Suspended animation: thinking and animality in neurocultural selfhood

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Abstract: This paper analyses a genre of self-improvement literature based on scientific models of animal behaviour and neurophysiology. Popular science books such as *blink: the Power of Thinking Without Thinking* by Malcolm Gladwell or *Mind Wide Open. Why You are What You Think* by Steve Johnson, and academic books such as *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* by William Connolly argue that everyday thought or thinking includes animal behaviours and responses. They suggest that these behaviours and responses should become the object of managed self-awareness. Their broadened understandings of thought have dramatic implications for contemporary selfhood, sociality and political life. The paper situates their understandings of animality, selfhood and thinking through the work of Giorgio Agamben. Agamben’s concept of the anthropological machine offers an alternative framing of the relation between human and animal, and of any attempt to manage that relation. It suggests how this relation changes historically, generating instabilities in political and metaphysical formations, and why the collapsing of human-animal differences encounters obstacles. Drawing on Heidegger’s analysis of animals and boredom, Agamben’s work implies a different way of thinking this relation. Thinking, for Agamben, is a form-of-life that lies close to animality.
Suspended animation: thinking and animality in neurocultural selfhood

Do exceptional responses occur in everyday situations? Everyday events sometimes put our sense of selfhood in question. They trigger reactions and behaviours that have more to do with territory, survival and animal communication than meaning, intention, identity or thought. Reactions of fear, flight or attachment can occur anytime: at a political event, in the cinema or art gallery, at work or on the street. This paper analyses a strange form of self-improvement literature animated by such events. The literature assembles knowledges and techniques of selfhood based on scientific models of animal behaviour, cognition and physiology. Many forms, practices and ideas of communication, sociality, values, law, ethics and technology blur the lines between humanity and animality. Many examples in different domains could be cited here, but all of them transform and work up everyday experience of living as a set of responses to be analyzed, monitored and regulated through cognitive, behavioural, and neurophysiological models of animality. Giorgio Agamben’s work allows one thread of this development to be unravelled and
evaluated. Agamben analyses how concepts of life underpin political formations and forms of power. Crucially, he frames thinking as a form-of-life. This framing provides ways of situating animalisation in relation to thinking (as well as responsibility, ethics, politics and futurity). Because thinking or thought retains a special privilege in animalized accounts of personhood, self and relation to others, the connections that Agamben makes between thinking and life have special importance. Any shift in thinking about thought or practices of thinking deeply affects experiences of self, body, others and collective life. Agamben’s work demonstrates why affirming animality remains difficult for anyone who likes to think of themselves as human. It frames an important question: in what way can we become animals?

**Animalisation as everyday experimental sensibility**

The literature this paper analyzes forms a loose corpus situated at the boundary between books on popular science, personal development and cultural theory. Near the beginning of his best-selling book *blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking*, Malcolm Gladwell asks '[b]ut what would happen if we if took our instincts seriously?' Taking instincts seriously in itself is not new. Since the nineteenth century, large parts of the psy-disciplines (psychology, psychoanalysis, cognitive science) and the life sciences have devoted themselves to that. Gladwell answers that taking 'our instincts seriously' means attending to 'the very smallest components of our everyday lives – the content and origin of those instantaneous impressions and conclusions that spontaneously arise whenever we meet a new person, confront a complex situation or have to make a decision under conditions of stress' (16). We can
take this call to heed our instincts in different ways. For instance, we might regard it as re-affirming biological determinism. However, Gladwell’s and other similar books situate biology and animality in everyday senses of self. They highlight everyday scenarious (in the classroom, on the street, in a gallery, at home) and suggest that knowing biological explanations of them changes selfhood. In *Mind Wide Open. Why You are What You Think*, another recent best-selling non-fiction book on thinking, Steven Johnson suggests that ‘[k]nowing something about the brain’s mechanics-and particularly your brain’s mechanics-widens your self-awareness as powerfully as any therapy or meditation or drug. Brain science has become an avenue for introspection, a way of bridging the physiological reality of your brain with the mental life you already inhabit.’ There is much to analyze here. Almost every word in this brief passage - ‘knowing,’ ‘brain mechanics,’ ‘your,’ ‘self-awareness,’ ‘therapy,’ ‘meditation,’ ‘drug,’ ‘life’ - opens onto vistas of debate, contention, politicised struggle and power. To cite a final example, the political theorist William Connolly goes further. He says ‘thinking is neurocultural.’

Rather than concerning themselves with neurophysiology or cognitive psychology as scientific enterprises, these three accounts draw from them practically-oriented ideas about selfhood in everyday life. They look for elements to weave together in ‘technologies of self’ that can rapidly react, feel, invent, create, intuit and organise itself in networked capitalism. Johnson, like many others, sees brain science as a way of delineating how thinking overflows the discursive, logical, rational, or representational. The connection to brain science affirmed here is not to a classic scientific model, nor to a
determinist or reductionist account of self or culture as might be found in contemporary evolutionary psychology. They inculcate a quasi-experimental relation to self by borrowing from specific scientific disciplines and knowledges, combined with television nature documentary style narrative, brain-imaging techniques, therapeutic interventions, dietary and pharmaceutical regimes. Media, technology, everyday life and science intermingle here. Connolly connects the different components in this experimental sensibility when he writes:

"Today a dense series of loops and counterloops among cinema, TV, philosophy, neurophysiology, and everyday life enable people to explore the relation between thinking and affect more readily." 

