in turn integral to the community itself, unless we think of community as a fusional substance without individuality. As we shall see, Esposito, following those "thinkers of community," Nancy and Georges Bataille in particular, but also Martin Heidegger, Immanuel Kant, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Esposito 2010 [1998], p. 15ff), thinks that this would eliminate the "com," "*cum,*" or "*sym-*" of community and hence eradicate community itself, properly understood. We need rather to rethink community in a *certain* conjunction with immunity which will allow us to avoid the two extremes of absolute individuation (immunity without community) and non-individuated fusion (community without immunity).

Thus we must not detach immunity from community, but rather "deepen[…] the internal contradiction" between them in order to stress the imbrication of immunity and community *in* its very aporetic character (Esposito 2011 [2002], p. 16). This will involve Esposito in an attempt to apply the *second* of the biological interpretations of immunity to the legal sphere, as if a more advanced and politically promising understanding of immunity had been developed in the science which hit upon the notion of immunity only later. As Esposito puts it:

> I have sought the answer to the question with which I began at the very heart of the protective mechanism […] on the *biological* plane, in the immune system that ensures the safeguarding of life in the body of each individual. Not because the biological immune system is a neutral or original object compared to the derivative or metaphorical nature of other forms of social immunisation. On the contrary […] its functioning has been the object of an excess of meaning that threatens to erase, or at least confuse, its distinctive traits. (2011 [2002], pp. 16–17, emphasis added)

The excess to which Esposito refers here is the militaristic interpretation of the immune system as a border defence, allergic to all otherness. This is to be contrasted with the chronologically later interpretation which understands the immune system as akin to hospitality: "more recent study of the structure and functioning of the immune system seems to suggest another interpretive possibility, one that traces out a different philosophy of immunity" (ibid. p. 17). This philosophy will explain how "this new interpretation situates immunity in a non-excluding relation with its common [or communal] opposite. The essential point of departure […] is a conception of individual identity that is distinctly different from the closed monolithic one" (ibid. p. 17).

Esposito links this advance in interpretation to the history of *technology* and suggests that this new understanding of immunity and identity "has been made possible, even inevitable, by advances in genetic and bionic technologies: rather than an immutable and definitive given, the body is understood as a functioning construct that is open to continuous exchange with its surrounding environment" (ibid. p. 17). And crucially, he states that, "the immune system may very well be the

driving force behind this exchange" (ibid. p. 17). The immune system is thus not something opposed to the common, but is the very possibility of a genuine intertwining of self and other.

As proof of the validity of this new interpretation, Esposito offers the example of pregnancy and the fact that the mother's immune system under normal conditions does not reject the foetus it is carrying. Esposito avers that this refusal takes place not *in spite of* but *because of* the child's genetic heterogeneity, bestowed upon it by the father (ibid. p. 170). This is the phenomenon of "immune tolerance" (ibid. p. 166) and the related notion of "autotolerance," which stands in opposition to autoimmunity (ibid. p. 164): "if tolerance is a product of the immune system itself, it means that, far from […] rejecting [what is] other-than-self, it includes the other within itself, not only as its driving force but also as one of its effects" (ibid. p. 167). What the example of pregnancy reveals is that an immune defence is not necessarily destructive; in this context, the mother's immune system is "engaged in a furious battle" with the child, but this struggle is precisely what keeps the child alive (ibid. p. 170). And indeed, the mother's own distinct identity is also sustained by the same conflict: "difference and conflict are not necessarily destructive. Indeed, just as the attack of the mother protects the child, the child's attacks can also save the mother from her self-injurious tendencies" (ibid. p. 171). This would explain why Esposito says that, "once its negative power has been removed, the immune is not the enemy of the common, but rather something more complex that implicates and *stimulates* the common" (ibid. p. 18, emphasis added; cf. pp. 169–71).

