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# Labour and capitalism from the perspective of Giorgio Agamben's inoperativity

## Abstract

In this article, Ramond Geuss's theory of work is presented as a productionist model, which, as Honneth critiques, reduces labour to wage and product, thereby reducing the person, through capitalist logic, to an instrument who is disconnected from being and activity. In response, some scholars have drawn on Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of inoperativity (*désœuvrement*) and *being-with* (*être-avec*), which challenges the means-to-an-end logic of capitalism by insisting that community is defined by productivity and the completion of a task. Work does not represent the community or person; therefore, the inoperative community unworks teleological modes of being. However, Nancy's view, while ontologically rich and opening a space for community beyond a task-oriented mode, requires a more explicit biopolitical perspective. Giorgio Agamben offers such a more radical and politically potent concept of inoperativity (*inoperosità*). For Agamben, all work (as *ergon* or *opera*) is bound to a dualistic teleological structure – activity and inactivity for the sake of an end. Inoperativity suspends this structure, not to negate work or non-work, but to render the duality inoperative, opening it to new uses and freeing human activity from

the constraints of market-driven productivity by imploding the ontology and history of control and resistance. This is not a withdrawal from work, but a transformation of its meaning in which life and labour become forms of life, being, and activity that subvert economic utility. From this perspective, inoperativity is transformative because its resistance is not framed in terms of debt or guilt, but as a potentiality that opens the possibility for happiness and freedom beyond obligation. Agamben's broader critique of biopolitics situates inoperativity as both ontological and political, moving beyond Nancy's being-with beyond function to a form of life that resists through potentiality, not through productivity.

**Keywords:** Giorgio Agamben, labour, capitalism, inoperativity, ethics and happiness

## Introduction

In this article, I will argue that Giorgio Agamben's inoperativity contributes to an emergent discourse on work that seeks to decouple labour from identity and worth, proposing instead a politics that champions potentiality and a liberative form of life. This reorientation challenges the productionism of contemporary capitalism not merely on ethical, but also on ontological and political grounds, calling for transformational work that no longer demands that human life conform to a means-to-an-end and goal-oriented logic that attempts to control potentiality and activity. This approach is timely in our contemporary society, where the alienation, exploitation, and disillusionment of labour have reached a critical point of implosion (Weeks 2011; Graeber 2018).

In the book *A Philosopher Looks at Work* (2021), Raymond Geuss offers a productivist conception of labour grounded in the reductionist and alienating mechanics of industrial activity, wherein the value of work is equated with the value of its output. This perspective, while historically resonant with capitalist modes of production, abstracts labour from its broader socio-political and experiential dimensions. Axel Honneth (2024) critiques this framework by highlighting capitalism's tendency to instrumentalise and functionalise labour, thus obscuring its relational, affective, and normative dimensions. Honneth's critique aligns with broader concerns about the erosion of labour to mere utility and efficiency, particularly in types of work that extend beyond wage labour or industrial production, such as caregiving, creative endeavours, or volunteer work.

This reduction of being to teleological work has been problematised by Alexander Bertland (2011), who draws on Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of *désœuvrement* (inoperativity) to resist the reduction of labour to functionality in the management of workplace project teams. Nancy's community ontology of *being-with* (*être-avec*) that exposes teleological work by underpinning both labour and community, instead, offers a vision of human coexistence and work that is grounded in detachment, incompleteness, and non-finality to expose capitalist logic. However, Nancy's abstraction from institutional and political structures limits the transformative potential of his thought in relation to concrete labour conditions. As critics such as Bosteels (2010) and Esposito (2010) have noted, Nancy's more ontological focus with limited political focus risks rendering his thought politically less transformative.

By contrast, Giorgio Agamben articulates a more politically resonant account of inoperativity. In *The Use of Bodies* (2015), Agamben reconceptualises inoperativity by opposing the dual structure of work and detachment itself and a suspension of the apparatuses that enforce productivity and economic functionality by drawing on Aristotle's concept of *dynamis* (potentiality, power, ability); he emphasises the human capacity for not-doing is a refusal of prescribed roles that opens space for new modes of subjectivity and collective life. As Marmont and Primera (2020: 9) put it, Agamben's thought represents "a more sophisticated suspension of potentiality", aimed at disrupting the metaphysical compulsion toward actualisation, control and resistance that characterises modern labour regimes.

This intervention resonates with Hannah Arendt's distinction between work, labour and action in *The Human Condition* (1958), where she cautions against the dominance of labour as mere biological necessity and economic reproduction. She argues that meaningful political life requires a space of freedom beyond the compulsion of necessity. Agamben radicalises this insight by situating inoperability at the ontological and historical level, thereby offering not merely a critique of labour's dominance, but a rethinking of human existence beyond the imperatives of production and non-production.

Similarly, Michel Foucault's (1990) (the original work was published in 1976) notion of biopower, that is, the management of life through regulatory regimes of labour, well-being, and productivity, provides a helpful framework for interpreting Agamben's critique of societal controls that include commerce and labour. Foucault (1990: 140) states that biopower is a "... power whose task is to

take charge of life needs continuous regulatory and corrective mechanisms ... without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism." While Foucault traces how power produces docile, economically advantageous bodies, Agamben's inoperativity suggests a strategic withdrawal from this economy of subjectification to refuse the very demand to be productive. This resonates with Foucault's (1988) later work on technologies of the self. Still, Agamben departs by reasserting potentiality beyond activity and forms of life that are not anchored in the self's formation through labour.