While the precise character of the 'loops and counterloops' between media, science and 'everyday life' merit more description, here the key problem is to explain how animalization makes these loops feasible.

**Animality in everyday action**

At one level, Agamben's *The Open* parallels the popular literature. Accounts such as Johnson's, Gladwell's and Connolly's (although his diverges radically in theory) connect thinking and animality at a practical, quasi-popular level. They combine science and quotidian anecdotes to prove that responses, feelings, intuitions, or various kinds of memory are animal reactions developed to solve problems of survival. Agamben's work also connects thinking to animality. However, it scales thinking up to a historico-philosophical and political level. The practical, quasi-popular level understands thinking as something that can be modified, enhanced, and rendered more flexible or adaptable by reference
to scientific knowledges of animal behaviour, cognition and neurophysiology. As Nigel Thrift argues, these modifications serve very precise economic functions. Similarly, at the historico-philosophical level of Agamben's account, the machinery that produces, as we will see, the very possibility of any experience of boredom, pleasure, everyday life and thinking hinges on animality. However, Agamben’s differs decisively. It allows us to ask whether the loops between neurophysiology and everyday life, between animality and thinking more broadly, can be smooth or uneventful.

In *The Open*, Agamben argues that any concept of humanity must both exclude and include animal nature. A logic of exclusion-inclusion drives the history of philosophical, religious, legal, political, scientific and artistic concepts of the human in the West. Departing from an analysis of political sovereignty developed in *Homo Sacer*, Agamben formulates this logic as ‘the anthropological machine.’ This mechanism generates figures of the human by dividing or cutting between human and animal. Yet at each moment, the anthropological machine teeters on the verge of breakdown. 'The motor of the historical becoming of the human' (80) has repeatedly produced humanity in tension with animality.

How does the anthropological machine produce any historical becoming of human? Like the machinery of Kafka’s *Penal Colony*, the machine that Agamben describes performs a series of topological operations on the living. It cuts living elements apart (for instance, body and soul) and folds this cut back into the living in order to produce the human. It divides animality off from
ideas, practices, and discourses of being-human. However it also includes animality within them. Because the anthropological machine constantly re-inscribes animal-human difference within the human, figures of humanity cannot stabilise. The machine intermittently injects new breaks and separations. In the history of Western ideas of the living, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Linnaeus, and Ernst Haeckel represent significant philosophical and scientific articulations of the same discursive machinery. The different versions of the exclusion-inclusion share the folded topology:

In as much as the production of the human by the opposition man/animal, human/inhuman is in play in it, the machine functions necessarily by an exclusion (which is also and always already a capture) and an inclusion (which is always and already an exclusion). It is precisely because the human is, in effect, each time already presupposed, that the machine produces in reality a kind of state of exception, a zone of indetermination where the outside is only the exclusion of the inside and the inside, in its turn, only an exclusion of the outside (37).

As in *Homo Sacer*, Agamben calls this space of included-exclusion 'a state of exception'. In both older and newer versions, the anthropological machine generates a 'zone of indetermination' or state of exception where human and animal remain or become indistinguishable. The zone takes different forms, but it always posits the existence of something not yet human that is already human. For instance, late nineteenth century accounts of human evolution solved the problem of 'the missing link' by envisaging the virtual existence of pre-linguistic humans.

No-one lives only in the zone of indetermination. The state of exception precipitates from incessant cleaving, re-articulating, dislocating and displacing, of human and animal lives. Given the topological kinks of the anthropological construct, there is no prospect of simply putting humanity and animality back
together again. Rather than trying to put these elements or substances back together again (as have many philosophical projects during the last centuries, and as does the literature under analysis here), Agamben seeks to extract the dynamics of their constant division:

We must, on the contrary, learn to think man [sic] as what results from the disconnection of these two elements [body and soul] and examine not the metaphysical mystery of their conjunction, but the practical and political mystery of the separation (16).

Practical and political de-couplings or disconnections of animal bodies and human souls produce the human. Human life, in whatever sense, re-iterates, more less incessantly, in many places and ways (asleep, waiting, watching, playing, fighting, etc), that dividing and breaking apart.

**Biological thinking and the democratic value of life**

Agamben's account would help situate the literature of animalized or neurocultural selfhood if it can highlight the strategies that literature adopts. How does the anthropological machine help explain the practical re-definitions selfhood mentioned above? As mentioned above, ‘thinking’ appears surprisingly often as a cardinal concern. At first glance, the idea of thinking developed in Gladwell's, Johnson's and Connolly's work does not seem to fit very well with the Agamben's account of the anthropological machine. Their accounts displace thinking away from conscious, logical, rational, reflective registers towards ‘the very smallest components of our everyday lives.’

