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PUTTING THE HARM BACK INTO HARMONY

AIKIDO, VIOLENCE AND 'TRUTH IN THE MARTIAL ARTS'

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ABSTRACT

This paper will address the theme of 'truth in the martial arts', a phrase from Mitsugi Saotome's recent reflection on his relationship as uchi deshi (live-in student) to Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of aikido. I will frame this theme sociologically, exploring it as an aspect of the martial arts as contemporary practices of the self. What is distinct about the practice of the martial arts in this context is their sustained reflection on violence, not simply as violent contest but as a condition of irreducible insecurity per se. I propose that aikido (not unlike other martial arts) offers a response to violence by articulating a form-of-life – 'a life that can never be separated from its form' (Giorgio Agamben) – that is anchored by the understanding of complete martial fluidity as immanent to life. The martial arts are therefore very interesting contemporary practices of the self because their paths to knowledge address key biopolitical issues of life and power through a freeing relation to violence. I would also like to propose that the framework of transcendental empiricism, which Gilles Deleuze develops to describe the dynamics of affectual as opposed to representational (i.e. mediated) experience, is both promising to characterize the experience of martial fluidity and to expand martial artists' own self-understanding.

'What is the meaning of the martial arts in the contemporary conduct of life?' – This is how I imagine the sociologist Max Weber would have posed the question of the sociology of the martial arts. If politics is a vocation and science is a vocation [Weber 1919a/1946, 1919b/1946], what is the meaning of the martial arts as a vocation, or 'calling'? This is an interesting question, because while the martial arts in their different aspects certainly figure into contemporary societies as spectacles, sports, job skills, fitness regimens, hobbies, bearers of ethno-cultural identity, or even objects of desire or fantasy, these external characteristics do not get at what might be called the truth of the martial arts as practices of the self.

Following Ben Spatz's insights into performance studies in *What a Body Can Do* [2015], we are well positioned to inquire into this truth. One primary avenue of exploration in martial arts training is precisely the Spinozian and Deleuzian question: What can a body do? This is a question concerning the variable powers of action that can be learned through the body. As elaborated in Mitsugi Saotome's account of aikido, *A Light on Transmission* [2014], examined below, learning what a body can do in the martial arts entails three particular orientations to truth: a knowledge accessed through the transformation of the body, a knowledge specifically oriented to the problem of violence, and a knowledge that is primarily affectual rather than cognitive in content. As the basis for a specific conduct of life, Saotome's examination of his martial art parallels what Giorgio Agamben has called a 'form-of-life', suggesting that, within the dense configuration of life, politics, and violence that constitutes the contemporary conduct of life as a whole, the martial arts prefigure a kind of counter-politics. The thesis presented here is that Agamben's concept of a form-of-life provides a way to think about the nature of the martial arts and vice-versa. Arguably, this nature is profoundly political, though in ways that are not immediately apparent.

In an early essay on the theme of life and politics – a theme with which he has since been frequently associated – Agamben [1993/2000] introduced the concept form-of-life to describe the conditions under which a way out from the relationship between political power, life, and violence could be found. In his analysis, contemporary political power is founded on a division projected into the nature of life itself, between *bare life* (*zoē*) – the basic fact of mere living which humans share with animals – and the properly human *ways of life* (*bios*) – 'the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group' [1998: 1]. The capacity of 'the sovereign' to isolate naked or bare life from a way of life structures both the sovereign power of the state ('the power to *take* life or *let* live', as Michel Foucault put it [1978: 136]) and the biopowers, or disciplinary, life administrating powers, exercised in a variety of institutional sites in society from health care to the prison (the power to '*foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death' [Foucault 1978: 138]).

Contemporary political power therefore bears an intrinsic relationship to this original violence. Its distinguishing quality is its capacity to expose bare life to violence without limit, to separate and hold life in what Agamben calls the sovereign 'ban'; by contrast, he explains how, 'by the term *form-of-life* ... I mean a life that can never be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate something such as naked life' [1993/2000: 2-3]. Only through 'the emancipation from such a division, with the irrevocable exodus from any sovereignty' can a cohesive, reintegrated life be reconstituted.

This concept of an integrated or non-alienated life in Agamben's analysis has always seemed very promising, as it derives in a logically satisfying way from his compelling critique of the forms of contemporary power. It provides the basis for an analysis which, starting from an affirmation of life and its potentials, might reveal and begin to unravel the mechanisms of power that seize upon life as their anchor. But it is also puzzling when it comes to deciphering what the term *form-of-life* actually means. Is there a sociological referent to this concept? Is it possible to reconfigure a post-sovereign way of living that can disengage from the violent effects of sovereign politics, if not directly challenge or overcome them?

His clarification unfortunately is equally mystifying:

A life that cannot be separated from its form is a life for which what is at stake in its way of living is living itself. What does this formulation mean? It defines a life – human life – in which the single ways, acts, and processes of living are never simply facts but always and above all possibilities of life, always and above all power [potenza as opposed to *potere*] [Agamben 1993/2000: 4].

At play is a critical distinction between two conceptions of 'living itself' that parallel the distinction between *zoē* and *bios*. One might be characterized by 'simple facts' of life while the other only by 'possibilities of life'. The relationship between 'living itself' and 'the ways, acts, and processes of living' in which life is lived is framed within the same critical distinction. One appears emblematic of separation, the other of an integration of life's power of potential. But the terms of reference of this distinction and the 'stakes' referred to are difficult to draw out. Agamben's notion of a post-sovereign 'coming community' [1993] devolves precisely into this question of whether humans can live a life that affirms their quality as beings of 'pure potentiality'.