In more contemporary terms, Agamben's work intersects with Kathi Weeks's feminist critique of the work ethic in *The Problem with Work* (2011). She emphasises that modern ideologies of labour demand not only productivity but also personal identity and meaning from work, therefore extending capitalist control into the domain of the self and being. Agamben's inoperativity offers a robust response to meaningful existence through the refusal to accept that human value and subjectivity must be constituted through labour. Similarly, David Graeber's anthropological critique of "bullshit jobs" (2018: 10) highlights how much of contemporary labour is experienced as purposeless, sustained not by necessity but by social and economic coercion. In this context, Agamben's theory exposes the ontological absurdity and political resistance of work that no longer serves meaningful ends, revealing the contingency of the very structures we are asked to serve and their implosion through inoperativity.

In today's socio-political climate, which is marked by growing alienation, post-pandemic labour renegotiations, algorithmic surveillance, and the resurgence of unionisation efforts, Agamben's perspective on inoperativity offers critical conceptual resources. It is not a nihilistic rejection of work; instead of a radical suspension of its necessity as an organising logic of life and work, it asserts the embedded relationship between being and activity that transcends functionalistic identities. As Agamben (2015: 114) writes, "What human beings are capable of is not just what they do, but also what they can not do – this potentiality for inoperativity is what opens the space for politics and ethics." Therefore, inoperability rejects teleological capitalist labour by detaching itself from the logic of controlling potentiality and asserting forms of life that extend human freedom, activity, and identity beyond individual boundaries, embracing others.

The article is structured as follows: first, I examine the instrumental and functionalist view of labour, focusing on how modern work has been reduced to functionality that prioritises productivity over human potential. Second, I offer a critical analysis of inoperativity in Giorgio Agamben's work, situating it within the broader context of his political theory and particularly his critique of biopolitics and the ontological grounding of potentiality. Third, I explore the implications of inoperativity for contemporary transformational work, with special attention to the interrelation between work, ethos, and happiness. While Agamben intentionally resists developing a prescriptive system, keeping his work deliberately abstract to avoid reproducing the very logic of control he critiques, I will cautiously attempt to provide a practical workplace illustration of inoperativity. This example is not meant to systematise his thought, but rather to demonstrate how inoperative potentiality might be enacted within the space of work to open possibilities for more authentic labour practices beyond capitalist reduction.

## Labour, capitalism and inoperativity

In this section, Geuss's theory of work will be briefly discussed and critiqued from Honneth's perspective. This will underscore the impact of capitalist teleological labour and the control it places on human potentiality and freedom. This market-defined activity separates being, labour, and product, and reduces being through means-to-an-end logic and mechanisms. This reduction is a prevalent problem that Bertland attempted to address by advocating Nancy's inoperativity.

Geuss (2021) argues that the value of labour is objectively determined based on the external goods produced through work. The value is measured independently of the consumer's knowledge of the production process or the people involved. Therefore, compensation is not for the labour but for the goods produced. This reduces labour to the product or the ends produced, which further reduces the value of labour through market capitalism. Geuss (2021: 5) notes that work is distinguished from leisure activities (or any extended social relations of the worker) and marked by an objective value of goods that can be valued independently of the production process. In other words, the worker and product are separated. Work is reduced to creating goods with value based on the supply and demand of goods. The greater the demand and enjoyment others

derive from consuming goods, the greater the value. Conversely, labour is devalued if demand and enjoyment decrease without consideration of the effort and skill of the worker to produce the goods.

This productivist and externalist valuation of labour is echoed by Hannah Arendt, who distinguishes between labour, work, and action. She argues that modern society has conflated human worth with utility and productivity, particularly through the economic sphere (Arendt 1958). Agamben's concept of potentiality as it relates to inoperativity parallels Arendt's notion of *action*, as both draw on Aristotle's idea of potentiality. Arendt distinguishes action from work and labour, associating labour with biological necessity and survival, and thus the absence of freedom. Work relates to fabrication and control over materials, while action, marked by spontaneity and plurality, is the only mode of activity that realises freedom. For Arendt, labour cannot entail freedom, as it is defined by necessity rather than human freedom. Similarly, Harry Braverman (1974) critiques the degradation of work under capitalism, where the labour process is subordinated to efficiency and profit, eroding worker autonomy and reducing labour to a mechanised function. Karl Polanyi also noted the artificial separation of economic value from social relations, warning that commodifying labour leads to social disintegration (Polanyi 1944). These thinkers highlight how capitalist frameworks dissociate the worker from their product and reduce work to a calculable unit of exchange.

The market orientation of contemporary labour implies that the means-to-an-end logic of capitalism informs work without consideration of workers and what is produced, as well as the wider social network of the worker and work that does not produce a product or is not remunerated. Honneth (2024: 7) notes that this external aspect of Geuss's conception of labour reduces work to an external product and wage-producing activity that is reductive:

[...] this only supports the impression that all conceptual elements of socially necessary labor are here constructed from the center of industrial production, so that many other laboring activities, such as serving, caring, and educating, can only be understood as assistance related to it and cannot be unfolded in their own logic.

Honneth (2024) critiques the dominant paradigm of "productivism", which narrowly defines work in terms of remunerated production, particularly the manufacture of tangible goods. This conceptualisation, he argues, systematically excludes significant forms of labour that do not culminate in

discrete, commodifiable outputs such as caregiving, household management, and child-rearing. These activities, while essential to social reproduction, are structurally marginalised in theories that equate work with waged labour. As Honneth notes, this exclusionary framework positions domestic labour as peripheral to the world of work, reinforcing a distorted ontology of labour in which only remunerated productivity constitutes legitimate work (Honneth 2024: 8).