Thinking is presented as something mundane, dispersed, variable, fragmentary and transient. In this respect, their accounts very much echo long-standing philosophical criticisms of the separation of soul from body in Western thought
(often originally attributed to Descartes). Do they not continue the re-appraisal of thinking that Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger or Derrida undertook?

In contrast to the philosophical critiques of mind-body dualism, the accounts of neurocultural and animalized selfhood draw on life sciences. Agamben's work provides a way of situating life sciences and understanding how they become important. According to Agamben, Western political life and thought has long orbited a nucleus of animality or bare life. The term 'bare life' or zoë, sourced from Aristotle, takes many guises in Agamben's work of the last decade. In general terms, it refers to an 'incorruptible fallenness,' or 'mere living' outside politics, norms or judgment. According to *Homo Sacer Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, modern power, today in the guise of biopolitics, persistently probes bodies at the level of 'mere living.' It works to subsume bare life within organized forms of life (such as modes of subjectivation or selfhood) in order to constitute itself as sovereign, constituted power.

Despite their name, the life sciences provide no direct access to (bare) life. They, for Agamben, hover ambivalently on the fringes of the zone of indetermination. On this fringe, forms of life, organised by norms and institutions, shear away from bare life:

> Biological life, which is the secularized form of [bare] life and which shares its unutterability and impenetrability, thus constitutes the real forms of life literally as forms of survival: biological life remains inviolate in such forms as that obscure threat that can suddenly actualize itself in violence, in extraneity, in illnesses, in accidents.

On the one hand, biological lives capture the living in forms (anatomy, physiology, ecology, biochemistry, etc). On the other hand, biological life
retains something of the ‘unutterability and impenetrability’ of bare animal life. Any turn to neurophysiology or behavioural sciences finds itself enmeshed in a complex weave of forms, norms and exceptional events (‘violence,’ ‘extraneity,’ ‘illnesses,’ and ‘accidents’). These scientific knowledges supply diverse resources for social and political contests over living bodies. The animalizing accounts of thinking could extend what biological life sciences start. Outside the laboratory or the clinic, they could help render “real forms of life” as “forms of survival.” So, while responding to a stranger, an artwork or a political event might at first seem to lie a long way from biology, when explained in terms of a primitive or older part of the brain evolved to quickly produce fight-or-flight responses, art and politics entail forms of survival. From this perspective, popular accounts of everyday life as instinct, reaction or survival tactic capture and exclude bare life. They too produce the human, even as they seek to overcome the modernist separation between mind and body.

**Neurochemistry and democracy: no value other than life**

What happens to the unutterability of bare life in the animalizing accounts of selfhood? Popular accounts such as Gladwell and Johnson, but also academic work such as Connolly’s, present certain behaviours and physiological responses as politically useful and potentially democratic. For instance, Johnson writes ‘our mental modules are implicated in political issues’ (213). In order to understand why ‘our brain’s faculties may create too much resistance,’ we need more comprehensive accounts of ‘self in society’ (214). Hence Johnson proposes that:
[t]here is no convincing reason a comprehensive account of self in society couldn't be built by a consilient chain: neuroscientists explain how the brain's underlying electrochemical networks functions; evolutionary psychologists explain how and why those networks create channels of “prepared learning” or instinct; ... political theorists and moral leaders explore the best ways to structure society to reconcile those patterns of group behaviour with individual needs. (214)

At the base of the envisaged 'comprehensive account of self in society' lies neurochemistry and just above, evolutionary accounts of 'prepared learning.' In identifying and delineating the implication of brains in politics, all three books bring certain aspects of self to the fore. Many of the examples of ‘rapid cognition’ or snap decisions Gladwell uses come from the politicised domains of electoral politics, law enforcement or military strategy. When they put forward a concrete site of a neurochemical-evolutionary-political-moral self-in-society, they typically settle on the well-known behaviours such as the fight-or-flight response. This, as Johnson writes, is partly because:

Learning to be afraid turns out to have been one of the most studied behavioural patterns of the twentieth century. (53)

However, more than this, behavioural sciences attribute 'adaptive value' to the 'lack of discrimination' in the fear responses. That is, fear heavily dramatises the staying-alive or survival of life. The neurocultural accounts value such responses as 'a kind of thinking.'

Once again, a lack of discrimination has a potentially adaptive value. In life-or-death situations, you never know where relevant information might lie. ... This, too, is a kind of thinking. (59)

This 'thinking' is not linguistic, logical, rational, conscious or even unconscious.

Many of the examples of rapid fearful cognition come from law enforcement
because life sciences have examined such responses carefully. Now they can become part of what Johnson calls ‘self-awareness’ through a scientifically inflected process of personal development. The fight-or-flight response, Connolly suggests,

allows us to explore how thinking itself can sometimes modify the microcomposition of body/brain processes, as a new pattern of thinking becomes infused into body/brain processes. (8)

How can modularised, fragmentary and partial fear responses be democratic? The account of neurochemical-animal self in society enhances democracy by expanding the primary locus of political agency, personhood. It can think about itself more comprehensively, it can understand feelings of fear, intimations of threat and obscure anxieties as adaptations, as forms of survival, and above all as potentially legitimate forms of thought in their own right.

