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# 'Trust me, I do not know what I am talking about!': The voice of the teacher beyond the oath and blasphemy

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## ABSTRACT

Educational theorists ranging from Ivan Illich to Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons have described institutionalized schooling as a modernized, secular church, full of rituals, sacraments, and various incantations. For them, the function of the teacher as priest and schooling as baptism is highly problematic, separating education from the common world. As such, the educational theology of the school needs to be suspended in order for educational life to take on new meaning beyond the sacraments of learning. To further this line of inquiry, we turn to the work of Giorgio Agamben on the oath and its originary function of guaranteeing the truthfulness of language ('sacrament of language'). Insofar as the oath is also operable in learning (in the voice of the teacher), we argue that such operability can be suspended through a dialogic practice called 'community of infancy', thereby making possible new, profane forms of educational life beyond baptism.

## KEYWORDS

Ivan Illich; philosophy for children; P4C; Giorgio Agamben

## 1. Introduction

For critical theorist Ivan Illich, institutionalized schooling acts like a modernized, secular church, full of rituals and mystical incantations which 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,

[t]he 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. (Illich, 1970, p. 37)

Here 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' (ibid., p. 47). Stated differently, the major effect of schooling is the 'progressive underdevelopment of self- and community-reliance' (ibid., p. 3)—a removal of education from an immanence with social life as such. Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons (2010) add another important dimension to this argument. For them, the 'school-as-institution' (2013, p. 92) functions as a form of secular baptism that offers children a *Logo* or orientation for entering a specific world. 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', both Illich and Masschelein and Simons argue that the function of the teacher as priest ('sacrament of teaching') and schooling as baptism ('sacrament of learning') need to be suspended in order for new forms of educational life to be possible.

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 Giorgio Agamben, whose recent work, like that of Illich and Masschelein and Simons, concerns the entanglement of secular institutions with theological and economic discourses and practices.<sup>1</sup> While Illich and Masschelein emphasize the theological underpinnings of institutional forms (and the school in particular), Agamben turns toward the question of language and the voice, thus further developing the significance of Illich and Masschelein and Simons' work. For instance, in his book *The Sacrament of Language: An Archeology of the Oath* (2011), Agamben returns to the oath in order to understand the very origins and function of language. He states that the oath is 'the historical testimony of the experience of language in which man was constituted as a speaking being' (ibid., p. 66). To show how Agamben's exploration of the function of the 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 ('sacrament of language' underlying the 'sacrament of power') is also operable in education (as the voice of the teacher); (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 Philosophy for Children or what we call a 'community of infancy'. 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 (2007), we can describe this as a form of profanation 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' (Masschelein & Simons, 2013) and thereby making possible new forms of educational life beyond baptism.

## 2. Agamben: The role of philosophy in making inoperable the sacraments of language and power

Why does Agamben consider an understanding of the function of the oath so important and why does he believe that a suspension (rendering inoperative) of the oath is of utmost importance for current politics? Simply stated, before the advent of either religious ritual or political institutions, the oath was a linguistic utterance that 'confirm[ed] and guarantee[d]' (Agamben, 2011, p. 3) the order of things. Drawing on 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' (ibid., p. 4). Stated differently, the oath sutures together words and actions, language and world so that meaning is guaranteed. In this sense, the oath is akin to what Agamben (2009) previously has described as the 'signature' which is a special kind of statement that ensures the smooth translation of signifiers into signifieds.

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' (2011, p. 8) 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 archeology 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 but is internal to the present. This is a non-chronological 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. (2011, p. 11)

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' (2011, p. 30). 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! (ibid., p. 31)

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' (ibid., p. 44) 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.

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 rendered inoperative. 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' (2011, p. 43). 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 result is a coterminous splitting of language into logic and science on one side as pure management of statements and religion, art, and poetry on the other side as a signifying surplus. What is lost in both cases is an experience of language as both truth and error, as blessing and curse. Human language became possible when a living being

found itself co-originally 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. (Agamben, 2011, p. 69)

When the vanity of speech eclipses the oath, then human life as such is put in jeopardy—a life defined by history, action, meaning, and so forth.