Geuss's (2021) approach exemplifies this productivist tendency. By grounding his theory of work in the value of the product and its associated compensation, Geuss implicitly endorses a commodification of labour that privileges employment over other modes of human activity. In this framework, labour is treated as a transactional good exchanged between a worker and an intermediary, typically an employer, who facilitates access to the market. While this model does allow for certain variations, such as self-employment in which the worker also functions as the proprietor of production, it nonetheless remains tied to a market-centric logic. Even here, a distinction must be drawn between forms of self-employment in which the worker actively engages in the labour process and cases where the proprietor is merely a passive investor in the productive apparatus (Cholbi 2023).

The principal issue with Geuss's conception lies in its failure to interrogate or transcend the instrumental rationality underpinning the productivist model. By valorising labour solely through its market exchangeability, Geuss's account risks reinforcing the very structures of alienation and exclusion that render invisible vast spheres of socially valuable activity. Workers, within this schema, are evaluated primarily in terms of their utility to the market, divorced from the intrinsic or relational dimensions of their labour. The result is a reductive understanding of human work, one that suppresses considerations of autonomy, social embeddedness, and the multiplicity of ways in which labour contributes to personal and communal life.

Bertland (2011) challenges this functionalism by his examination of work that delves into Nancy's conceptualisation of inoperativity and community. This underscores novel perspectives pertinent to teambuilding endeavours that escape the means-to-an-end structure of functionality. The analysis highlights the adverse implications of applying instrumental, functionalistic, and mechanistic frameworks to project team initiatives, suggesting that such approaches hinder the development of innovative and prospective pathways.

Through a critical lens, Bertland advocates for a departure from conventional teleological paradigms of work, promoting instead a paradigm shift towards fostering environments that are rather conducive to emergent, socially connected, and imaginative modes of collaboration.

Bertland (2011: 1) notes that a "community of humans will never be able to function as efficiently as a community of machines". The reason for this, from Nancy's perspective, is that "humans cannot be reduced to their function" (Bertland 2011: 4). People exist before a teamwork project and continue thereafter. Furthermore, when engaging in a collaborative project, not all time is allocated to the project due to other side engagements, such as responding to emails, making phone calls, and having leisure conversations with colleagues, among others. In other words, beyond the functional community organised through teamwork, people are always already part of a community with no fresh starting point or expiration date.

Bertland (2011: 5) advocates Nancy's consideration that the community is inoperative. As stated differently, inoperativity marks the work of project teams due to the broader social interconnectedness of people beyond activity and function, which is already present. Work is interrupted, operations are limited, and managers' performance goals are incomplete. "Once the team stops seeing itself as a machine working toward a specific end, it can see itself as a rich nexus of people, always connected through sharing yet never reducible to the group" (Bertland 2011: 7). It also means that goals should be exchanged for "wonder about what the future will hold" (Bertland 2011: 6-7). An idea that may frustrate profit-driven business practices, but alternatively inoperative community can provide the space to realise the complex nature of work, engagement, and creative opportunities far beyond the envisioned goals of a project.

Although Nancy's inoperative community opens new vistas of meaning, it unfortunately provides limited political and transformational guidance that also limits Bertland's application for project teams. Notably, Bertland's application encompasses the broader social network of workers and various uses of human activities beyond functional outcomes, products, and compensation for work. Still, it does not provide a robust source of resistance to political control that influences society in general and supports capitalistic means-to-an-end work. Nancy's being-with ontology that goes beyond functionalism must continue to an inoperativity with a political will to suspend the means-to-an-end logic



in society and markets. The inoperative act of transformation of functionalism and the market-reducing view of activity requires work that implodes the capitalist duality of potentiality and activity, work and non-work, operativity and inoperativity.

In the next section, the focus shifts to Agamben's political and ontological approach to inoperativity and his contribution to transformational work.

## Agamben, inoperativity and biopolitics

A vital contribution of Giorgio Agamben to contemporary political and philosophical discourse is his radical critique of the prevailing market-driven conception of work through the notion of inoperativity (*inoperosità*). This concept refers to a strategic suspension or deactivation of the instrumental logic that reduces human life to mere productive functionality. Compared to Nancy's criticism of functionalism, Agamben (2001: 93) proposes a more radical suspension of the structure of capitalism and its embedded inoperativity by arguing that the question is not simply what humans ought to do, but how they relate to the teleological apparatuses that govern their existence. In this sense, inoperativity is a condition of potentiality beyond activity, a refusal to be wholly captured by the imperatives of utility, production, and economic rationality.

Agamben develops this concept in critical dialogue with the Marxist and existentialist traditions, particularly through a re-reading of Alexandre Kojève's interpretation of Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic. Kojève (1969: 48) famously posited that historical progress is driven by the Slave's labour, which reshapes both the world and human self-consciousness through work. Alternatively, the suspension of work or the workless slave suspends the dialectic that culminates in the paradoxical "end of history", wherein the resolution of the Master-Slave relation leads to the dissolution of difference. However, Agamben notes that this does not address the deeper problem, namely the disconnect between being and activity or non-activity. In other words, the identification of human subjectivity with labour or non-labour as such, which is an identification that ultimately forecloses other modes of existence, e.g., the workless slave remains a slave.