These suggestions aim to enhance truth and justice. Even if these responses can fit somehow within democratic understandings of citizenship, justice or deliberation, zoë's inherently unstable position within modern democracy troubles their success. In terms of Agamben’s account, they also participate in another wider process. On the one hand, as Agamben points out, '[M]odern democracy presents itself from the beginning as a vindication and liberation of zoë, and ... it is constantly trying to transform its own bare life into a way of life and to find, so to speak, the bios of zoë.' On the other hand, the transformation of bare life into political form is not unique to democracy. Agamben claims directly that democracy and totalitarianism converge at a 'historico-philosophical level.' Both know 'no value ... other than life itself'
Furthermore, he insists that only by holding on to the idea of their 'inner solidity' can 'new realities and unforeseen convergences' be sensed and understood. Hence while the animalized accounts of thinking vindicate and liberate bare life, they also transform zooē into a way or form of life. In doing so, they affirm no value other than life itself.

**Techniques of transforming zooē**

How do the animalising accounts transform zooē? Practically, they begin by naming. Johnson suggests learning to name chemicals and brain regions:

> If you spend some time exploring this new world, you will end up with a set of conceptual building blocks to use when thinking about how your brain works: some of them specific chemicals, some them localized regions, some of them broader patterns of interaction between regions or chemicals. (184)

Naming never simply denominates. As Judith Butler argues, ‘to be named by another is traumatic: it is an act that precedes my will, an act that brings me into a linguistic world in which I might then begin to exercise agency at all.’

Naming substantiates, organizes, distributes and lays the ground for regulation, in this case of a sense of self oriented by biological and behavioural knowledges. For instance, Gladwell has the reader imagine going into a psychologist’s office to take a language test: make four-word sentences out of some five-word sets. The sets include words like 'worried,' 'old', 'Florida', 'lonely'. After setting ten word samples for the reader to test themselves, Gladwell remarks

> 'After you finished that test – believe it or not- you would have walked out of my office and back down the hall more slowly than you walked in. With that test, I affected the way you behaved. ... You thought that I was just making you take a language test. But, in fact, what I was also doing was making the big computer in your brain – your adaptive unconscious – think about the state of being old' (53).
The imagined experiment sets a scene. In this scene, things take place on a largely inaccessible level (that Gladwell somewhat problematically terms 'the big computer in your brain'). According to Gladwell, the language test and its aftermath – walking more slowly – show that the 'adaptive unconscious' 'picked up some clues that we're in an environment that is really concerned about old age' (58). In trying to transform bare life into way of life, the test brings to light the penumbra of instantaneous impressions and conclusions that accompany an explicit cognitive task.

Yet visiting a psychologist's office to take such a test is not a neutral situation. Test situations generate anxieties. The disciplinary norms and techniques of the psy-disciplines institute and structure the event. The imagined test in the book embeds language-thought within modes of address, compliance, norms and performance. Taking this test, even in the literary form offered by a book on popular science, places the experience in a specific register. As Nikolas Rose puts it,

"The colloquial designations, the simple examples, the dissection of recognizable moves: all these provide a means of rendering our own experiences in social transactions into thought and making amenable them to management."

The features that Gladwell's imagined test seeks to bring to light, and to render recognisable for readers, relies on a pre-existing familiarity. Psychological testing interpellates subjects and correlates them norms in educational, employment, medical, therapeutic or pastoral settings. Because subjects are accustomed to being tested, they quickly recognise the structures and forces framing their responses. The test results – walking down the hallway more
slowly – rely on this prior incorporation of test instruments to do its work. The test makes something recognizable (walking down the hall more slowly as the trace of a bodily modification wrought by the adaptive unconscious) because the psy-disciplines have already formed and articulated life as bios. Moreover, the experience of aging itself carries much bio-political baggage. It is not one example amongst others. Readers may recognize the fact that multiple, autonomous adaptive behaviours shadow conscious cognitive tasking. Yet any such recognition relies on the framing provided by the prior formations that subtly corporealises language and pervasively, ineluctably politicises life itself.

**The territories and behaviours of everydayness**

The experiments, situations, tests, tricks and naming, however, do not exhaust the bios of zoë. Beyond the techniques of behavioural self-experimentation stands a more forceful attempt to overcome any separation between human and animal. For instance, Connolly contends:

> Although human culture is in fact composed of essentially embodied beings implicated in complex patterns of action, and although some brain nodules in the human brain network are shared with other animals, cultural theorists haunted by determinist images of nature are pressed to dismiss, ignore or degrade the corporeal layering of language, perception, and thinking in human nature. (62)

This formulation, echoed in other recent academic and non-academic work in cultural theory and popular science, begins with commonalities between animal and human. In another example that joins animal and human, Johnson suggests that ‘[w]hen we sense emotional complexity in other mammals, we’re detecting the existence of the limbic system operating in their brains.’ Both writers emphasize patterns of action and biological structures common to
animals and humans.