The problem today is that the efficacy of the oath as a performative speech act is in a constitutive crisis. 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 itself. On the one hand, we see on-going examples of the living being reduced to bare life. In Agamben's work (1998), this is illustrated by a number of contemporary figures ranging from prisoners in concentration camps, to refugees, to coma patients. We also see an educational equivalent of bare life in the form of the educational disappeared, the forced-out, and the permanently suspended (Lewis, 2006). In all cases there is a split between survival and language. Bare life is a kind of invisible life, whose voice is mere noise, 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 twitter-feed replacing the possibility of experiencing one's self through the efficacy and truthfulness of giving one's word. Again, in relation to education, we find ever-increasing instrumentalized and bureaucratic lip-service to the 'common core' without reference to the actual lives which such meaningless phrases affect. Teachers no longer have a word to give. They can only read a predetermined script given to them. Summarizing, Agamben warns of an

unprecedented proliferation of vain words on the one hand and, on the other, of legislative apparatuses that seek obstinately to legislate on every aspect of that life on which they seem no longer to have any hold. The age of the eclipse of the oath is also the age of blasphemy. (2011, p. 71)

In short, the oath in contemporary society is largely inoperative. But this does not mean that Agamben calls for a mere return to 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 (as that which is always already given over to blasphemy). Stated differently, we do not need new ritual baptisms to initiate us into culture so as to secure life and word, word and action. These rituals would merely reiterate the paradox of the oath as a performative act that always includes what it excludes: blasphemy. 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.

The means to do so are found in 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' (2011, p. 72). 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, he 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 here is not to repair the oath and make it operable again, but rather to render inoperative 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' (ibid.). We might refer to this state as *absolute* inoperativity. It is only when we let idle the oath and blasphemy that philosophy can once again give us the experience of language as such.

### 3. Operativity of the oath in schools

Here 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. According to 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*' (Agamben, 2011, p. 30). According to what has been said before (Illich, Masschelein and Simons), the students are being baptized by the teacher who offers them a *Logo* for entering a specific world. More specifically, it is the voice of the teacher, the language she uses, that functions as an initiation tool. What gives it the power to function in this way is that one of its constitutive features is the curse. The teacher swears and curses, i.e. says 'this is the truth, learn it and you will be saved (blessing)' and 'this is the truth, and if you don't learn it, you're in trouble (curse)'. Both options are present in the performative act of the teacher's voice. Progressive educators and radical pedagogues alike have asked the question: How to eliminate the curse from the teacher's voice?

In order to do so, we need to first be clear about who is cursing and at whom the curse is directed. What is important here is to note that it is not (or at least not primarily) the teacher who is *taking* the oath. Rather, she is *administering* (officiating/presiding over) the oath by speaking in the voice of the teacher and expecting the students to do the same ('Repeat after me: ...'). It is the students who actually *take* the oath (receive the sacrament/baptism of learning) by 'repeating after the teacher', that is, by speaking in 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. But what they are repeating (the voice of the teacher) also has the form of an oath. In fact, whenever the teacher is speaking in the voice of the teacher, she could be said to renew her own pledge to the institution of the school. The fact that part of administering the oath is to say/articulate the words of the oath ('Repeat after me: *I know what I am talking about*') means that the teacher is constantly reaffirming (and—simultaneously—fulfilling) the pledge to speak in the voice of the teacher (i.e. to teach).

The contemporary crisis in teaching is really a crisis in the structure of this oath. Here 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 her word, resulting in a situation where the teacher can no longer stake her life in the performance of her word (hence the teacher is no longer a priest or judge but rather a bureaucrat). 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, 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: without a problematization of the voice of the teacher the oath is simply reinstated.