It is precisely this embracing of otherness as a condition for the formation of identity rather than its antagonistic opposite that renders the militaristic interpretation of the immune system implausible:

> At this point the whole immune dynamic takes on a shape that cannot be assimilated into the current interpretation: rather than acting as a barrier for selecting and excluding elements from the outside world, it acts as a sounding board for the presence of the world inside the self. […] [The body's] boundaries do not lock it up inside a closed world; on the contrary, they create its margin, a delicate and problematic one to be sure, but still permeable in its relation to that which, while still located outside of it, from the beginning traverses and alters it. We could say that, contrary to all the military interpretations, the immune system is itself the instrument of this alteration. (ibid. p. 169, translation modified)

Esposito goes on to say that, "[a] perspective is thus opened up within the immunitary logic that overturns its prevailing interpretation. From this perspective, nothing remains of the incompatibility between self and other. The other is the form the self takes where inside intersects with outside, the proper with the common, immunity with community" (ibid. p. 171).

And it is at precisely this point that we should apply the biological interpretation of immunity to the political and legal form of immunity. Or perhaps, given that a literal community is *already* opened up at the biological level, such an application is not even needed, since the immune system itself will constitute the most elementary cell of a community between self and other, as if the biological were already *intrinsically* communal, and life always already political.

7 The Community

This, then, is how Esposito philosophically rethinks the immune system in terms of a porous logic of identity which he explicitly relates to our community with others; immunity *is* exposure and communication:

> [N]othing is more inherently dedicated to communication than the immune system. Its quality is not measured by its ability to provide protection from a foreign agent, but by the complexity of the response that it provokes: […] this is perhaps the only—certainly the first—experience of the stranger in relation to but also in the very constitution of the proper. […] [E]ach body is already exposed to the need for its own exposure. This is the condition common to all that is immune: the endless perception of its own finitude. (Esposito 2011 [2002], p. 174)

What we have in common is our mutual exposure, given to us by our immune systems, which expose us, in a measured way, to every form of otherness. This is Esposito's answer to the question, "can we imagine a philosophy of immunity that, without denying its inherent contradiction, even deepening it further, reverses the semantics in the direction of community?" (ibid. p. 165).

This leads us onto the way in which Esposito thinks this community of immune others, although here we can only touch upon its most prominent contours. As the subtitle of the introduction to Esposito's book devoted to the question of *communitas* indicates, this is a community of those who have "Nothing in Common."

This is an idea which Esposito inherits most immediately from Georges Bataille and Jean-Luc Nancy, and it is the one we have already broached in terms of the balance between absolute immunity and absolute community, individuation and dis-individuation. This new notion of immunity provides us with the theory of the "with" or the "com-" that we have been seeking. It will leave us with a community that is neither thought on the basis of a common property shared out between many individuals nor understood as an individual of a broader kind. Bataille and Nancy are heirs to Heidegger's deconstruction of the ontology of substance but they take that thought in a *communal* direction: their problem is how to think the relation between mortal singularities *without* substantialising or "reifying" that relation. If thought is condemned to think in terms of substances and their presence, according to an ousiological determination[8] that Esposito himself seems to take for granted here, we may speak of the "unthinkability of community" (2010 [1998], p. 1). Esposito describes this tendency of thought as its "mythological inclination" and expresses the problem as follows: "How are we to think the *pure relation* without supplying it with subjective substance? […] [T]hat void tends to present itself in almost irresistible fashion as fullness" (ibid. p. 15). Perhaps this refers only to the

[8]I take this term from Miguel de Beistegui (2004, p. 36). It refers to the identification of being with presence or substance (*ousia*, in Greek) which Heidegger and others associate with the beginning of philosophy as metaphysics and which they locate in the work of Aristotle, if not Plato, or even Parmenides.

failure of *philosophical* thought, which can be averted by means of the recourse to the natural science of *biology*, for this relationship becomes thinkable precisely on the basis of the second interpretation of biological immunity that we have been exposing.