At the juncture of human and animal, Agamben's exploration in *The Open* of the way Heidegger thought about differences between animal and human life again heads in a different direction. Rather than reinforcing or collapsing their separation, Heidegger's work represents for Agamben an attempt to take the animal-human separation to its historical limit. This attempt ultimately puts any separation in doubt. Heidegger's thought approaches the zone of indetermination without collapsing animal and human differences. If Agamben, via Heidegger, can sustain this movement, then an important dimension of contemporary selfhood can be re-evaluated without collapsing all values and all separations.

Agamben tells how Heidegger departs from the basic concept of *territory* developed by the early twentieth century ethologist, Jacob von Üexkull. Heidegger took from von Üexkull the notion that animal time and space differs from human time and space. Animals live in milieus, humans live in worlds. As Agamben says, 'we too often imagine that the relations that a particular animal maintains with things in their milieu take place in the same time as those which link us to things in our human world' (40). An animal habitat consists of a system of marks which trigger perceptions and channel them into particular ways of moving through and marking out a space. Territorial limits are signalled by marks left by other animals, or, in the case of some birds, by song. The relation between an animal and its environment consists in this interlocking between marks or signs and corresponding capacities to react to them in an
environment. Animal milieux, according to von Üexkull, effectively shut animals in. The milieu consists of a selection of marks in close structural coupling with the senses and motor capacities of the animal in question. What falls through the sieve of these marks forms no part of the animal's milieu.  

The tight coupling between territory and behaviour figures in the contemporary literature on animalisations of thinking. These accounts (and again Johnson's book is exemplary) take two things from it. Firstly, they re-iterate the connection between milieu and action-reaction. Secondly, they treat this connection as something to be experienced and acted on. People can become more sensitive to or conscious of the connection between trigger and reaction. They can also perhaps modify the connection. Fear, as mentioned above, and love-attachment, commonly appear as the most important sites of intervention examined in these accounts. Johnson's book describes a life-threatening event that happened to the author and his partner in their Manhattan apartment. In his story of the shattering of a large window during a storm, Johnson contends that fear, and his memory of that response link certain marks (the sound of wind) to reactions:

This is the body's fear response, an orchestral mix of physiological instruments launching with masterful speed and precision. ... Feeling it kick in is one of the best ways to experience your brain and body as an autonomous system, operating independently of your conscious will. (49)

The sound of wind triggers bodily changes – tensing of muscles, sweating, shivering, eye movements, etc. In Johnson's case, the whistling of wind around a building launches 'an orchestral mix of physiological instruments.'
Importantly, this trigger has also become a way for him to experience his own 'brain and body as an autonomous system.' Similarly, for Connolly, fear reactions offer a particularly quotidian site for the modification of thinking:

In this instance the relatively slow, complex process of perception gives way to the lightning-fast, crude processing of the amygdala. ... Let’s call the emergency percept infra-perception, because of its speed and its processing of information without visual imagery. It happens all the time, as when you turn your car in a flash on the road or freeze suddenly while walking in the woods. (27)

Perception, feeling (of fear) and reaction happen 'all the time,' even during sleep. They are constantly available. However, they work without 'visual imagery' and beneath the threshold of perception. It is hard to become conscious of them except in exceptional situations, when something actually frightening occurs. The interlocking of milieu and reaction or behaviour means that this 'kind of thinking' has its own specificity. A sound or a flash of movement triggers a cry and a lurch sideways in response. The transition from trigger to response outstrips conscious perception or intended action. Reactions triggered by specific sensed features of a situation sweep over 'intention' and 'perception.' Because it does not rely on language, fully-formed images or sound-images, it is fast. How then the technologies of self-thinking bring it to bay?

**From excitement to boredom**

Agamben's reading of Heidegger suggests that bringing this 'kind of thinking' into awareness is fraught. Because animals allegedly unify perception, action and milieu, Heidegger famously argued that animals are 'poor-in-world.' They do not act, they behave. Borrowing one of von Üexkull's examples, Heidegger
describes how milieus lock animals in. An experimenter cuts off the abdomen of a bee and then puts the bee on the edge of a bowl of honey. The bee observes neither the superabundance of honey or the absence of its abdomen (52). It just sips the honey. A circuit of pulsional drives prevents the bee from seeing the catastrophe or responding to what happened. The world, Heidegger suggests, can only absorb or daze animals. Animals cannot relate to the world or things as such. Being dazed or captivated, as Agamben notes, is the basic state, the fundamental mood, of animals. This state flows from functional coupling between perceptions, milieu understood as a system of marks or triggers that drive behaviours. It differs from human existence. Although we can be absorbed in things, we don't have to be. We act, we have and make worlds, the argument runs, because we don't have to, because we can not do. Not having to act or do, not having to make, in short, being essentially indeterminate, grounds radical contingency, being-open and having a world.