Agamben (2001) argues that Kojève's reading of Hegel does not negate the self-identity as *Slave* and the notion of the workless slave as a metaphor for happiness and the end of history. For Agamben the end of dialectical history is inoperativity and the surprise discovery of happiness, not an end (Prozorov

2009: 529). "This workless being, who is nothing but his own existence (rather than his essence or his work), finds in this very existence the possibility of 'happy life' that is not attainable by any future-oriented project" (Prozorov 2009: 529). The consequence of the negation of the slave is the possibility of happiness or the "human as such". The dialectic of worker and product, as noted by Guess, is an important perspective for production work that perpetuates a master/slave dichotomy. Inoperativity presupposes the negation of work to transform human activity beyond its market mode and functionalism.

For Agamben, the dialectic collapses not through synthesis, but through inoperativity, a suspension of the binary logic of domination and subjection that underpins the Master-Slave relation. This suspension is not merely a cessation of labour but a deactivation of its teleological necessity. In other words, inoperativity dissolves the dialectic by revealing that the very structures which define human identity through work, whether as Master or Slave, are themselves contingent and deconstructible. This deactivation of operative identity opens a space for what Agamben calls *form-of-life*, which is a mode of existence not predetermined by roles, functions, or economic imperatives, but grounded in potentiality and the capacity *not* to be what one is. In this respect, Agamben's inoperability provides the conditions for a rethinking of freedom and happiness which is not an outcome of productive achievement, but as expressions of life's irreducible openness beyond a means-to-an-end logic.

Marmont and Primera (2020) note that inoperativity in Agamben's work is the subversion of the relationship between means and ends, and at the same time, it advocates for different forms of human activity. Work for Agamben has become the ontology of people that define identity or labour, without essence – *being-at-work* (Marmont and Promera 2020: 10). The consequence is that there is no determinant or vocational will for humanity and work, which deactivates the ontological apparatus and leads it towards a modal ontology. Life and work are inoperative and without meaning, which makes it subject to capitalist teleological labour and control for profit. Agamben (2011: 245) explains inoperativity as follows:

Human life is inoperative and without purpose, but precisely this *argia* and this absence of aim make the incomparable operativity of the human species possible. Man has dedicated himself to production and labour because, in his essence, he is completely devoid of work because he is the Sabbatical animal par excellence.

The suggestion is that inoperativity contains a double tonality of inoperativity that is used to control activity and *argia* or the subversion of capitalist labour that is becoming of a future community. This underscores an eschatological aspect of inoperativity that is messianic and yet to come. It opposes the separation of potentiality and actuality, and undermines the logic of functional and goal-oriented work that creates a false sense of meaning and identity by emptying potentiality to make money. Inoperativity is not limited to Bertland's application of Nancy that reveals the mechanisms of capitalism but continues to implode the dualistic structure itself, replacing functionality with potentiality that is not locked in a system of activation. People are also not entrapped in a productivist and means-to-an-end logic because the activities of people remain inoperative in the sense that it is not limited to product or remuneration but enhances the potentiality of people.

Agamben (1999: 176) differentiates between two modalities of potentiality: the potentiality to be and not to be. For example, a writer who does not want to write remains a writer. Potentiality for Agamben (1999: 183) is where “not-be does not lag behind actuality but passes fully into it as such”, also referred to as “existence potentiality”. This is because potential “can pass over into actuality only at the point at which it sets aside its own potential not to be” (Agamben 1999: 264). Potentiality refers to the Aristotelian idea that distinguishes between the inherent potential of a person or *dynamis*. At the same time, actuality is *energia* or the dispersion of energy to accomplish something or potential. Marijsse (2019: 144) points out that Agamben reinterprets this distinction made by Aristotle, where potentiality is viewed as a “lack of form that can only be laid bare retroactively after actualization”, which assumes the “primacy of actuality over potentiality” or “potential is that which is *not yet* actualized”. Marijsse (2019: 145) confirms that for Agamben, the “moment of actualisation indicates both the destruction and the persistence of potentiality”. The crucial aspect to consider is that actualisation or work is not the end of potentiality because the *argia* is retained and the different uses of activity in the form of life. This is a feature that Agamben reverses with potentiality exceeding actualisation, being that it is severed from activity (Butler 1987: 26). Geuss's functionalist view of labour and the value of the objects of production retains the potentiality and activity link in which the means-to-an-end logic decreases potentiality. Furthermore, capitalism also reduces market activity to a value of production that excludes other forms of life and the use of human activities. The potentiality of the worker is, therefore, condensed to an object of production.

Inoperativity resists this reduction, championing existence and potentiality above activation and functionality; for example, authors remain authors even when they are not writing.

Consequently, Agamben (2001: 93) cautions that inoperativity “does not mean inertia, but *katharsis*” that emphasises the “how”, meaning “the life without form and the forms without life coincide in the form of *life*”. In other words, who we are and what we do converge in the form of life. “A life that cannot be separated from its form is a life that, in its very mode of living, is itself a form-of-life” (Agamben 2000: 4). For Agamben, being and activity are inseparable and are not controlled by external roles. Forms of life are expressions of freedom and potentiality, not controlled by politics or economics. Capitalism separated activity and being, in which work becomes teleological and stripped of potentiality and freedom. This is what happens to labour when the market-dictated function and value dominate work, and the worker's identity has a market value. To understand the full effect of Agamben's notion of inoperativity, which is not mere inactivity but rather forms of existence, it is important to grasp his biopolitical theory and the dialectic between *zoe* and *bios*. In other words, inoperativity is not only concerned with work, labour and activity; it is rather the condition of the control of life by the state that exercises its influence across all sectors of society and labour.