In casting about for examples of such a form-of-life, it becomes evident that this might be a question amenable to a reflection on the type of training practiced in the martial arts. The notion of a form-of-life

or life of pure potentiality bears a resemblance to the concern in the martial arts to develop martial fluidity or free movement. In the 'skilled practices designed to induce spontaneous martial Innovation', as D.S. Farrer puts it, 'true skill is not reducible to the slavish [or disciplinary] reproduction of forms' but emerges in a *becoming-other* [2013: 147]. In this focus of the martial arts, it seems plausible to state, along with Agamben, that 'what is at stake in its way of living is living itself'. A more general sociological query within martial arts studies on the meaning of the martial arts in our contemporary conduct of life might be refined therefore to focus on the embodied nature and transmission of these arts as forms-of-life. In Foucault's analysis, biopolitical or disciplinary power 'disassociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an "aptitude", a "capacity" which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection' [1977: 138]. The reverse of this would be a situation in which power was not disassociated from the body. This would seem consonant with many martial traditions aligned with the Japanese notions of *budo* or the Chinese notions of *wude*, for example.

It therefore seems profitable to follow in the footsteps of Ben Spatz's project, *What A Body Can Do* [2015], and ask, can a body 'do' political ontology? Can a body provide access to the foundations and first principles of political life? Can a body learn to alter these foundations? For martial artists in particular, can the transformation of the body through the practice of the martial arts provide insight into the nature of contemporary power relations and violence? Is this one of its truths? Can it fundamentally reorient the living of life in a manner such that life is no longer being separated from its form? More simply, can the embodied knowledge of the martial arts offer a model of a form-of-life that is politically salient today?

TRUTH IN THE MARTIAL ARTS

In this regard, this essay takes up the theme of 'truth in the martial arts', a phrase from the opening pages of Mitsugi Saotome's [2014] recent reflection on his relationship as uchi deshi – live-in student – to Morihei Ueshiba (referred to by aikidokas as O' Sensei), the founder of aikido. What is the nature of this truth? It becomes immediately apparent that Saotome's concern in the book is not to teach the secrets of aikido technique, nor to determine the most effective fighting method, nor to decide which of the many styles of aikido that emerged from Ueshiba's teaching is best or most true to his intentions. Rather, he argues that the truth of aikido lies in its essentially *ethical* dimension, that is, in its practice of self-cultivation; as he puts it: 'Aikido is the way of coming to understand natural law in all its complexity within the

context of one's own life, and of making this understanding part of one's flesh and blood' [2014: 9]. Quoting Ueshiba, Saotome adds that 'training of the ordinary mind and body is the path to spiritual truth' [2014: 57]; in other words, truth in the martial arts for Saotome involves the principles by which the training of the body and mind in martial technique gives access to a transformation of 'spirit'. The ultimate goal of transforming the spirit, through the bodily alignment of 'one's own life' with 'natural law', is a state of *complete martial fluidity*. This quality is not attained at a purely physical or purely tactical level but at the level of an embodied knowledge – as 'part of one's flesh and blood' – which, in order to be more than a descriptive term, must be understood to express the quality of pure potentiality key to Agamben's form-of-life.

From the point of view of sociology, this idea marks aikido and other dedicated martial arts practices as particular *ways of living* or 'forms of life' (no hyphens yet) rather than simply sports, hobbies, fighting methods, or military training practices. They are in this sense *ethics*, or forms of what Foucault [1994a] has called 'practices of the self'. That is, while the martial arts certainly have historical ties to military training, competitive sport, and even nation building projects, etc., on their own they are relatively autonomous ways in which people freely act upon themselves to transform themselves. Through the ethical work of a practice of the self, a particular state of being, a particular power of action, or a particular embodied knowledge can be attained. In this sense, they are much like the ancient Greek and Roman ethics of *care of the self* in which, as Foucault says, 'ethics as the conscious practice of freedom ... revolved around [the] fundamental imperative: "Take care of yourself"' [1994b: 285].

This provides one important departure point for their analysis as forms of political life because Foucault is at pains to distinguish an ethics of 'care of the self' from the dominant biopolitical paradigm of the 'truth of the self'. If contemporary biopolitics is a project that seeks to order or 'normalize' the life of the population by extracting the truth of the living self in various sites of social control – medicine, psychiatry, education, work, criminality, sport performance, etc. – then the care of the self is a reverse of this relationship. The truth of the self is not the source but the consequence of the autonomous practices of care of the self [Foucault 1994a]. In this respect, the care of the self seems in sync with Foucault's interest in modern practices of the self as techniques of ongoing experimentation: an ethos centered on the 'historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them' [Foucault 1984: 50].

Of course, many types of practice of the self are available today. It has become common in sociology to note that citizens of late modernity – detraditionalized, globally integrated, technologically mediated,

culturally hybrid, risk averse, freedom oriented, socially fluid, and self-actualizing [Giddens 1991; Bauman 2000] – are confronted with an array of competing options for engaging in practices of the self. The various forms of counseling and therapy, meditation practices, yogas, martial arts, dieting, fitness regimes, and different systems of health management, as well as the numerous spiritual practices adopted in ‘do-it-yourself’ fashion from the world religions, are all examples of the contemporary care of the self. What is not clear from the sociological literature on this pluralization of practices of the self, however, is a sense of their political effect. At what point do these voluntary practices of self-transformation come into contact with the involuntary structures of sovereignty and biopolitics, and why should the martial arts stand out in this regard? In terms of the political dynamics that govern human action today, with so many possibilities for practices of the self, why should the truth of the martial arts, or the conceptualization of a martial art like aikido as a practice of the self, be particularly significant? What type of practice of the self are the martial arts and what bearing does it have on the political theme of a form-of-life?