The amputee bee's state of absorption resonates in the recreational neuroscience texts. Experiences of love and attachment epitomize absorption for Johnson. Johnson's book contrasts the fear fight-flight response to an equally or perhaps more important alternative: tend-and-befriend. Again, an animal model is crucial:

The prairie vole, a small rodent indigenous to the midwestern plains of the United States, is one of the natural world's great romantics. After mating, most voles remain monogamously attached to their partner for life, raising children together in a rodent version of domestic bliss. (111)

The prairie vole, subject of intensive laboratory investigation, teaches us about the neurochemistry of absorption, attachment and feeling. The prairie vole's
brain in particular turns out to be particularly instructive. ‘Domestic bliss’ hinges on a single molecule, oxytocin:

For most people, I suspect, the neuroscience of personal connection will have more intimate revelations as we come to understand and recognize the chemicals that trigger these powerful feelings. Not just because it's intellectually interesting to know that your feelings of attachment are partially instigated by oxytocin, but also because the chemistry's effects go beyond the primary emotion itself-altering your memory, your immediate attention, your evaluation of people and environments. (130)

The 'intimate revelations' in his account tell of his partner nursing her newborn baby in a downtown Manhattan apartment on 11th September 2001. Her calmness represents for Johnson an existential counterweight to the nervy fight-flight response. Oxytocin lends durability to feeling:

In other words, it's possible that oxytocin does not create the visceral pleasure of love and attachment, but it does enable that pleasure to last longer than it normally would. (132)

Like knowing about the amygdala’s rudimentary decision-making, knowledge of oxytocin affects how we inhabit our worlds - ‘your memory, your immediate attention, your evaluation of people and environments.’ Knowing that chemicals such as oxytocin coincide with feelings of attachment affirms animality at species and individual levels:

Knowing something about your brain chemistry at such a moment connects you both to the individual neuronal assemblage in your brain that creates the image of your child and to the evolutionary history of feeling, the history of all your ancestors and their parental emotions. (211)

The state of absorption or captivation that Johnson attributes to oxytocin resembles the absorption that Agamben finds of interest in Heidegger.

Agamben does not equate animal absorption with the human history of feeling.
Instead, through the state of captivation or dazedness (*Benommenheit*), he attempts to envisage what would happen if the anthropological machining of human-animal differences halted. Absorption exposes and expels animals into the world. Although animals only have habitats or territories, they are also, as Heidegger puts it, 'expelled' (pulsionally expelled) towards something other than themselves (61). Their very being exposes or expells animals outside themselves. They still somewhat lack a world in this exposure, yet engage with what absorbs them - the marks, the triggers and stimuli, that which locks in their perceptions and behaviours. In its milieu or habitat, 'the animal is outside of being' (91). This exposure or expulsion holds for Agamben an extraordinary potential: it opens the possibility of moving outside the historical impasse of anthropologisation.

Agamben quickly rules out one interpretation of what this might mean: 'to render inoperative the machine which governs our conception of the human would not mean to look for new - more efficacious or authentic– articulations’ (92) of human-animal composites. Most of the materials of neurocultural-animal selfhood risk becoming efficacious. Instead, he suggests, it would be better ‘to show the central emptiness, the hiatus that - within man – separates man and animal, to risk ourselves in this emptiness: suspension of the suspension, Shabbat of both animal and man' (92). The weekend state of animal dazedness both sedates and animates.

Like the lasting feelings Johnson describes, the fundamental mood of animals – absorbed or dazed – is much closer to boredom than excitement. For
Heidegger, profound boredom occurs when the world refuses to open itself to a constitutively open being (Dasein, a person). Agamben suggest that Heidegger's reading of the existentially profound state of boredom cannot ever be fully distinguished from the dazed state of animality. Conceptually and ontologically, boredom actually coalesces with the state of being dazed (65). As Agamben concludes, 'Dasein is simply an animal who has learnt to be bored, who has been woken from its own dazedness and to its own dazedness' (70). The 'practical mystery' of the separation between animal and human lives does not rest on any essential difference such as language, rationality, capacity for invention etc. it lies in a zone of half-awake indetermination, between being dazed and being bored. The ‘banal, quotidian mysticism’ he affirms comes from being-dazed. Effectively, Agamben, via Heidegger, folds the line between animal and human within the human in a way that emphasizes its mutability. ‘We’ share with and veer away animals this dazed relation or absorption in the world.

**Waking and thinking as form-of-life**

I suggested earlier that in the texts under discussion, thinking has a privileged status. If often seems that we must preserve thinking itself as part of human selfhood at all costs. Yet if the technologies of animalized self have any purchases, thinking cannot remain what it was. It works beneath ‘direct reflective regulation’ as Connolly puts it. Nerve-wracking, stressful or traumatic scenes – police shootouts, severe weather events, brain scans, attacks, art auctions – abound in these accounts. Thinking occurs in wild or violent events. Does the folding inwards human-animal separation in the zone
of indetermination suggest any other trajectory? At the end of his discussion of
Heidegger, Agamben poses two possibilities:

At this point, two scenarios are possible from Heidegger's perspective: (a) posthistorical
man no longer preserves his own animality as undisclosable, but rather seeks to take it
on and govern it by means of technology; (b) man, the shepherd or being, appropriates
his own concealedness, his own animality, which neither remains hidden nor is made an
object of mastery, but is thought as such, as pure abandonment. (80)

On the one hand, in alternative (a), the biopolitical containment of life as bare
life needs to manage animality. Examples of that management litter biomedical
and psy-disciplines. Johnson, Gladwell and perhaps Connolly also take on
animality through behavioural and neuro-technical practices of various kinds
(MRI brain scans, biofeedback, drug and dietary regimes, etc). Alternative (b),
on the other hand, grapples with thinking itself as pure abandonment. Thinking
comes close to the dazed state that lies at the heart of animality.