Agamben's political theory critiques sovereignty and the distinction between *zoe* (bare life) and *bios* (political life) in the development of biopolitics, which reduces life to bare biological existence and controls it through state intervention (Agamben 1998). Biopolitics assumes that the state controls people through law, discipline, and the management of aspects of life – the nexus between biology and politics. Bare existence had the potential to encompass political existence throughout the ages. Still, the modern state has merged political existence and bare existence, with the possibility of controlling bare existence, which also includes the economy and labour. Therefore, controlling bare life limits political existence and directs people's lives and work. This power is operative through the state of exception, where the people's political power is suspended for the sake of state security or the protection of life itself. Excluding people from political existence enables the government to control their lives and blurs the distinction between law and life.

Agamben's view of biopolitics differs from Foucault's because he argues that the control of bare life is not only a modern development but is inherently the invention of the modern state. He notes that the “production of biopolitical body

is the original activity of sovereign power” (Agamben 1998: 6). The reason for this is that the exception has become the norm (e.g. surveillance) and the basis for modern states in which “bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusions found the city of men.” (Agamben 1998: 7). In contemporary politics people become the *homomines sacri*, the abandoned figure for whom law and the sacredness of life is revoked (Agamben 1998: 115). The insignificance of law in the context of exception is the basis for Agamben’s ethics, which does not include law because law is the inscription of the impotence and inoperativity of power that is concealed by glory. Similarly, control is exerted through capitalism because the market, which functions without intervention, exposes people to dynamics in which they have no political or legal rights. Agamben (2017: 591) argues that this is an indescribable mystery,

The indescribable mystery that glory, which is blinding light, must hide from the gaze of the scrutatores maiestatis is that of divine inoperativity, of what God does before creating the world and after the providential government of the world is complete. It is not the kabhod, which cannot be thought or looked upon, but the inoperative majesty that it veils with its clouds and the splendor of its insignia.

Dickinson (2022: 118) states that “... God is really concealing, through reference to Being and Act, an abyss of potentiality and inoperativity that cannot be ignored, but must be ceaselessly covered over...”. According to Dickinson, the “abyss of potentiality” that is covered is referred to as “glory”. Glory covers the “unaccountable figure of divine inoperativity” (Dickinson 2022: 119). The Sabbath expresses inoperativity because it prohibits work, and all economic operatives cease. Sabbath is an interruption of the “normal” day to functionality and reveals a liminal space for subversion of ontological absolutism, and opens a new possibility of a modal ontology. However, glory obscures the inoperative God and emphasises human operativity of the dualistic ontology that separates heaven and earth with a deferred operativity and functionality. Agamben (1997: 591-592) explains that inoperativity is the basis of the power of government:

Glory, both in theology and in politics, is precisely what takes the place of that unthinkable emptiness that amounts to the inoperativity of power. And yet, precisely this unsayable vacuity is what nourishes and feeds power (or, rather, what the machine of power transforms into nourishment). That means that the center of the governmental apparatus, the threshold at which Kingdom

and Government ceaselessly communicate and ceaselessly distinguish themselves from one another is, in reality, empty; it is only the Sabbath and *katapausis* – and nevertheless, this inoperativity is so essential for the machine that it must at all costs be adopted and maintained at its center in the form of glory.

Dickinson (2022: 120) notes: “Glory is what attempts to conceal this fundamental emptiness that characterises the true ‘purpose’ (as purposelessness) of the human being. It is this purposelessness that allows for any sense of purpose to be created at all within a human being’s life.” Inoperative in this context does not mean that the dialectic between work and non-work has ceased, but rather is suspended in a situation in which the dualism of *zoe* and *bios* is overcome by the former penetrating the latter. The state, by implication, as an agent of the divine, embodies this glory and governs bare life, labour, and ethics. Transformational work that subverts the inoperativity of teleological work is not the mere implosion of potentiality and market-directed activity. It resists the theological inoperativity that is transferred to the state and mechanisms of social control, as well as potentiality and activity.

Therefore, inoperativity, for Agamben, is not merely the absence of action but the potentiality to not-act, to suspend every determinate function or role. Power seeks to instrumentalise this bare life and potentiality by orienting it toward ends, especially within market and biopolitical structures. It is resistance that adopts a counter-programme that remains within this logic. True transformation occurs not through opposing power with a new telos, but by rendering its apparatuses inoperative, thus opening a space for *form-of-life*, where potential is not subordinated to utility, and where life can persist with the implosion of biopolitics and outside the economy of means and ends. From the perspective of Arendt’s view of labour that is not free, Agamben argues that inoperativity is present in the very functioning of state structure, mechanism and capitalist teleological labour that requires detachment and inversion by potentiality and forms of life, ethos and happiness in transformational work. Inoperativity signifies activity, community and ethos, the way of potentiality beyond activation and the possibility of joy.

## Inoperativity and the interconnection of work, ethics and happiness

Agamben's notion of inoperativity is embedded in an interconnection between work, ethics, and happiness, which is an extension of his biopolitics. The interconnection is based on the fact that inoperativity is not mere inactivity but the suspension of the dualism of capitalist labour. It is rather a radical and transformative activity that does not succumb to teleological labour but suspends the dialectic of control by opting for a community of potentiality beyond state and market controls. This resonates with people's ethos, which is the ethos of a becoming community in which neither good nor bad dictates. Rather, it is the space of existence without duty or guilt, which is the ethos of happiness. In other words, the way of inoperative work contains the possibility of joy. In this section, I will argue that these interrelated aspects have important implications for work and business.