8 Esposito and Derrida: History and Community

Two features differentiate Esposito's thinking of immunity from Derrida's: first, the historical tale which attempts if not to explain then at least to show how the political events of modernity can be unified and narrated.[9] This allows Esposito to at least address the idea of history and the specificity of the present day in a way that one might suspect Derrida, who has expressed doubts about the very notion of "history," is unable to.[10] It is as if Derrida's thought remains fundamentally structural or

[9]If there *is* a philosophy of history in Esposito as distinct from a mere narration, it is perhaps to be found *in embryo* in his notion of technology. History would therefore be a history of technology, as if technology had brought us to the ambivalent moment in which we stand, between two interpretations of immunity. We have already seen Esposito suggesting that the second, "hospitable" interpretation "has been made possible, even inevitable, by advances in genetic and bionic technologies" (2011 [2002], p. 17).

The relation between politics and life would thus be given a particular historical form by the level of technology that has been attained and the kind of technology that has been developed: "the connection between politics and life is radically redefined by the unstoppable proliferation of technology" (2011 [2002], p. 146). We might interpret this as saying that the ways in which power can directly act upon bare life without mediation are greatly enhanced by the manner in which technological systems have now infiltrated the most intimate interiors of our bodies and our relation to those bodies.

Once again, Esposito credits Nancy with the link between community and technology, or more precisely, *technē* (2011 [2002], p. 150–53). *Technē* may indeed be identified with the exposure to the other governed by the immune system, since *technē* is precisely the moment at which the supposedly proper, natural body of the self opens onto the non-natural other (2011 [2002], p. 151).

[10]Speaking of Derrida's theory of fundamentalist religious movements as reactions to the globalisation that *religion* has embraced in recent times, Esposito says the following: "this is hardly sufficient to resolve the question of religious immunity. The entropic dialectic we have just described would itself appear to be the final outcome of a *much more ancient process,* one whose beginnings have been preserved in the original semantic stratification of the religious phenomenon" (2011 [2002], p. 53, emphasis added). These he discovers in a text by the linguist, Emile Benveniste, which Derrida cites, but the implications of which, according to Esposito, he does not fully explore.

To begin an adequate defence of Derrida on this point, one would have to examine his last two seminars on *The Beast and the Sovereign*, which do deal with a history, albeit a history of texts, which coincide to a large extent with those addressed by Esposito. One would also need to examine the way in which "Faith and Knowledge" in particular, and indeed all of the texts on immunity, are unquestionably driven by "contemporary" concerns—at least in their deployment of this vocabulary. And more fundamentally, as Derrida points out in his dazzling interview, "Politics and Friendship," one would need to examine his early work on historicism from a Husserlian point of view (Derrida 2002 [1989], pp. 156–57).

synchronous, a theory of the nature of identity and its self-undermining *at all times,* in a way that is not subject to an unequivocally determinable historical change. One might relate this to Derrida's and Esposito's respective theories of democracy since for Esposito it seems that an end to the autoimmune threat might well be reached when the intertwining of community and immunity is properly thought, while for Derrida, the autoimmune, anti-democratic possibility is inherent to the very *idea* of democracy, and is hence eternally a part of it.[11]

Secondly, Esposito's much more (explicitly) developed theory of the way immunity is entwined with community; in other words, the way in which the self-undermining of the totality of the individual in its propriety *opens* the individual to a communal relationship. It is perhaps for this reason that Jean-Luc Nancy is a more predominant reference in Esposito's work than Derrida.

9 Conclusion. Agamben: Of a Possible Survival Beyond Immunity

Let us relate what we have achieved so far to the question with which we began: the question of bio-politics and thus, at least indirectly, bio-ethics. Esposito, deploying his thinking of the "dialectical" relationship between immunity and community, delineates his own relation to biopolitics by differentiating his approach from Giorgio Agamben's:

> [W]hat does it mean to say that politics is enclosed within the boundaries of life? […] the answer to this question should not be sought in the folds of a sovereign power that includes life by excluding it [Agamben's position]. Rather, what I believe it should point to is an epochal conjuncture out of which the category of sovereignty makes room for, or at least intersects with, that of immunisation. This is the general procedure through which the intersection between politics and life is realised. (Esposito 2011 [2002], pp. 138–39)