Animality, for Agamben, has to be ‘thought as such, as pure abandonment’ in
order to avoid either hiding or managing it. Thinking abandonment is not
abandoning thinking. What would thinking be if not a startled bark into
wakefulness that happens now and then? Would it be placid attachment? At the
end of Homo Sacer, Agamben asks what to do politically, ethically and
ontologically about ‘bare life,’ and answers:

This biopolitical body that is bare life must itself be transformed into the site for the
constitution and installation of a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life and a
bios that is only its own zoë. Here attention will also have to be given to the analogies
between politics and the epochal situation of metaphysics. (188)

Why this injunction? Why would anyone especially want a ‘form of life’ that is
'exhausted in bare life', especially given that bare life is the included-other that
has become the principle on which biopolitical sovereignty pivots? Why must the analogies between politics and the 'epochal situation of metaphysics' receive attention?

Agamben envisages the emergence of a field of research on the fringes of the biopolitical terrain occupied by politics, philosophy, medico-biological sciences and jurisprudence. This fringe would not cut bare life into form and matter, into \textit{bios} and \textit{zoë}. Here, however, thought or thinking is crucial here because life and ‘form-of-life’ coincide in it. By contrast, the animalizing accounts attempt to identify the forms of thought that imbue life and subject them to regulation. In an essay entitled 'Form-of-life', Agamben asserts:

> Thought is form-of-life, life that cannot be separated from its form; and anywhere the intimacy of this inseparable life appears, in the materiality of corporeal processes and habitual ways of life no less than in theory, there and only there is there thought.\(^2\)

Thought that can think a form-of-life that is nothing but its own existence, ‘a \textit{bios} that is only its own \textit{zoë},’ would itself be form-of-life. The connective hyphens are important. Thinking would no longer seize an historical destiny (as in Heidegger), or radically distinguish the necessary and the contingent (as for instance in most Enlightenment and social constructionist accounts). Nor would thinking service the increasingly fine-grained biopolitical management of ecological, economic and political-cultural systems. Rather, thought would live, occasionally or intermittently, \textit{bios} and \textit{zoë} inseparably.

An ultra-minimalist, almost sedated mood pervades Agamben’s alternative. As in Johnson, Gladwell and Connolly’s accounts, for Agamben, thought as form-of-
life inhabits quotidian or everyday life. The contingencies of everyday life have been a constant theme in cultural and social theory over the last half century for various reasons (beginning perhaps with Benjamin, running through situationist-influenced and then feminist thought). In Agamben's work, everyday life undergoes a further vitalisation. Its radically contingency wells up along the fault-lines of indetermination where \( \textit{bios} \) uncontrollably coincides with its own \( \textit{zoë} \). In the language of his earlier work, ‘the contingent is not simply the non-necessary, that which can not-be, but that which, being the \( \textit{thus} \), being only its mode of being, is capable of the \( \textit{rather} \), can not not-be’.  

This zone where something becomes ‘its mode of being’ cannot be thought except as thought thinking itself. By virtue of its own singularity or ‘thusness’, thinking can never become an object or a subject. In this respect, it diverges in principle at least from the techniques advocated by Connolly, Gladwell and Johnson. If they all seek to heighten or render salient non-intentional, non-reflective thought through exceptional situations, thought as form-of-life dismantles the privilege of exceptional, shocking or jarring events.

We have no example of form-of-life apart from thinking. Moreover, thinking leads a quotidian not a transcendent life. This means that it must involve, as Agamben says, ‘everyday zones, a very banal, quotidian mysticism.’

Agamben's analysis of animality seeks to afford an understanding of what this quotidian life might mean. A version of bare life as everydayness, can be re-evaluated if we can show how separations between forms of life and life itself or bare life are practically produced.
Conclusion

Can we accept animality as the basis of thinking? ‘Our’ animality cannot be thought because thinking itself is put in question by animality. Thinking as ‘form-of-life’ cannot get very far away from management of animality. Almost the only distance it can give itself comes from that fact that it does not frame scientific thinking in the way that the popular and some academic accounts do. As biomedical sciences and capitalism become increasingly entwined, we can expect further intimate experimental syntheses of life and power to appear. The need for ways of sensing and making sense of ‘our’ animality or ‘our biological nature’ grows.

