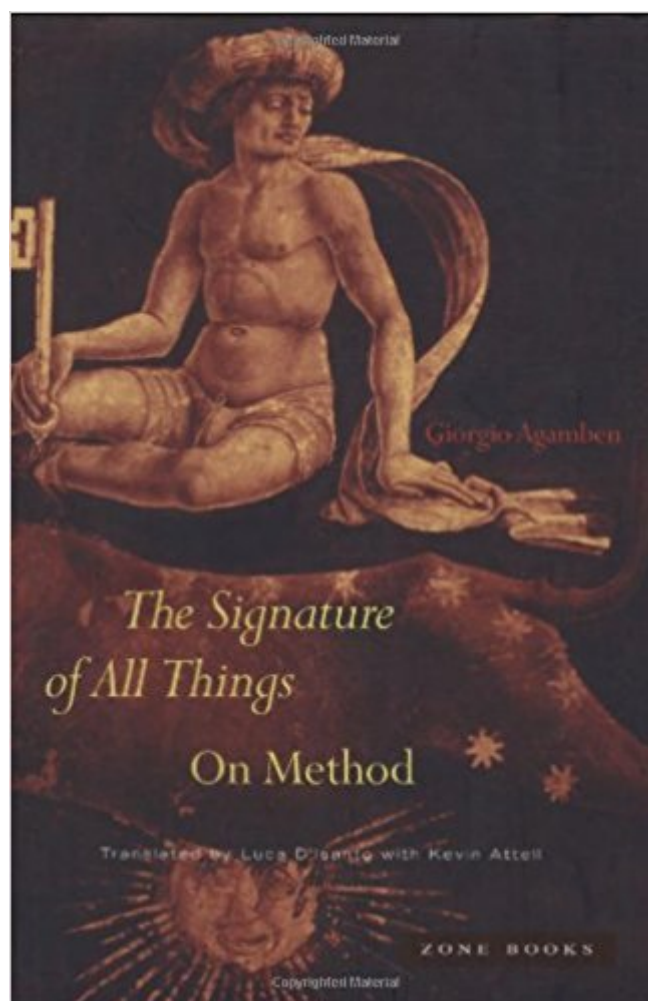


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The Signature Of All Things: On Method



Synopsis

The Signature of All Things is Giorgio Agamben's sustained reflection on method. To reflect on method implies for Agamben an archaeological vigilance: a persistent form of thinking in order to expose, examine, and elaborate what is obscure, unanalyzed, even unsaid, in an author's thought. To be archaeologically vigilant, then, is to return to, even invent, a method attuned to a "world supported by a thick weave of resemblances and sympathies, analogies and correspondences." Collecting a wide range of authors and topics in a slim but richly argued volume, Agamben enacts the search to create a science of signatures that exceeds the attempts of semiology and hermeneutics to determine the pure and unmarked signs that signify univocally, neutrally, and eternally. Three conceptual figures organize Agamben's argument and the advent of his new method: the paradigm, the signature, and archaeology. Each chapter is devoted to an investigation of one of these concepts and Agamben carefully constructs its genealogy transhistorically and from an interdisciplinary perspective. And at each moment of the text, Agamben pays tribute to Michel Foucault, whose methods he rethinks and effectively uses to reformulate the logic of the concepts he isolates. The Signature of All Things reveals once again why Agamben is one of the most innovative thinkers writing today.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"...The Signature of All Things is a work of the highest intellectual caliber." Conor O'Dea Philosophy in Review

Giorgio Agamben is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Venice. He is the author of *Profanations* (2007), *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (2002), both published by Zone Books, and other books.