[11]"Derrida, rather, gives it a much less optimistic, even tragic characterisation. More than immunity or immunisation, he always speaks of 'autoimmunity' […]. The contemporary political situation can indeed be interpreted in the light of a similar destructive and self-destructive process. On this point I am in complete agreement with him. […] [/] Nevertheless, certain relevant differences remain in relation to the formation of the category of immunity that in Derrida emerges as somewhat extemporaneous, in the sense that immunity is linked neither with the theme of community [Derrida in fact does indicate this connection, as we have seen—M.L.] (which Derrida rejects in favour of the weaker concept, from my point of view, of friendship), nor with that of biopolitics, which is utterly extraneous to his thought [in fact, the final seminars on *The Beast and the Sovereign* demonstrate this to be false, at least up to a point—M.L.]. This isolation of the category of immunity […] impedes Derrida from fully grasping the dialectical character of immunity […]. In fact, Derrida doesn't treat the long-standing modern character of the immunitary paradigm, which emerges as crushed in the contemporary period. On the other hand, it is precisely the indissoluble, albeit negative, relation with *communitas* that opens for me the possibility of a positive, communitary reconversion of the same immunitary *dispositif*" (Esposito 2006, pp. 53–55, translation modified).

Esposito helpfully locates his own position by means of a critique of his fellow theorists of biopolitics, Agamben and Antonio Negri. He finds that in Agamben, generally speaking, biopolitics is thought in a "negative, even tragic" fashion, and in Negri it is thought in a positive, "productive, expansive" way (Esposito 2006, p. 50). Neither position satisfies Esposito, and his own rethinking of the relation between life and politics, immunity and community, manages to account for the fact that biopolitics may take on a positive *or* a negative form, which, according to Esposito, the one-sided theories of Agamben and Negri do not:

> I have tried to move the terms of the debate by providing a different interpretive key that is capable of reading them [the positive and the negative connotations of "biopolitics"] together, while accounting for the antinomical relation between them. All done without renouncing the historical dimension, as Agamben does, and without immediately collapsing the philosophical prospective into a political one, as Negri does. As you know, this hermeneutic key, this different paradigm, is that of immunity. (Esposito 2006, p. 50)

Hence, "[t]o grasp the dual potential biopolitics holds for destruction or affirmation, we have to go back to its founding relationship with the immune system, which constitutes both its transcendental condition and its functional model" (Esposito 2011 [2002], p. 145, translation modified, cf. ibid. p. 150).

Nevertheless, a brief excursion through Agamben's work might lead us to a different conclusion. For is there not in Agamben's work a notion of life that does without the notion of immunity altogether, and which might produce an alternative vision of biopolitics that Esposito is unable to envisage?

What does Agamben say of the life which lays itself open to politics? Does his thought in fact move beyond the horizon of immunity? What interests Agamben most about life in its contemporary form, life and the particular way in which it has become the object of politics and political power, is its absolute vulnerability. Esposito—following Foucault—will have stressed the importance of the shift from a sovereign paradigm to a purely biopolitical one, a shift which involves the removal of all mediation between power and biological life (Esposito 2011 [2002], pp. 14–15; pp. 112–13). Formerly this relation was mediated by a legal system of rights and laws which ensured that the citizen was subject to political power in their *public* form, but their private life, which included the reproductive capacities of *biological* life, remained within a separate sphere (cf. Agamben 1998 [1995], pp. 1–11). Biopolitics in its contemporary guise is defined by the collapse of this distinction. Even the most basic of the human being's biological functions is now immediately subject to political domination.

The most extreme, "paradigmatic" figure of this biopolitical situation is *homo sacer*, a figure defined in Roman law according to the ambiguity of the Latin adjective "*sacer*" which means both "sacred" and "condemned," a man guilty of a certain crime as a result of which they may be killed with impunity, but not ritually killed, not sacrificed (Agamben 1998 [1995], pp. 71ff). In other words, they are living and nothing more: "mere life," barely alive, without being possessed of the least dignity, rights, or legal protection. Theirs is a life of pure exposure to the

power of another, an other who enjoys an absolute power of decision over the survival of that life.