Agamben provides a broad account of how selfhood and political power form around life. History, Western history at least, constantly re-fashions the separation between human and animal. Any sense of humanity more or less openly hangs on the twisted topology of that separation. Biological life and life as survival appear as recent forms of the excluding-inclusion of bare life. At a more fine-grained level, Agamben offers ways of analyzing some aspects of the emerging syntheses of scientific, political and practical life. His work helps analyze the species of animalised thinking that Johnson, Gladwell and Connolly’s accounts seek to bring into self-awareness. Thinking itself begins to function as a crucial component in the modified version of the anthropological machine. Patterns of fear, insecurity, love, and attachment come to be seen as kinds of thinking. Physiological and psychological understandings of them as survival instincts or biochemical processes are put together with everyday
experiences. Different aspects of that putting together - naming in language, practices of testing, etc – coalesce as technologies of a thinking self.

It would be a mistake to treat experiments in animalizing thought solely as targets of criticism. As everyday forms of separation, they make it possible to begin to see and experience the entwining of biomedical and political life. Agamben’s readings of Heidegger showed that the structural couplings between perception, movement and milieu ultimately render conceptions of animality and thinking inextricable. Agamben locates in Heidegger an asymptotic proximity between absorption-abandonment and boredom-wakefulness. Likewise, the animalization of thought, in its attempts to structurally couple self-awareness and biomedical knowledge both shows why it is hard to make animality present as an object of thought and hard to expunge it from thought.

Agamben’s own affirmation of animality against the ‘total management of biological life’ hinges on thinking the abandonment, exposure and dazed feeling of animality as such. Across a wide spectrum of his work, he posits thinking as form-of-life as a way to activate a politically progressive relation to contemporary biopolitical power. Of all the animals in The Open, a tic that hibernated in a Rostock laboratory for 18 years before waking to feed again is one of the most striking (70). The tic woke, like the sleeper in the hotel room, without knowing much about where it was, or what had happened. Hibernation or suspended animation are states, however, that involve a change in immediate relations to the environment.
There are many ways to sense and make sense of ‘our’ animality or ‘our biological nature.’ Agamben provides an extremely broad account of the formation of subjectivity and political power around life. History, Western history at least, is a constantly re-fashioned separation between human and animal. Any sense of humanity more or less openly depends on the twisted topology of that separation. Biological life and life as survival appear as recent versions of the excluding-inclusion of bare life as forms of life. As biomedical sciences and politics become increasingly entwined, we can expect increasingly intimate experimental syntheses of life and power to appear.

At a more fine-grained level, Agamben offers ways of analyzing some aspects of the emerging syntheses of scientific, political and practical life. The main features of the analysis offered here have concerned what the Johnson, Gladwell and Connolly’s accounts regards as different kinds of thinking. Thinking itself begins to function as the pivotal component in the modified version of the anthropological machine. When patterns of fear, insecurity, love, and attachment come to be seen as kinds of thinking, physiological and psychological understandings of them as survival instincts or biochemical processes have to be put together with everyday experiences. Different aspects of that putting together - naming in language, practices of testing, etc – coalesce as technologies of a thinking self.
It is important not to treat these animalising experiments in thought solely as objects of criticism. Because they are quotidian, everyday forms of separation, they make it possible to begin to see what is stake in the entwining of biomedical and political life. Like Agamben’s readings of Heidegger, in which the structural coupling between perception, movement and milieu also pushes conceptions of what it is to have a world to their limit, the animalisation of thought, in its attempts structurally couple self-awareness and biomedical knowledge, shows why it is hard to make animality present as such. (In the discussion above, the proximity between absorption-abandonment and boredom-wakefulness that Agamben finds in Heidegger was key to this argument.) Why can’t we just accept our own animality? ‘Our’ animality cannot be thought as such because thought itself is put in question by animality. Thinking as ‘form-of-life’ (the connective hyphens are important), something that Agamben valorises strongly, is not very far away from management of animality. Almost the only difference is that it does not keep scientific thinking outside the frame in the way that the popular and some academic accounts do.

Agamben’s own affirmation of animality as a response to the ‘total management of biological life’ (77) rests on thinking the abandonment, exposure and dazed feeling of animality as such. Across a wide spectrum of his work, he posits thinking as form-of-life as a way to activate a politically progressive relation to contemporary biopolitical power. Of all the animal figures mentioned in The Open, a tic that hibernated in a Rostock laboratory for 18 years before waking to feed again is one of the most striking (70). The tic woke without knowing much about where it is, or about what has happened.
Hibernation or suspended animation are states, however, that involve a change in immediate relations to the environment.
3 Connolly, William E. *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed, Theory out of Bounds; V. 23*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
6 Connolly, ibid, 67.
10 Agamben, ibid, 2004, 80.
11 Gladwell, ibid, 16.
19 Johnson, ibid, 205/
21 This closed and stable functional unity of mark, perception or action raises all kinds of questions and gives rise to twentieth century life sciences such as ethology and ecology. If ethology studies how signs, territories, perceptions and actions mesh together for particular animal worlds, ecology studies how the different closed milieu overlap and intersect with each other.
22 Connolly, ibid, 112
23 Agamben, 1996, ibid. 156.
24 Agamben, 1993, ibid, 105.