So to suspend the suspension of the voice of the teacher, she has to model (be an example, a paradigm) of the abandonment of the oath (sacred speech) and of blasphemy (vain speech), that is, in some way make inoperative the constitutive relation and subsequent non-relation between swearing and cursing. This would mean that the voice of the teacher no longer speaks the language of truth and falsity without falling into mere haphazard nonsense either. But what is left when teachers no longer swear or curse at their students? Here we suggest one alternative is to theorize the relation between teaching and silence, or, at least, the silence of the voice of the teacher. By silence we do not mean lack of language, but rather language as true or false, blessing or perjury, oath or blasphemy. Such speech, be it actual silence or babble (speech without truth-conditions) is itself profane in that it demonstrates the free use of language (released from the sacred realm). The profane speech of the teacher, in turn, carves out a hollow in the language of the classroom where students (by speaking after the teacher) can experience a pure language, the potentiality to speak. In sum, when the teacher speaks silence, she whispers: 'Speak after me, I do not know what I am talking about!'

#### 4. The teacher in the community of infancy: Administering the oath, minus the curse

What would it mean to think of the language of the teacher beyond swearing ('This is the truth!' Or: 'Listen to me because I know what I am talking about'), or the curse ('You be quiet or I will have to send you to the principal's office')? This would be an experience of the voice of the teacher as pure language, as the potentiality to speak, without therefore turning into blasphemous or meaningless speech ('This is just a job', or 'This test is all meaningless'). The question is, how can the speech of the teacher be reconfigured in such a way as to not have this or that meaning (as in the giving of oaths) but rather as to have the meaning that everyone can speak, while at the same time keeping the students' conversation from becoming pure nonsense?

A clue to answering this question is found in Agamben's gesture toward the work of philosophy as providing an experience of language that interrupts the dialectic of oath and perjury. In this sense, philosophy provides a unique education in language as such. For us, Agamben's turn to philosophy is important because it allows us to rethink the particular educational value of philosophy for children (P4C) as a practice (Jasinski, 2016). While there are now many forms of philosophy with children (Vansieleghem & Kennedy, 2012), what we are most interested in is the community of infancy as a pedagogical cornerstone of philosophy for children that allows for such a reconfiguration of the voice of the teacher.<sup>2</sup> What distinguishes the community of infancy from other educational experiences is that the speech in the community of infancy is neither reasonable speech, nor merely nonsense or haphazard speech, but rather speech in its infancy. Drawing on Agamben (2007), infantile speech could also be referred to as babble. Babbling is truly profane speech that says nothing beyond its own sayability.<sup>3</sup> The suspension of the voice of the teacher allows students to experience both the voice of the teacher and their own voice as pure language, as the potentiality to speak (without renouncing the possibility of lying), thus, as Agamben would say, 'abiding in the risk of truth as much as of error'. To babble means that the teacher does not speak truth or lies, does not give blessings or curses ('That sounds right' or 'Good job' or 'Excellent idea' or 'Yes but I think your premise is wrong' or 'I am not sure I agree'), but rather speaks speaking as such. This kind of speech is always posed as a question ('Can you say more about ...?' or 'What do others think?') or offers a silence that leaves open the hollow of language for more speech to happen. The lesson here is not HOW to speak or WHAT to speak but rather that we CAN speak (babble) ... that we all have the potentiality to speak, that everyone equally has this capability.

Philosophy for children is uniquely positioned to provide a space within the school where the voice of the teacher can be suspended (and, thus, where babbling can occur), and where this can be done responsibly. There are several reasons for this. First of all, in contrast to factual questions, philosophical questions are truly open, i.e. there is not just one possible correct answer. At the same time, there is an intimation of truth, that is, there is an assumption that the questions being discussed (What is time? Can we ever be truly happy?) *should* have answers—which keeps the conversation going. Finally, students have everything they need (i.e. language) to come up with possible answers. In contrast, open-ended discussion in other subjects (e.g. science, history, math) can either be only temporary (because there are specific answers that are based on a body knowledge that only the teacher has), or, as may be the case in English or Art, the discussions revolve around questions of taste or personal preferences, in which case what is lacking is the intimation of truth that drives and sustains the discussion in P4C.