### Work

Geuss notes that the value of work is contained in the object of production, a perspective that inoperativity undermines by moving from output to potentiality, e.g. value beyond what is produced. The radicality of inoperativity is not its resistance to the mechanism of capitalism, but through subverting the duality of potentiality and activity. It is rather a transformative condition that resists the capitalist logic of work by prioritising potentiality and authentic being with others. Marijsse (2019: 149) writes concerning the conundrum of contemporary labour:

When you cannot find happiness in this vocation or action, another job should do the trick' has become the adage of our times. In a tradition that has always prioritized the actual over the potential, Western culture and capitalist society have appropriated happiness within this drive to act and to fulfil. But the most harrowing consequence of a culture in which people shift and turn into different jobs and vocations, trying to reach happiness in whatever prescribed work they perform, is a surging recognition of the indifference and anonymity that these empty, legal vocations produce. It's the tragic realisation that however hard (and often repetitively) we try to do different things, happiness is nowhere to be found at the end of a specific accomplishment.

Marijse's concern is that the means-to-an-end structure in which we search for happiness through various jobs is a misguided understanding of work. Therefore, inoperativity is embedded in work as a phenomenon, which implies that work is a transformative condition of autonomous existence and not a means-to-an-end. Freedom in classic economic literature is associated with the autonomous and self-interested individual who can sell labour for money, which underscores the functionality of work and the possibility of exploitation for profit. In contemporary society, work remains a contentious issue, with new challenges arising from technological innovation that is transforming the workplace, altering skill sets, and even leading to the emergence of redundant labour (Marsh et al. 2022; Graeber 2018). Conversely, Agamben's philosophical and existential approach uses the concept of inoperativity to enhance freedom and potentiality by undermining the functionalist systems with new forms of life. The benefit of Agamben's approach is that the system that supports the control of people is resisted and transformed by suspending the universalisation of work as identity and history emphasised by the Master and Slave dialectic.

The critical aspect of Agamben's view of inoperativity deals directly with the operativity of political and economic systems, with work at its core. If labour is the economic variant of operativity, inoperative is Sabbatical and liminal. It ceases to be controlled by causative rationality with a means-to-an-end mentality in which labour becomes a necessary function, and people are the cogs in the providential machines that promise well-being and happiness. Functionalism grinds to a halt because inoperativity asks the question, how? How am I doing this job? How am I producing this product or service? Is this making my life and the lives of others better? Inoperativity resists anthropological reductionism and subverts a *homo economicus* mentality as the basis of meaning and purpose. Teleological work is not merely resisted but the dualistic structure implodes. Consequently, Rae (2018: 981) notes that Agamben is often criticised for being vague and not using clear examples. This is because Agamben was wary of producing another political programme and operativity that continued the "what" logic and functionality. This aspect of Agamben and his messianic view of a coming community limits the practical application of inoperativity by inserting a new ideology. This is because the radical and transformative political agenda cannot be universalised but instead unravels and detaches systems of control to uncover the unique form of life, being and activity beyond productionism.



Constructively, this brings us to another aspect of inoperability, namely life, and how Agamben envisions it as the form of life that is changeable. His modal ontology suggests the possibility of human potentiality being open to all human activity. Agamben is less prescriptive about what work entails to avoid inscribing a new ideology of work. Working from Agamben's perspective enhances the freedom and autonomy of the worker as potentiality and non-identity – freedom not to *be* what the system demands (not to be *homo economicus*). Still, it creates a subversive event from which different uses or activities can emerge to bridge Geuss's productivism. For Geuss, this linking of the value of labour to the value of the product excluded other forms of work that did not include monetary value, e.g., the service industry or, more personally, caring for a sick child or spouse. Agamben's modal ontology offers a distinct understanding of the value of work and its significance in the broader community, one that deactivates the value and activity consequential linkage. This supports Nancy's argument that inoperative functions in community with others are beyond the capitalist labour agenda. A perspective that yearns for meaningful work because the self-expression of work is embedded in authenticity and the community (Ang 2019). In contrast to Nancy's inoperativity used by Bertland for project teams that include different use activities and communities beyond the workplace, Agamben's notion of inoperativity presents a radical implosion of capitalist labour. For Agamben, inoperativity is transformational at its core, meaning that all activities have value in a cooperative way that is not merely market-dependent (Barkan 2009: 250).

For example, suppose a company acquires a lucrative contract with specific deadlines to be met, accompanied by financial penalties for failing to deliver on time. In that case, employees must be productive and comply with the objectives set by the employer with the end goal of making a profit. To meet production goals, the optimal functioning of employees may require that workers are assigned different tasks that match their skills to optimise production – teleological work. This places tremendous pressure on workers and can even become constraining, especially if events beyond the workplace, such as a sick child or a dying spouse, complicate matters and tax a worker even if the task is rewarding and meaningful. Under normal conditions, an employer can replace a worker or suggest that they take leave. But imagine a situation where Katleho is the only specialist in an IT program essential to completing a task, and his wife falls ill. Taking leave or exchanging Katleho with someone

else is not an option. From the perspective of teleological work, Katleho will have to complete the task, with the task defining his existence, severing being and activity.