It's no big secret that the method has been limping under the sign of a bad star in continental philosophy for a while now. Unsurprising perhaps, since the tradition burnt its fingers early with Edmund Husserl and Henri Bergson, each being the first and last to speak of method (Husserl's phenomenological method, Bergson's method of intuition) without a trace of self-consciousness. Having since become easy-pickings for generations of philosophers following however, the question of method has remained a vexed one. As such, it's with a certain strategic - if nonetheless academic - audacity that Agamben can unblinkingly subtitle his little book, *On Method*. Consider, for example, Theodor Adorno's polemics against the 'intolerance' and 'arbitrariness' of method, whereby method is charged with 'doing violence to unfamiliar things' insofar as it can only 'model the world after itself' and 'substitute itself for things' (see Adorno's brilliant tract 'Against Epistemology', another suitable title of which could have been 'Against Method'). The argument being that insofar as method can only presuppose the sorts of things that will fall under its purview, anything that does not fit will invariably get tossed to the side. This is what Agamben calls the problem of relating the universal to the particular, whereby what is 'left out' is precisely the singular: that which is unique and unsubstitutable. In the face of these problems, Agamben proposes an alternative way of thinking method: as that which, rather than moving from the universal to the particular, moves instead from singularity to singularity. In trying to elaborate just what this move entails, Agamben embarks on an investigation of three exemplary methodological approaches: that of the paradigm, the signature, and philosophical archeology. Those who have been following Agamben's work till now will be more or less familiar with the first and the last of these, which have found expression in Agamben's other works, but are for the first time explicitly taken on as themes of their own. The 'theory of signatures' however, the longest and most elaborate of the investigations here, has made its appearance in Agamben's writings only relatively recently, so it's nice to see it treated in such great detail here. Although it's been billed as something like a 'reply to critics', *The Signature of All Things* stands very much on its own as a work of philosophy. Particularly great is the extended meditation on sacraments (as an example of a signature at work), a

discussion of which felt oddly waylaid in Agamben's *The Sacrament of Language*. In terms of contemporary reference points, it's the work of Michel Foucault here which gets the most attention, particularly and unsurprisingly his more methodological works, 'The Order of Things' and *The Archeology of Knowledge* which Agamben treats with great respect and delicacy. As Agamben remarks, where Foucault ends and where Agamben himself begins is a little hard to parse, but that's part of the fun. There's also a little jab at Derrida here, which continues Agamben's career-spanning pokes at deconstruction. One missed encounter I feel worth mentioning in closing is with the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Agamben's reflections on rules and singularities bear an uncanny resemblance to Wittgenstein's own meditations on the question of whether or not the standard meter in Paris is in fact, a meter long. When Agamben speaks, for example, of 'the total abandonment of the particular-general couple as the model of logical inference', and of 'the exhibition of the paradigmatic case that constitutes a rule which cannot be applied or stated', is this not the same logic the governs Wittgenstein's declaration that the meter rule in Paris is neither a meter long, nor not a meter long? In any case, something to explore! (see Paul Livingston's work here on the politics of paradox).

This is simply the most important book by possibly the most important thinker of our age. All the questions raised by earlier works are addressed here and the method of philosophical archaeology is THE mode of critical hermeneutics of our times. There are simply no questions left hanging here as Agamben wrong-foots all his critics by presenting a totally consistent critical method for undermining the predominant philosophies of difference that have held sway for so long in the academy and beyond. I realise for most *Homo Sacer* is the central text but the full radical meaning of Agamben's politics cannot be understood without this work. Not only does *Signature of All Things* clarify Agamben's philosophy brilliantly, it justifies claims for him to be the philosopher of our age, the work of Badiou notwithstanding. Read this book. It is an urgent need for anyone serious about critical thinking in our age of catastrophe and lassitude.

Agamben's book is a homily to ways of approaching the humanities and humanity. A great essay writer in the classical rhetorical sense - instilling a sense of curiosity, lightness and open wonder while offering substantial readings of key ideas. If elegance of knowledge be a virtue, it is here.

For better or worse, Agamben is now part of the oxygen literary critics need to breathe. That said, this book is marvelously suggestive, and at its best, really helps one to think about how method dictates the content of argument. The weakness is that many of the claims are really grounded in the signature of Agamben, and one would really like historically specific examples for the broad charges levied against, for example, scientific methods of the early modern and modern periods.

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