We might begin by observing that the martial arts are practices of the self which are uniquely positioned between the twin poles of biopolitics and sovereign violence. In fact, as discussed in the next two sections, it is the *combination* of two central qualities of the martial arts that distinguish them from other practices of the self: their formulation as *spiritual practices* and their *freeing relation to violence*. Both aspects revolve around the question of what enables access to the truth of the martial arts. On one hand, it is the manner in which these truths are disclosed through intensive bodily training – only after years of training can some of the truths of the art be grasped – and, on the other hand, the way in which these truths bear in obvious and not-so-obvious ways on a relationship to violence. If the implication is that the underlying element of our political situation today – the ‘secret tie uniting power with bare life’ [Agamben 1998: 6] – can be researched, resisted, or even transformed through the body, then this clearly requires an expansion of the terrain that is traditionally drawn in to the study of martial arts practice. Nevertheless, the thread that has tied the truth of martial technique to the truth of the martial ‘dos’, or ways, has always implied this relation.

THE MARTIAL ARTS AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Foucault [2005] seems to go out of his way in the first lecture from his 1981-1982 course on the ancient ‘care of the self’ to demarcate a certain set of self-practices as ‘spiritual’. On the surface, this is consonant with Saotome and others’ efforts to show the place of Shinto and Buddhist concepts in Morihei Ueshiba’s discourses on aikido [Saotome 1993, 2015; Gleason 1995], or the connection of Taoism and Shamanism with taiji or gongfu, etc. [Shahar 2008; Boretz 2011]. There are some grounds for caution here as the intrinsic relationship between the martial arts and particular spiritual practices like those of Zen Buddhism have been contested by recent scholarship [Benesch 2016]. But Foucault means ‘spiritual’ in a much more specific sense. Spiritual arts refer to a particular relationship to truth; unlike scientific practice, where anyone can (in principle) observe and manipulate the elements of reality and therefore come to know the truth, a spiritual practice of the self is one that requires a fundamental self-transformation in the subject before access to knowledge is attained.

Thus, Foucault defines a spiritual practice of the self as ‘the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth’ [2005: 14]. He adds that ‘we will call “spirituality” then the set of these researches, practices, and experiences, which may be purifications, ascetic exercises, renunciations, conversions of looking, modifications of existence, etc., which are, not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject’s very being, the price to be paid for access to the truth’ [2005: 14]. If a martial art requires years of training and a fundamental shift in the practitioners’ relations to ‘being’ to access the truth of the techniques, then the martial art is a spiritual practice in this specific sense.

Foucault goes on to elaborate three premises that set spiritual traditions of knowledge apart from modern Cartesian philosophy and science:

Spirituality postulates that the subject as such does not have right of access to the truth and is not capable of having access to the truth ... It postulates that for the subject to have right of access to the truth he [*sic*] must be changed, transformed, shifted, and become, to some extent and up to a certain point, other than himself [*sic*].

There can be no truth without a conversion or a transformation of the subject’, which is typically accomplished through either the transforming movement of eros (love) or askesis (work on the self).

Once access to the truth has really been opened up, it produces effects [of]... 'rebound' ('de retour'), effects of the truth on the subject ... The truth enlightens the subject; the truth gives beatitude to the subject; the truth gives the subject tranquility of the soul. In short, in the truth and in access to the truth, there is something that fulfills the subject himself, which fulfills or transfigures his [*sic*] very being'.
[2005: 15-16].

The key point from these definitions is that the martial arts are 'spiritual practices' in the sense that they require a fundamental transformation in the subject to access truth. Training in the martial arts is ultimately not a Cartesian science. It has to be conceptualized otherwise. It is not about how an already constituted subject – a subject with a 'right of access to the truth' – obtains objective skills and capacities, which themselves can be categorized by objective measures of their efficacy. Rather, if we are able to speak of attaining martial fluidity or free movement as the truth of the martial arts, then it is a truth that is obtained through the arduous back and forth between training or *askesis* and a *becoming-other* of the subject.

This notion of a spiritual dimension and transformation of existence, learned through the relationship to the body, is in fact a defining feature of many types of martial arts practice. It informs, for example, the distinction between *gong* (skill) and *fa* (technique) in taiji [Nulty 2017], the experiential 'bodying forth' in *taolu* [Mroz 2017], and the 'somatic conundrums' of *kime* (decision) in karate [Bar-On Cohen 2006]. The nature of this transformation is not conceptualized as simply physical or technical, as might be understood in the practice of a sport or in efforts to objectively define the most effective martial technique. For example, Saotome describes the three levels of learning in the martial arts as *shu* – learning the established techniques and kata (*waza* or basic technique); *ha* – breaking apart the established forms to discover their limits or to adapt to unexpected variations an opponent introduces (*kaeshi-waza* or reversals); and *ri* – departure from the *waza*, 'the ability to freely adapt and apply *waza* to different situations ... To respond flexibly and intuitively to a wide range of attacks' [2014: 80]. In order to open up access to this ideal of martial arts fluidity, one has to be transformed through repeated practice of the first two levels, which might take years. One has to be transformed, not only physically or mentally in terms of mastering technical skills, but also transformed in terms of one's basic being-in-the-world, in 'one's flesh and blood'. This is a process that, through the body, breaks down the ontological coordinates of the Cartesian subject to effect a fundamental transformation in first principles, or, in essence, 'life'.