Applying Agamben's work on the oath in *Sacrament of Language*, we can now articulate how the experience of the silence of the voice of the teacher leads to a suspension of the sacrament of language that underlies the sacrament of power without therefore merely reinforcing the general inoperativeness of the oath that leaves us with only blasphemy (which would ultimately just be another way to keep the oath operative, given that blasphemy is defined by its opposition to the oath). In other words, the voice of the teacher in the community of infancy makes inoperable the inoperativeness of the oath (as blasphemy, nonsense, mere play), without restoring one of its constitutive elements, the curse, and thus, simply resorting back into the oath as sacrament of language and power. Community of infancy is therefore the communal and dialogic equivalent of Agambenian philosophy: both are a critique of the oath. Indeed we would go so far as to suggest that the community of infancy is perhaps preferable in

this case precisely because dialog anchors the question to a communal practice where the experience of language is shared.

The practice of a community of infancy accomplishes its suspension of the oath in two stages: The first stage consists in suspending the suspension of the oath (explicitly (re-)instating the oath) through the establishment of procedural rules, whereas the second stage consists in the absolute suspension of the oath. The key here is that what could be called a sacrament of power, in the first stage, is solely directed at the students' behavior (acting according to the rules), and not language ('I swear to do whatever you say'; or: 'I swear to follow the rules'). This means that the curse remains operative, but only with regard to students' actions, not their speech. And because language has been freed/separated from the curse in the first stage, the sacrament of language can now—in a second stage—be replaced by the 'experience of infancy'; that is, the sacrament of language, minus the curse (leaving only the pure experience of 'I can speak'). This, as we will see, also makes possible two other experiences that are constitutive for the community of infancy: love and trust, leading—ideally—to a (retroactive) suspension of the relationship of power established in the first stage, and its replacement with a non-relational and non-hierarchical order of things based on infancy and love.

#### **4.1. Sacrament of power**

In the community of inquiry model,<sup>4</sup> procedural rules are typically established at the beginning of the course (e.g. 'We show respect for each other'; 'We listen carefully to each other'; 'We help each other express our ideas'; 'Each person's views are taken seriously'; and so forth.). These rules are either simply presented as the rules of the community that need to be followed, or the students are asked to come up with their own rules. However exactly the (procedural) rules of the community of infancy are arrived at, they necessarily contain an element of power the teacher exerts over the students. The voice of the teacher ('Speak after me: We will respect each other. We will listen carefully to each other', and so forth) is clearly a way of reinstating/reinforcing the oath, *including the curse* ('Do as I say, and good things will happen to you, otherwise bad things will happen to you'). What makes this not merely a re-assertion of the oath, however, is that this is a two-stage process, and that the emphasis, in the first stage, is solely on the students' performance/behavior ('I will *do* as you say!'), rather than language ('I will *say* what you want me to say'). While this may seem like a particularly crude form of the exercise of the teacher's power, the emphasis on procedural behavior (rather than language/content) in the first stage, opens up a space ('carves out a hollow') for the second stage, in which the sacrament of language can now be enacted without the curse, that is, it can be replaced by infancy, trust, and love.

#### **4.2. Experience of infancy, trust, and love**

To show how, in the second stage, the oath can be reinstated without the curse (suspension of the suspension of the oath), we need to say a little more about what we have been referring to as the community of infancy. As stated before, the silence of 'the voice of the teacher' (the voice of knowledge and truth) in the community of infancy leaves the students to their own devices. Without a reference point with regard to knowledge or truth they take whatever is being said in its own right. In other words, rather than assessing or evaluating what is being said in relation to an established framework of truth and knowledge, the students perceive each contribution as equally valid (or as neither valid nor invalid). But this also means that the members of the community of infancy perceive *each other* differently. If everything that is being said is equally valid or invalid, it can be experienced in both its particularity, and in its contingency: Peter said x, but he could have said something completely different, or somebody else could have said what he said. For Agamben, this combination of particularity and contingency is the precondition for the possibility of love.