However, from Agamben's perspective, the task does not define Katleho's existence. His existence includes family, friends, hobbies and other interests, although his work is also important to him. From this perspective, the authenticity and freedom of Katleho's existence and potentiality, inoperativity require that his form of life be affirmed by subverting the means-to-an-end logic because his being consists of more than his job description. He needs to care for his wife and take time away from the strain of work, because he is not an instrument or cog in a machine. Inoperativity does not simply mean that he can work from home, work shorter days, or maybe a compromise can be reached with the contractor for a minor penalty, or even some penalties can be incurred to assist him and continue the project.

Inoperativity suspends the logic of capitalism in totality by shifting from teleological work to potentiality – detachment from capitalist means of production. This is in support of his potentiality, well-being and happiness. This does not imply that happiness is a direct result of work or that work is inherently meaningful. However, Agamben's modal ontology incorporates different activities that also recognise the value of caring for a spouse and support the suspension of activity in exchange for a different use of human activity that also disrupts the capitalist view of work. While caring is not valued as a product (proposed by Geuss's view of the value of labour), it does demand value beyond market dependence. Instead, it asserts that the possibility of inoperability may create the detached condition that does not succumb to capitalist teleological work. Rather, the potentiality and form of life of Katleho that is liberative and in solidarity with others, e.g. transformational work. Although many views on meaningful labour include a moral or ethical aspect, work makes a difference in the lives of others. It benefits the common good but can remain in the grip of operativity and functionalism (Michaelson et al. 2014). Agamben advocates meaning beyond a job with remuneration. This requires inactivity while retaining potentiality. It is more radically transformative, undermining the connection between potential and market control, but moving towards deactivation. It also disrupts the assemblage of ethics of guilt and duty, for example, by losing your job and income or even not caring for your sick wife.

## Ethics and ethos

Agamben (1999) developed an ethics of testimony that encompassed an ethos of bearing witness based on the accounts of the concentration camps during World War II. He identifies the figure of the *Muselmann*, a person who has been stripped of all physical and existential resources, between life and death, human and inhuman. This liminal being raises the question of humanity for him, which is the essence of his ethics. Agamben (1999: 69) notes that the depravity of Auschwitz is the end of the idealised concept of dignity and normativity. The *Muselmann* is “the guard on the threshold of a new ethics, an ethics of a form of life that begins where dignity ends”. In this context, the relationship between the living being, speech, and event is suspended. Testimony becomes the fractured speech of the inhuman or an ethos of existence. A place of existence and happiness. This also implies, for Agamben (1999:24), that responsibility from a legal perspective results in guilt and debt that encompasses existence. In other words, authentic and free existence becomes possible beyond the confines of good and evil. It is an ethos of existence and community.

Agamben's ethic is subversive in form, critiquing the goodness of systems themselves and how that limits human autonomy. Marijsse (2019: 141) emphasises that for Agamben “... ethical language is inherently contaminated when concepts that resonate a distinct juridical origin like responsibility, culpability, dignity, and repentance are at its core”. The problem is that ethics in law subvert morality to judgment, and what is good is merely following the law. The proliferation of statutes is emblematic, an attempt to prescribe how we must live due to the absence of ethical experience, a mechanism of biopolitical existence. This is also a distortion of the modal ontology of a person because people cannot be reduced to law (Marijsse 2019: 143). Agamben (2009: 44) underscores that when it comes to ethics, “there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize”. Ethics is a space and ethos of community that opens the possibility of the “doctrine of happiness” (Agamben 1999: 24). In other words, “ethics is the sphere that recognises neither guilt nor responsibility; it is... the doctrine of happy life” or “form-of-life” (Agamben 1999: 24). The capitalist work ethic is a form of labour that plays on the duty and debt of working for an income in which more productivity and a means to an end activity produces more profit and superficiality. For Agamben, ethos is more transformative because the guilt-driven production does not determine our existence. Inopertivity, from this perspective, suggests the freedom of being that undermines a market-driven ontology.

Returning to Katleho's dilemma, inoperativity relates directly to ethos and the ethics of not fulfilling the requirements of the prescribed market ideology for work. Form of life connects his being with others and activity beyond labour and teleological work. The debt and guilt for not performing his task at work is subverted by opening to his being with others and accepting that potentiality is not suspended without labour, doing his job as an IT specialist. Succumbing to the guilt imposed by teleological work, his being with others is fractured, and even his enjoyment of his potentiality would be eroded. This type of dilemma cannot be simplistically understood by applying a normative ethical theory to find a solution, as the situation is too complex and lacks a clear path to undermine capitalist logic. It can leave Katleho in a state of conflict and debt.

For Agamben, this conflict is precisely the point of inoperability because its detachment results in the implosion of the tension by embracing an authentic transformation of life. The debt and guilt of this structure are transformed by potentiality that is not market-controlled and remuneration-determined. Agamben proposes an alternative in which the complex network of relationships and activities is acknowledged and becomes part of the lived experience and solution. Therefore, as suggested in the previous section, the relationship between Katleho, his wife, his family network and his employer comes into scope that leads to inoperativity, resisting teleological work without the guilt of fulfilling a function as an IT specialist. This is not an idealistic compromise, but it affirms that potentiality and happiness are not chained to his job description.