Here I am struck by a video of Seigo Yamaguchi (who, along with Morihei Ueshiba's son, Kisshomaru, taught Saotome prior to him

joining Hombu Dojo to study with Ueshiba). In an aikido seminar, Yamaguchi explains the need to study flowing movement so that the line of an attack from an opponent will be unimpeded and the corresponding defensive response effective [*Aikido Journal* 2014]. He describes this in terms of the fluid sword work in the stories of the old budo practitioners:

Fluid, yet heavy. Gentle, yet fierce. Budo is full of such opposite concepts. Movement in stillness, stillness in movement. In motion, yet immovable. They sound like Zen koans, but with our bodies, we can gain clear understanding of such ideas. We forge such a body, and such a mind, rather than simply trying to learn techniques. We do this through 'right practice' and training. Then it no longer matters where or how you are attacked. Grabbing and being grabbed, attacking and receiving, are one and the same.

In pointing to a practice in which 'we forge such a body', Yamaguchi points to the spiritual nature of martial arts training as Foucault has described it. He expresses the strange nature of the practice of the martial arts in which truths that can only be contradictory, paradoxical, or mystical when expressed in the language of empirical concepts can be accessed, perceived, and lived through the body. This speaks to the different nature of the truths that are attained through 'right practice and training'. It is through a thorough transformation of the experience of the body that this different truth becomes possible.

There is therefore a crucial difference here between the medical knowledges and disciplinary powers that break down the body to extract its aptitudes, capacities, and 'objective' truth, and the spiritual practices of care of the self that build up self-mastery [Foucault 1977: 137]. In Foucault's analysis, disciplinary power 'disassociates power from the body' [1977: 138], whereas martial arts work in the opposite direction: to reintegrate the body and its powers through practices that transform the life of the subject. In Foucault's formulation of the spiritual practices of the self, we can therefore see perhaps one of the sources for Agamben's criterion of the form-of-life: 'A life that cannot be separated from its form is a life for which what is at stake in its way of living is living itself. Compare Foucault: 'The truth is only given to the subject at a price that brings the subject's being into play. For as he [*sic*] is, the subject is not capable of truth' [1977: 15]. The truth of the martial arts is tied to bringing the subject's being 'into play', which in turn is 'what is at stake' in the truth of his or her martial art practice. A spiritual practice of the self is one that requires a fundamental self-transformation in the 'living' of the subject before access to truth – the variable powers of action that can be learned through the body – is granted.

MARTIAL ARTS AS VIOLENCE

The second distinct feature of martial arts as a practice of the self is their sustained orientation to the problem of violence. In Saotome's account, the classical Japanese martial disciplines, or budo, originated in a practical orientation to the fact of violence, not as practices of the self *per se*. The fighting arts and battle skills developed during the Warring States period after 1477 and were then formalized into schools following 1600 during the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1867). It was after 1600 that they gradually began to focus on the practice of the self as much as the practice of battle skills. Some of the particulars of this account might be disputed by modern scholarship, especially when it comes to determining whether the Samurai class had a unique 'code' of their own [Benesch 2014], but clearly from the late 19th century onward the idea of the martial arts as an ethic of self-cultivation has been central. In its origins, therefore, Japanese martial arts training was about learning the technical skills (jutsu) to conduct various types of violent or martial contest (bu-jutsu), after which the narrow framework of bujutsu is modified by the ethical concerns of self, community, and spiritual truth that define bu-do as a martial way.

Saotome offers the following, perhaps provocative, elaboration on the difference between bujutsu and budo: 'The goal of bujutsu [martial (bu); technical skills (jutsu)] has always been survival ... How to effectively control and kill an opponent ... True bujutsu is mikiri, or living on the edge – *the paper thin edge that separates life from death*' [2014: 51, my emphasis]. To distinguish the ethical project of budo from bujutsu, he suggests that budo 'embodies and makes practical the conversion of the energies of conflict into the energies of coexistence' [2014: 52]. Moreover, for Saotome, budo offers a way or do of *misogi*, or self-purification, a way of preserving 'a sense of calm at all times – even in the thick of battle' [2014: 45]. In other words, as opposed to bujutsu, in which one trains for violence, Saotome wishes to present budo as offering a *freeing relation to violence*. Nevertheless, both have a commitment to responding to 'the paper-thin edge that separates life from death'. What is at stake in both is 'living itself', as Agamben puts it, but the valence of the stake differs in a consequential way.

To various degrees, martial arts training is understood as a practical orientation to this edge, and many of the problems that one seeks to work out in training have to do with maintaining proximity to this edge. If formal martial arts training in the dojo is always several steps removed from actual violence, as Rory Miller [2008] has argued, then the question 'How can martial arts training practices be real?' is another way of pointing to this edge as another *truth* martial artists seek to 'know'. In Miller's view, 'the insular tradition and history of each *dojo* has morphed a primal understanding of violence into the modern ritual

of martial arts' [2008: xii]. He argues persuasively that there is a stark difference between the techniques one learns repetitively in practice under the artificial conditions of the dojo and the responses to an actual violent confrontation in 'the street' under the influence of the chemical cocktail of adrenalin and in the 'totality of circumstances' of the martial encounter [2008: 31-32]. In the midst of 'all of the infinite details of the moment', dojo technique tends to fail. As my own Sensei lectures when he gets testy about students trying to get fancy, or mimicking master's techniques before they have put in the time to develop the skills of a master, 'That is not martial, that is dancing!' If there is no direct orientation to or understanding of the edge – no orientation to 'the street' – then there is no martial art. In this sense, the truth of the martial arts is about what makes techniques 'work' in practical applications when survival is at stake. If it is the orientation to harm that gives meaning to the practice of harmony in a martial art, then the question of the truth of the martial arts practice becomes: *How can the harm be put back into harmony?*

However, implicit in Saotome's analysis of the edge is the question: Is it possible to develop a freeing relation to violence or must one train to become fully violent? To examine this question in light of Agamben's theme of the form-of-life, it is necessary to step back to examine 'the truth' of this edge itself. What is the 'primal' experience of violence or 'survival' this edge refers to? This is another point where a broader political context intrudes. It is a way of characterizing the grounding of the martial arts in an *ontology of violence* – an orientation to the world that emerges in situations of crisis, when norms of civility are suspended and lethal violence exists as a constant threat. As an ontology or reflection on first principles, it reconfigures what can be done and what can be known in any contest of powers. The martial arts are not simply training in the skills and strategies necessary for violent contest – they define an orientation to the conditions under which violent contests arise *per se*, to the idea of *unlimited and irreducible insecurity* as an always immanent, ever present condition of life.