For Agamben, the most characteristic (and puzzling) feature of the experience of love is that we love another person for what that person is (his or her particular attributes), and, at the same time, independent of—and maybe in spite of—such attributes. 'Love', Agamben writes,

is never directed toward this or that property of the loved one (being blond, being small, being tender, being lame), but neither does it neglect the properties in favor of an insipid generality (universal love). The lover wants the loved one *with all of its predicates*, its being such as it is. (1993, p. 2, emphasis in original)

Another way of saying this would be to say that we love a person for whatever they are, that is, for ‘what’ they are *and* ‘no matter what’ they are. Agamben calls a being that we relate to in this way a ‘whatever being,’ or a ‘singularity’: ‘The singularity,’ he writes, ‘exposed as such is whatever you *want*, that is, lovable’ (ibid., p. 2). In other words, as a singularity a person is whatever he or she is, not because of their attributes in relation to a general concept (e.g. being French) that allows us to distinguish them or think of them as different from other individuals (e.g. those who are Italian). This means that, according to Agamben, ‘[w]hatever singularity has no identity it is not determinate with respect to a concept, but neither is it simply indeterminate; rather it is determined only through its relation to ... the totality of its possibilities’ (ibid., p. 67). It is in this sense that the lack of a point of reference in terms of knowledge and truth allows students to experience each other as whatever beings, or, singularities (that is, as both particular and contingent) and, thus, to love each other.

What makes this experience possible is the radical abandonment of the students caused by the teacher’s silence. It is exactly the silence of the voice of the teacher (the teacher’s role as a paradigm of infancy) that allows his or her own *whatever being* (Agamben, 1993) to come to the foreground, which opens up a space and time of love beyond the fetishization of particular identities over singularities. The teacher’s silence is pedagogical, offering itself as a paradigm of whatever makes love possible. Both, in terms of providing a space and time for love to emerge among the students, but also in the sense of showing his or her love for the students. When the teacher falls silent, she demonstrates that she loves the students not because of their specific properties (their perceived skills, talents, or interests), but as whatever they are (in excess/independent of perceived skills, talents, or interests).

Applying Agamben’s work on the oath, we can now say that the role of the teacher in the community of infancy is to officiate—through his or her silence—the following oath: ‘Speak after me: I don’t know what I am talking about, and neither do you, but it’s ok, as long as you love each other.’ While this formula may still have the form of an oath, what makes it fundamentally different is that here the ‘sacrament of language’ (the very origin of the oath) itself is being suspended. Insofar as this can still be called an oath (if only a limiting case), it consists in the pledge to keep the oath (and thus the curse) suspended—although, without the curse, the key element of the oath is missing. It would therefore be more accurate—drawing here on Agamben’s reflections on parody in *Profanations* (2007)—to refer to the above formula as the parody of the oath, insofar as a parody consists in the ‘preservation of formal elements into which new and incongruous contents are introduced’ (ibid., p. 39). Pointing to medieval sacred parodies of the liturgy of the mass and of chivalric love poetry as examples, Agamben believes that the function of the parody is ‘to confuse and render indiscernible the threshold that separates the sacred and the profane’ (ibid., p. 43). The parody of the oath (using the form of the oath to render the oath inoperable) could then be seen as just such a way of blurring the line between the sacred and the profane use of speech. And, if, as Agamben suggests, the ultimate function of parody (as ‘paraontology’) is that it ‘expresses language’s inability to reach the thing and the impossibility of the thing finding its own name’ (ibid., p. 50), the purpose of the parody of the oath would be to express the inoperability of the oath. The word ‘express’ is important here, because it indicates that what the parody can do is something that cannot be achieved by direct statement or assertion. This is because the origin of the parody of the oath (the way the oath contains as its origin the ‘sacrament of language’) is the ‘*experience* of infancy’, which can itself only be expressed through another experience—the experience of the contradiction contained in the performance of the parody of the oath (using the form of the oath to suspend the oath).