According to Agamben, the nature of life is potential. The same goes for *homo sacer* but in this case, life has been reduced to a minimal and utterly passive potential: "its capacity to be killed" (ibid. p. 8). It is subject to an external sovereign power to such an extent that both its survival and its perishing are beyond its control. It thus remains below the level of an animal in the sense that its very instinct for survival has been destroyed and yet it cannot commit suicide while it remains suspended in life by the hesitation of those who can exterminate it at will. The place in which the possible reduction of life to the level of *homo sacer* was most starkly brought to light was the concentration camp, metonymised by the name "Auschwitz" (ibid. pp. 114ff).

The crucial feature of *homo sacer* for our purposes is that, despite having just one possibility remaining, its own death at the hands of another—it nevertheless survives. It still lives. What are we to say of this in the context of immunity? Here we have a figure of life whose every form of defence has been broken down, it lacks even a will to survive in its individual integrity. It is as if in *homo sacer* we find a victim of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome nevertheless surviving, absolutely at the mercy of powers beyond his or her control: in this case, technological life-support and synthetic drugs, rather than the executing sovereign Other.

Is such a figure thinkable on either Esposito's or Derrida's account? Without an immune system, the identity of the living individual is supposed to disintegrate, and death to ensue. But Agamben locates an extremely surprising—in fact, empirically testified—kind of life which nonetheless endures even at this level: one thinks also of the marvellous example which he cites from Jakob von Uexküll, of the tick that lives for eighteen years without any stimulation at all (Agamben 2004 [2002], p. 47). It is as if life were a potential, a power for living that could somehow survive *without* immune defences, as a pure exposure and awaiting. As if, even when subjected to the absolute and unmediated power of an other, subsisting only in the hush before its sentence is pronounced, in the stay of execution before the coming of an unpredictable though certain event—death—life endured.

Here we might discern the influence of one of Agamben's teachers, Martin Heidegger. For the latter, the anticipation of an unpredictable end is a relation to death which characterises every human "life" even *before* that "life" has received any biological determinations, and perhaps even before that individual living substance can be understood as having any real or metaphorical "immune system." This would imply that life was first of all an exposure and a potential, a vulnerability to an invincible power, ultimately death itself, but at the same time nevertheless empowered by this possibility that will always remain outstanding, to the very end, even in the face of a complete collapse of the immune system. The one possibility that is always yet to come, a power we therefore retain for precisely as long as we are alive, is that of dying, and this is an absolutely solitary possibility, unique to each one of us, which leaves us *without* relation: "death reveals itself as that *possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to*

be outstripped. As such, death is something *distinctively* impending" (Heidegger 1962 [1927], p. 294).

The issue between Heidegger and Agamben will ultimately revolve around the question of whether this is essentially a power we have mastery over, or at least a possibility which is the source of our *active* power, or whether this power can, in extreme biopolitical situations of the kind Agamben describes, be given over to another, as a result of which we would be essentially related *to* this other, even here, but—contrary to Esposito's idea of community—in a relationship that would be asymmetrical.

But in either case, this suggests that life can be understood in a way that is ultimately more basic than all considerations of its immunity and community—if there is a relation to the other, it does not have the symmetry of communal being-with, and it is unrelated to immunity—in terms of a non-biological power exposed to the possibility which always stands at the border of life and which maintains the individual integrity of the substance even in the absence of any immune defences: and that is its own dying.

To be sure, this might all seem to confirm the negative, if not tragic characterisation of Agamben's thought which Esposito proposes, and to indicate the necessity of thinking life as an intimate mutual belonging of immunity and community. But if it offers *both* a theory of life prior to immunity *and* a way of thinking relation prior to the immunitary-communitary combination, then we should take it extremely seriously.