To evoke the situation of irreducible insecurity is to evoke a situation maximally saturated by politics. The emphasis on *survival* under conditions of violence refers immediately back again to the various ways forms of life are constituted as bare life – the 'hidden foundation of sovereignty' or 'ultimate and opaque bearer of sovereignty' as Agamben says [1993/2000: 6]. Bare life is life viewed from the perspective of violence; it is life reduced to a quality of mere survival under conditions of uncertainty. By extension, it presents a view of the world from the situation of political exception, emergency, or war: the situation of life's unmediated exposure to the threat of death that emerges when regular laws or norms do not apply or are suspended. As a sovereign is 'he who decides the exception', in Carl Schmitt's famous formula [1922/1985],

the act of a sovereign to declare an emergency and suspend the law (and thereby the normal situation) is an act which, at whatever scale it occurs, is properly *political*. It is the unique quality of the political decision to grant the power that strips life of the protections afforded by law, customs, status, rules, and morality. To follow Agamben, the paper-thin edge that defines survival is most usefully characterized in terms of a *political* truth: it is only under conditions of the politics of exception that bare life, and an orientation to it, emerges.

Violence is therefore not so much a specific act of physical, emotional, or structural, etc., aggression, but the emergence or declaration of a situation of exception – a situation in which one’s life is exposed to violence or irreducible risk. The idea of ‘the street’ in martial arts discussions is a microcosm of the Hobbesian ‘war of all against all’, a situation of exception that emerges when no sovereign has the power to ‘overawe them all’ and anything becomes possible. This world of violent encounters is at once fundamentally uncertain, insecure, and lethal. The truth of the martial arts is therefore framed by a fundamental orientation to the problems that emerge from this condition. In the martial arts, this condition might be described as the totally fluid martial situation, a situation of pure lethal, unpredictable contingency, or ‘unconfined combat’. ‘Combat “as is” is total ... Lacking boundaries, combat is always fresh, alive, and constantly changing’ [Lee 1971: 27].

One response to the problem is Hobbes’ own appeal to a natural right of self-preservation, as implied in Saotome’s account of bujutsu. This would define a way of inscribing the martial arts into the existing structures of law and sovereign politics. Every person claims sovereignty to the limited degree that they take it upon themselves to suspend the law in a situation of exception and regard anyone who threatens their right to self-preservation as an enemy. This decision to authorize the use of lethal force against an enemy is a decision of ‘utmost intensity’, as Schmitt puts it [1932/1996]; even at the individual level, it goes beyond ‘taking the law into one’s own hands’ to an act of foundational *law-making*, which decides on an ad hoc basis what the law itself – i.e. the entire political framework of ethical life – actually *is*. For Schmitt, this existential act of decision defines the political dimension; it steps outside the normative conditions of social life, which remain bound to predictable social, moral, legal, and psychological facts and regularities to establish new norms. The implication is that the everyday ways of living in which normal life is conducted are contingent on the existential or primary reality of violence. They are, in Miller’s analysis, illusory, not ‘real’, not oriented to the edge. In the name of survival, the decision to separate naked life from a social form or way of life is always immanent, always present behind the scenes. Violence itself is the truth; the certainties and regularities of normal life are merely contingent. In this context, martial arts are called upon in the guise of lethal responses

to the problem of the exception; one’s attitude towards training and the truth of the martial arts is configured accordingly.

On the other hand, when martial arts are considered as practices of the self or budo, they begin to prefigure a way out of this structure of sovereign power. Here we can say that aikido (like other martial arts) offers a response to violence by articulating a form-of-life – ‘a life that can never be separated from its form’ – in a very particular sense: a life practice in which violence *cannot* emerge and bare life *cannot* be isolated. It is in this sense that Morihei Ueshiba famously reconstituted the martial situation of violence as a situation of non-violence, non-fighting, or non-contest: ‘In fact, your opponent is not your opponent because you and your opponent *become one*. This is the beauty of the Art of Peace’ [Ueshiba 2002: 79, my emphasis]. As Saotome puts it, ‘there is no such thing as life in isolation, either physically or spiritually’ [2014: 23]. Here, he invokes the principle of ai-ki (harmonious energy), the embeddedness of life in the totality of the universe: ‘Consciously and unconsciously, we are always living in sync with the activity of the universe’ [2014: 23]. Against the notion of violence as a *crisis* ready to emerge anywhere at any time, the countervailing response is to pass through the cycle of norm and crisis by continually ‘becoming one’. The irony of the martial arts from this perspective is that as one practices the skills of violence (bujutsu) one actually learns to prevent a situation of violence from emerging (budo).¹ In this ‘becoming one’ of the practice of the self, one trains to allow no gap in the living situation from which an act of violence or rupture can emerge. One learns ‘how to harmonize with any attack’ [Ueshiba 2007: 123].