Infancy and love, finally, make possible yet another experience: trust. As we have seen, love in the community of infancy is being realized in the love of the students for each other, because they recognize each other as the same with regard to their particularity and contingency (that is, their humanness) as whatever beings. But other than in the oath based on the sacrament of language, here there is no perjury (and thus no curse/punishment) possible. This is because the ‘*experience* of infancy’ is not based on the idea of a correspondence (between words and things), or even on any idea of correspondence/

relationship between distinct/identifiable entities (given the whatever nature of the members of the community of infancy). This means that the trust/faithfulness (*fides*) that the sacrament of language was meant to guarantee (to establish and maintain order) shifts from that between words and things in the sacrament of language to that between people (the members of a community of infancy), based now on—and made possible by—the experience of love and trust.

The role of the teacher in the community of infancy, then, is to silence the voice of the teacher (actual silence or babble) and thus become a paradigm for profane speech, that is, speech in its infancy (the sacrament of language minus the curse). By 'repeating after the teacher' the students engage in babble, keeping the oath suspended. This allows students to experience each other as whatever beings (without reference to truth), which, in turn, makes possible the experience of love. But without a reference to truth (faithfulness between words and things, formerly guaranteed by the sacrament of language), there can be no perjury, and thus no curse. And without the curse, there is no threat of punishment, which allows the students to trust and be faithful to each other ('None of us knows, not even the teacher, so nothing bad can happen to us'). At the same time, the trust and faithfulness among the members of the community that have been established relinquishes the need for blasphemy and keeps the speech from becoming vain and meaningless, and from turning into haphazard nonsense. The dialectics of blessing and curse, swearing and perjury that we mentioned earlier, have been broken and the students (and the teacher) are instead free to be profane.

## 5. The profanity of infancy

The community of infancy is neither a sacred baptism nor merely a meaningless and empty blasphemy. 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—an absolutely inoperative state of educational life. 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 voice of the teacher as merely a jaded bureaucrat, what we have here is the voice of the teacher as not the voice of the teacher, or the voice of the teacher without the signature of truth to guarantee its word as fact. Rather than a paradigm for the sacred use of speech, in the community of infancy language (silence, babble) is now freed from its sacred use (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. In this way the community of infancy is truly an inoperative community where each is exposed to that which is most fragile and precious: love.

This also means that educational philosophy—as an ontological inquiry into the community of infancy—is always already a parody of philosophy. While philosophy attempts to reinstate the sacrament of language (and thus divide truth from falsehood), 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 exposes the precariousness of speech to speak itself speaking. On this view, the community of infancy is precisely the hinge through which education can become philosophical and philosophy can become educated.

## Notes

1. Agamben has become an increasingly familiar name in educational philosophy, and his work has been used to problematize everything from pedagogy in general (Peters, 2014; Peterson, 2014), to zero tolerance policies (Lewis, 2006), to citizenship education (Hung, 2012; Shapiro, 2015; Zembylas, 2010), to curriculum design (Meskin & Shapiro, 2014), to educational architecture (Lewis, 2012), to educational research (D'Hoest & Lewis, 2015), to school practices (Vlieghe, 2013a), and to physical education (Vlieghe, 2013b).

2. See Jasinski & Lewis (2015a) and Jasinski & Lewis (2015b). We may add that the teacher in the community of infancy does really not know what she is talking about, that is, the teacher is indeed ignorant, and not just pretending to be. Whereas the teacher-as-facilitator in traditional philosophy for children might not know the answer to a philosophical problem, she is nevertheless granted authority precisely because of expertise in procedural knowledge (the knowledge of sound and justified reasoning). Yet the teacher in the community of infancy is radically inoperative and thus does not have even these procedural rules to help guarantee his or her control over what and how students speak.
3. We may point out here that what defines babble is not its formal appearance. In fact, babble in the community of infancy may be indistinguishable from rational discourse (expressing opinions, making and supporting arguments), or, it may seem random, contradictory, redundant. Rather, what defines babble is the lack of a framework of rationality, truth, and specific truth conditions (due to the silence of the voice of the teacher), that leads to a different experience of speech by the members of the community of infancy, completely independent of the degree of rational discourse exhibited.
4. While this pedagogical style is associated with a more traditional version of philosophy for children (e.g. Lipman, 2003), we are appropriating this particular feature of the practice for our own purposes.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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