## Happiness

As with Agamben's ethics, happiness cannot be understood in isolation from his criticism of biopolitics and its embedded inoperativity. Agamben (2000: 114) argues that the "happy life" is not a neutral space free of the sovereignty and the control of the "naked life". It is rather in the subversion of the power that dictates what the sources of a happy life are. The happy life is inherently political, a life that has reached the "perfection of its own power and its own communicability – a life over which sovereignty and right no longer have any hold." (Agamben 2000: 115). Agamben rethinks life without sovereignty because his view of the form of life and the coming community is inherently political in the sense that it opens a non-hierarchical, non-functional, and non-normative mode of being together. Happiness is, therefore, inherently

inoperative because it detaches from the mechanism and logic of control of potentiality by embracing the forms of life for all. It also envisions a messianic or coming community with genuine communication beyond the biopolitical power (Agamben 2009).

Marijsse (2019, 139) argues that in response to a life controlled by a functionalistic view of happiness, Agamben postulates an idea of happiness that radically opposes sovereignty by embracing potentiality and activity immersed in being. From his viewpoint, precisely because human beings are 'inoperative', 'workless', or 'beings of pure potentiality', there is no specific or prescribed telos to fulfil or actualise, a "different kind of happiness" beyond production. This view of happiness resists the utilitarian notion that labour is valuable only in producing happiness after a life of toil, or aspirational happiness. Alternatively, for Agamben, it is about 'sufficient life' beyond operativity and sovereignty. Sufficient in autonomy, the power of authentic communicability and not rights. Beyond ethical-juridical forms of existence that attempt to prescribe what is good and worthy of happiness. Something we must deserve or work towards. Agamben (2007: 20) protests that the objectification of happiness is the "result of arrogance and excess" – an act of hubris. Marijsse (2019: 150) concurs that today, "happiness presupposes the idea of a perfect, efficient, and cohesive plan-based ownership of life. The alleged free and agile subject consumes his life", instead it is being instrumentalised and driven towards the agenda of well-being and happiness. The means-to-an-end strategy of happiness, according to Agamben (2007: 20-21), fails to recognise the embedded paradox contained in happiness because when we realise we are happy, it has already ceased to be, as it is not a matter of destiny. Happiness awaits us when we do not attempt to find it. It is in not trying to find happiness and attempting to create happiness that it is discovered, because it is not a possession. It is inoperative in its subversive presence.

Charles-Leija et al. (2023: 1) note that research on productivity found that "there is a positive relationship between a worker's subjective well-being and productivity, and individuals who are happy in their work have a better attitude when performing activities: happier employees are more productive". This view assumes that meaningful and authentic work affirms worker happiness and increases productivity. In other words, the optimal functionality of a worker through meaningful work and happiness results in the increased functionality of the worker, which is a return to Agamben's warning of the impact of biopolitics. Controlling the meaningfulness and happiness of workers by corporations

increases productivity, profit, and the state's tax revenue. Therefore, labour policies on the well-being of workers remain a way for the state to take control of the bare life of workers for the happiness that serves the state, failing to acknowledge the inoperativity of work.

In the example of Katleho, it is clear that legislative control can be at play. But will that secure his happiness or place another layer of prescription on his work and being? Is his happiness a mere function of his potentiality as IT specialist and his role as husband? His right to family responsibility leave? Or is his very inoperative existence unlocked from teleological work and duty the breakthrough? A form of life in which activity and meaning are submerged into his existence without prescriptions. No policy or legal mechanism can be used to dictate what the employer should do or what should be done to ensure Katleho's well-being, nor can it be used to provide the profitability of the company. Happiness is rather the surprise of existence and the different potentialities of human activities, which is an extension of being and not a function.

## Conclusion

In this article, Geuss's theory of work is presented as a typical modern functionalist way of understanding work, which Honneth critiques for reducing work to wage and product. In this case, the worker becomes a means to an end and an instrument constraining a person's freedom and autonomy. Bertland addressed this constraint by advocating Nancy's view of inoperativity and its importance to the community. From this perspective, the wider social network of a worker focuses on inoperative work or non-activity during the working day. The problem of Nancy's distinct ontological inoperativity is that political resistance is less articulated. To address this problem, Agamben's radical conception of inoperativity, within his wider criticism of biopolitics, was explored as a supplementary perspective that moves, that is distinctly political. Inoperativity, from Agamben's perspective, moves toward the implosion of the means to an end, the structure of work and the duality of being and activity by envisioning work as transformational by resisting teleological work. Agamben is not suggesting that we stop working, but rather that work is no longer constrained by predefined roles, productivity mandates, goals and market mechanisms that control. Inoperativity refers to the detachment of work from

its fixed, utilitarian determinism. It disrupts the binary between potentiality and activity, showing both as historically constructed categories within capitalist and sovereign regimes of power.

From this perspective, the community of work is not a means to an end and is not a controlled collective submitting to state and market power. It is, instead, a potentiality beyond activity and an ethos that is not regulated by debt or guilt, but rather the possibility of happiness beyond legal intervention. It is the modal existence and work that are, for Agamben, a radical critique of the control of market capitalism that only values certain activities, production and profit. Agamben's inoperativity is transformative and incorporates value beyond a product and the value placed on the end product. The socially embedded person and their activities have value beyond production. Therefore, Agamben proposes inoperability at the basic level of potentiality beyond use value and market controls that is always already present within any system of work, not something to be added later, but a potential immanent in human life that can be reclaimed or rendered visible. This encompassing political view of Agamben addresses the modern reductionist nature of work that advances people's freedom without succumbing to a means-to-an-end structure.

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