In one sense, therefore, the martial arts might simply be characterized as one type of bios or sociological ‘form of life’ (no hyphens) alongside others, defined by a practice of the self that trains in the skills of violence. They can be practiced in a limited way and slotted into the existing structures of power in the same manner as a pastime, hobby, sport, or trade. It is possible to think about them and practice them

1 Saotome subscribes to the popular, albeit etymologically questionable, interpretation of the term budo as literally ‘the way of stopping the spear’. His interpretation is nevertheless informative vis-à-vis his wish to establish the project of modern budo. He discusses how the Chinese character for **bu** ‘is composed of radicals meaning “to stop” and “spear”; thus the original purpose of the martial disciplines, as reflected in the character with which the word martial is written, was to subdue conflict and maintain the peace’ [2014: 37]. He finds a similar equivocation in the Japanese word **ikusa** as both ‘battle’ and ‘wellbeing of the people’. At the collective level, ‘the purpose of the martial arts since ancient times has been the quelling of violence, the securing of the peace, and the betterment of society’; at the individual level, ‘the essence of martial discipline is ... no more or less than what we bring to bear in order to reconcile and overcome ... [the] contradictions and difficult choices in our daily lives’ [2014: 37].

in this way. But it seems more significant to see how they also work towards becoming a *form-of-life* – ‘a life that can never be separated from its form’. This vocation implies a different relationship between life and power: an affirmation of unrestricted martial fluidity as both the telos of a spiritual transformation and the freeing relation by which violence, or separation itself, is deactivated. In Saotome’s terms, this martial fluidity is not defined by specific proficiencies in martial technique as much as it is by seeking a certain power of vitality through the training of the body. In this turn, he expresses the idea of a life of potential – a practice oriented to the *formlessness* of pure potential – that resembles very closely Agamben’s own solution to the problem of sovereign power and biopolitics.

ON POISE

To learn what a body can do through martial training is to come to experience it not primarily as this or that ability, but in its potential for abilities, or what Agamben refers to as the ‘potential character of life’ [Agamben 1993/2000: 9]. The numerous paths that constitute the martial arts seek to liberate the body’s potentials through the practice of training. They act upon a truth of the body: the idea that complete martial fluidity is a quality immanent to life or vitality itself. Following Agamben’s analysis, this relation to life is key to deactivating the forms of separation that underlie both the sovereign power of exception and the biopolitical manipulation of life. Martial arts embody one instance of this relation. To the degree that this is also necessarily a collective endeavor, this reorientation to the life of the living body is political in a fundamental manner. Yet it is rarely understood, articulated, or theorized as such. It seems entirely feasible to ‘touch’ this possibility in a theoretical description, while not ‘knowing’ it or living it as an experiential reality.

This presents a particular problem of truth that martial arts training seeks to resolve. With respect to the embodied nature and transmission of these arts as forms of life, a third criterion might be adduced to characterize them: *the martial arts are a social form with affective content*. The crypto-mysticism of which discourses concerning the martial arts are sometimes accused – we saw above the series ‘fluid, yet heavy’, ‘movement in stillness’, ‘in motion, yet immovable’, etc., in Yamaguchi’s account of forging the martial body, for instance – might be better understood to originate in the difficulty of translating the invention of affective states into words or proscriptions. Their truths are learned through ways of *feeling* the body’s dispositions, what gives power, where balance lies, etc. To refine this problem further, as the philosopher Gilles Deleuze [1998] puts it, specific affects – a joy, a love, a hope, a pain, etc. – are non-representational modes of thought. They

are transferred by means of *affectio* (affection, or a responsive state of the body) and *affectus* (affect, or an increase or decrease of a power of acting). In contrast to the communication of ideas, which represent things, affects are a mode of thought that do not represent anything. For the numerous martial arts that seek to liberate the body’s potentials through the practice of training, the truth of the body is affectual: the experience of complete martial fluidity as a quality immanent to life or vitality itself is an affectual state.

One figure by which this affectual state is accessed is through the study of what might be called ‘poise’ in the martial arts. What is poise? There is a common and deceptively simple difference martial arts students encounter in training between learning a ‘stance’ and learning ‘poise’. This difference parallels the distinction drawn between learning technique and developing the capacity for free movement. Where the former involves the practice of fixed forms, the latter evokes the idea of formlessness. Saotome describes *takemuso aiki*, for example, as the ‘movement of truth’ or ‘a spontaneous and creative application that allows the dynamics and structure of the universal laws to be expressed in the human body’ [1993: 2]. He distinguishes it from the study of ‘correct’ technique as the attempt to repeat forms exactly as an instructor has demonstrated [1993: 179-180]. From this we might gather that stance or posture is to poise as the fixed disciplinary forms of technique are to the potentiality of form-of-life. One is the basis of training in technique, the other a way of freedom of movement. Following Saotome’s account of the three levels of learning in the martial arts – shu (technique), ha (reversals), ri (free adaptation) – the martial artist paradoxically practices forms and technique to learn the truth of formlessness. How this ‘truth’ actually impinges upon practice, powers of action, and what can be learned through the body is the unique challenge of the martial arts as a social form-of-life.