References

Agamben, G. (1991 [1982]). *Language and death: The place of negativity* (K. E. Pinkus & M. Hardt, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Agamben, G. (1998 [1995]). *Homo sacer: Bare life and sovereign power* (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Agamben, G. (1999 [1998]). *Remnants of Auschwitz: The witness and the archive* (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans.). New York: Zone Books.

Agamben, G. (1999). *Potentialities: Collected essays in philosophy* (D. Heller-Roazen (Ed., Trans.)). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Agamben, G. (2000 [1996]). *Means without end: Notes on politics* (V. Binetti & C. Casarino, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Agamben, G. (2004 [2002]). *The open: Man and animal* (K. Attell, Trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Aristotle. (1989). *Politics* (H. Rackham, Trans.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

de Beistegui, M. (2004). *Truth and genesis: Philosophy as differential ontology*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Derrida, J. (1989 [2002]). Politics and friendship (Interview with Michael Sprinkler). In E. Rottenberg (Ed. & Trans.), *Negotiations: Interventions and interviews, 1971–2001*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Derrida, J. (1994 [1993]). *Spectres of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning and the new international* (P. Kamuf, Trans.). London: Routledge.

Derrida, J. (2002 [1996]). Faith and knowledge: The two sources of "religion" at the limits of reason alone. In S. Weber & G. Anidjar (Ed. & Trans.), *Acts of religion*. London: Routledge.
Derrida, J (2003 [2001]). Autoimmunity: Real and symbolic suicides—a dialogue with Jacques Derrida (P. A. Brault & M. Naas, Trans.). In G. Borradori (Ed.), *Philosophy in a time of terror*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Derrida, J. (2005 [2003]). *Rogues: Two essays on reason*. (P-A. Brault & M. Naas, Trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Derrida, J. (2008). *The animal that therefore I am* (M-L. Mallet & D. Wills, Ed. & Trans). New York: Fordham University Press.
Derrida, J. (2009 [2008]). *The beast and the sovereign*, Volume I [2001–2002] (G. Bennington, Trans). M. Lisse, M-L. Mallet & G. Michaud (Eds.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Derrida, J. (2011 [2010]). *The beast and the sovereign*, Volume II [2002–2003] (G. Bennington, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Düttmann, A. G. (1996 [1993]). *At odds with AIDS: Thinking and talking about a virus* (P. Gilgen & C. Scott-Curtis, Trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Esposito, R. (2006). Interview with Timothy Campbell. (A. Paparcone, Trans.) *Diacritics*, *36*(2), 49–56.
Esposito, R. (2008 [2004]). *Bios: Biopolitics and philosophy* (T. Campbell, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Esposito, R. (2010 [1998]). *Communitas: The origin and destiny of community* (T. Campbell, Trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Esposito, R. (2011 [2002]). *Immunitas: The protection and negation of life* (Z. Hanafi, Trans.). Cambridge: Polity.
Esposito, R. (2012 [2007]). *Third person* (Z. Hanafi, Trans.). Cambridge: Polity.
Esposito, R. (2012 [2010]). *Living thought: The origins and actuality of Italian philosophy* (Z. Hanafi, Trans.). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Esposito, R. (2013 [2008]). *Terms of the political: Community, immunity, biopolitics* (R.N. Welch, Trans.). New York: Fordham University Press.
Foucault, M. (1990 [1976]). *The history of sexuality, 1: The will to knowledge* (R. Hurley, Trans.). London: Penguin.
Hägglund, M. (2008). *Radical atheism: Derrida and the time of life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Heidegger, M. (1962 [1927]). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.
Lacoue-Labarthe, P., & Nancy, J-L. (1997). *Retreating the political.* (S. Sparks Ed.). London: Routledge.
Naas, M. (2012). *Miracle and machine: Jacques Derrida and the two sources of religion, science, and the media*. New York: Fordham University Press.
Žižek, S. (1994/2005). *The metastases of enjoyment: Six essays on women and causality*. London: Verso.