There is some confusion on this issue, not least because the political elements are submerged. In the John Stevens translation of *Budo* [Ueshiba 1991], a pre-WWII technical manual written by Morihei Ueshiba for Prince Tsunenori Kaya, there is a discussion of the stance or posture that came to be the basis of techniques in aikido: the *hanmi* stance or half-posture (i.e. exposing only half the body as a target). The difference between the literal translation and the Stevens translation is interesting because where Stevens gives a very practical description of foot positioning he omits the elements that transform a technical *stance* into the potential fluidity of *poise*. Stevens translates:

(1) Stance: Fill yourself with ki, assume a hanmi stance with your feet apart opened at a sixty-degree angle, and face your opponent with a flexible aiki posture.
[cited in Li 2012]

Christopher Li suggests a more literal translation:

(1) Kamae: Fill yourself with Ki power, open your legs in six directions and face the enemy in the hanmi irimi posture of Aiki.
[Li 2012]

What is the problem here? Both descriptions offer instruction on how the practitioner should orient themselves to an opponent. There is an attitude of readiness, of filling oneself with energy, and a concern with positioning oneself along a line with respect to an opponent/enemy. The first is very practical in that it defines foot positioning geometrically to the orientations of a compass – a universal knowledge open to anyone – whereas the second is esoteric – a *spiritual truth* as we have described above – evoking a knowledge of the internal and external six directions to which, without further explanation, one's legs open. One describes a *stance*, a standard of martial training manuals, which can be repeated according to a fixed form that corresponds to an illustration provided. It is described in representational terms as a means of making the body conform to a template, an *idea*. The other describes an openness, a formlessness or *affectual state*, which implies both a stance *and* the devolution of the stance into six directions. Between the two translations is in fact a political element: one indicates a mode of embodiment that remains bound to the idea, which in turn binds life to a plane of established organization; the other indicates a mode of embodiment that is affectual, which in turn implies the passage to an affective state of openness and expresses life as a power of action. Again, this is a way of speaking about 'a life for which what is at stake in its way of living is living itself' [Agamben 2000 [1993]: 4].

Saotome gives us a concrete image of formlessness and martial fluidity in his description of the study and practice of circular movement in aikido:

Circular movement, where end meets up with beginning, is the basis of aiki waza (martial techniques). These techniques and their movements are infused in the physical body as the circle's soul (center). The circle describes emptiness, and what is born of emptiness is kokoro, 'mind' (the character for kokoro also means center). *Emptiness is completely free and without restriction*. As soon as a center is formed in the middle of emptiness, ki is produced. So the center of emptiness, that which fills the entire infinite universe with energy and life, is the essence of soul. Soul is the immortal, life-giving parent responsible for all creation. When the circle is infused into the physical body, waza are the result: the essence responsible for the workings of waza is brought into existence. *This process of birth is limitless*. [2014: 63, my emphasis]

Leaving aside for a moment some of the language here – 'soul', 'mind' – Saotome uses the image of the circle to describe both the form of aikido technique and the nature of a field of martial encounter. The circle is of course a form, but, in this case, a form that indexes a state of formlessness: it is built on an emptiness 'completely free and without restriction' in which the generation of waza is limitless. Saotome clearly means emptiness in the Buddhist sense of void – that is, not as a representation or symbol at all but as an emptiness unconstrained by the limits of representation, or of being and non-being. Just like in the overly technical translation of hanmi as a fixed stance, the circle is often used to 'represent' or 'symbolize' emptiness, but this is understood in a more immediate, embodied, *affective* way in Saotome's account.

How does this work? Saotome describes how, in a martial encounter, as soon as a center is formed in the middle of emptiness a circular field of immanent form and action is produced. He refers to this as a field of ki or formless energy, or what might be called a *metastable state*. As Ronald Bogue puts it, a metastable state is one possessing 'potential energy, or unevenly distributed energy, which is capable of effecting a transformation' [Bogue 1989: 61]. Once the metastable field is created, it is 'empty' and yet full in the manner described in Shinto creation stories. It is tense, or rather, as a metastable field, both tense and slack, heavy and light, vertical and horizontal, smooth and sharp, etc. It is a field rife with thresholds of this nature. In a martial encounter, movements of bodies create openings for attack while closing down others. The field of the martial encounter shifts as the center shifts and meets other centers. Bodies move together and continually re-center one another. There are open doors and blocked passages, intense zones of engagement and voids, force majeure and vacuums, straight lines and spiraling eddies, exposed spaces and safe retreats, stable alignments of weight and gravity and destabilizing misalignments. Center – or the kamae of connecting center to center – defines the ever-shifting parameters, focus, feeling, and efficacy of technique.

In this context, the study of circular technical forms in the martial arts becomes a means of learning or transmitting how to center the physical body in this emptiness – to affect a *becoming-empty* that enables the generation of waza 'completely free and without restriction'. The inertia and resistance of the body empties out as the body becomes light. The metastable field thus corresponds to the sword work Yamaguchi described. Training is oriented to the possibility of learning through the body to attain the fluidity of an unrestricted emptiness. The circular techniques do not *represent* emptiness as an idea but enable the martial artist to *move into* a space of emptiness, or, more accurately, for the space of emptiness to move into the martial artist. 'The human body and the universe are one and the same; the universe is the body that we inhabit. Aiki can only be understood as the expression of universal movement' [Ueshiba in Saotome 2014: 2].

The passage into emptiness is a shift in affectual states that registers as an increase in a power of action. Deleuze describes this passage as the formation of a 'plane of consistency', or, in a martial context, the smooth space of the war machine in which there are 'only relations of movement and rest, of speed and slowness, between unformed, or relatively unformed, elements, molecules or particles borne away by fluxes' [2007: 68]. This provides another vantage point to understand Ueshiba's description of the martial situation of violence as a situation of non-violence, non-fighting, or non-contest. Self and other do not define the field of encounter as violent opposition but are themselves elements in a field that precedes them, a field which is metastable but indivisible. There is no separation within the field, yet there are thresholds, barriers, and conduits of greater or lesser intensity.

If there is a politics in this study of what the body can become, it is connected to the nature of *life* that is implied in the practice of budo. In Saotome's account, the words *life* and *ki* appear synonymous. We do not have to regard Saotome as an unproblematic interpreter of Ueshiba and the tradition of budo to recognize that he is often stretching the use of terms to address the basic problem of how to characterize the truths of the body learned through martial practice. In this concept of budo, both *life* and Saotome's *ki* are extra-individual, infusing the body rather than products of the body. Where *life* reduced to *zoe* is the anchoring point of our submission to both sovereign and biopolitical forms of power, the martial arts build on another concept of *life* captured in the phrase *takemusu aiki*, the 'movement of truth'. In one of his final essays on transcendental empiricism, Deleuze described the concept of *life* as *itself* a metastable field phenomenon. *Life*, he argued, is *impersonal*, it partakes in a transcendental field that precedes the experience of subjects: 'a pure stream of a-subjective consciousness, a pre-reflexive impersonal consciousness, a qualitative duration of consciousness without a self' [2001: 25]. Where there is 'a life', he says, there is the 'immanence of immanence' [2001: 27]. Saotome refers to this quality of immanence as the metastable plenitude of 'emptiness'. Political acts that isolate naked *life* enable all the divisions that underscore the subjection of *life* to power and the biopolitical ordering of the world – subject/object, doer/deed, flesh/mind, animal/human, abnormal/normal, exception/order, enemy/friend. The attunement to immanent *life*, on the other hand, as Agamben himself notes, 'marks the radical impossibility of establishing hierarchies and separations' [1999: 233]. Two *political* definitions of *life* thus emerge in relationship to the situation of martial violence: one is the naked *life*, in the last instance *life* reduced to biological survival; the other is unblocked immanence, *life* as pure potential. Where the first captures bare *life* in a violent appropriation, the latter opens onto forms-of-*life* that free *life* from violent appropriation.

In the martial arts practice described by Saotome, therefore, *life* – Deleuze's immanence of immanence – is infused into the physical body through the becoming-circular of techniques and movements. As in Deleuze's conception, *life* or *ki* for Saotome is in essence *impersonal*. His use of the words 'soul' and 'mind' is thus quite focused: 'the physical body as the circle's soul'; 'what is born of emptiness is kokoro, "mind"'. They refer to the *indefinite, impersonal* qualities of consciousness or awareness. 'Soul' and 'mind' are qualities that inhere in the creation of a circle and a center; they do not refer to the attributes of unique individuals or to the metaphysical souls or minds of gods or spirits. As Deleuze puts it, 'the *life* of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular *life* that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external *life*, that is, from the subjectivity and objectivity of what happens' [2001: 28]. The pure event in the martial encounter is the coincidence of a center and the fluidity in a free and unrestricted emptiness which the martial arts seek to attain.

One figure of this relationship to formlessness in the martial arts is something like what we mean by the word 'poise' – being centred but unrestricted in movement, 'legs open in six directions'. Poise – 'a gathering unto a moment of novelty' [Appelbaum 1995: 64] – is the affectual form of a particular freeing relation to violence. It is not the same as a stance or posture but is rather a fluid 'relation of movement and rest', however stationary any particular poise might appear. Saotome recounts:

During the years I studied under Morihei Ueshiba as an uchi deshi [live-in student], O-Sensei never once gave us specific, technical instructions – for example, where to place our feet or what to do with our hands ... This, we understood, was because, in the world of life or death encounter, the enemy attacks without words and without advance warning. In this world there are no second chances and if one is to survive one must act quickly and intuitively to take control of frantic and confusing circumstances. Martial encounter is not subject to logical analysis. [2014: 130]

The cultivation through the ritual practice of martial arts training of the power to spontaneously generate technique is the cultivation of poise. As Ueshiba describes it, poise is not contained in a particular stance or posture but in the manner or ethic in which one opens oneself to emptiness in a freeing relation to violence. 'In the face of every challenge, remain calm, centered, and optimistic. Keep on the path. Do this, and you can immediately discern any move your opponents make' [2007: 123-124].

FINAL THOUGHTS ON THEORETICAL RESEARCH IN THE MARTIAL ARTS

In the formal practice of the martial arts, one gives up one's individual sovereignty in a voluntary way in order to follow a path or 'do' – to follow the teaching of a Sensei and ultimately to align oneself with the unfolding or immanent principles of a greater life and/or of the universe itself. Practice is a 'profound inquiry into the workings of both physical and spiritual existence' [Saotome 2014: 24]. This is a process with political implications that are rarely perceived. As many of the principles of daily practice dictate – albeit often with the mystifying proviso that this is something practitioners will only understand later – the path to truth in the martial arts is arguably *inaccessible* to those who do not give up the understanding of themselves as sovereigns, as the isolated rights-bearing agents of their actions, as ones who assume the power to suspend the law in situations of exception. The goal is not the natural right to self-preservation, but – in Saotome's formulation at least – the state of formlessness and 'no-self', or Deleuze's 'impersonal life', through which the reintegration of ai-ki can be achieved. As Saotome puts it, 'part of the process of learning aikido is learning to compose and execute waza, or techniques, while also noticing how it is that these waza are products, not of individual will, but of the life force behind one's actions' [2014: 23]. One trains to insert oneself into the unfolding or immanent process of the impersonal life force rather than to grant oneself a right of power over it: to isolate oneself from it, break with it, suspend it, or step outside of it in the manner of a sovereign.

In this regard, to pursue the truth of the martial arts in Saotome's sense is a way of constituting life as a form-of-life – 'a life which can never be separated from its form'. As I have argued, this can be understood as a practice of the self with three dimensions: as a spiritual practice in which life and the way of living life are transformed in order to attain the truth of spontaneous martial fluidity; as a freeing relation to violence in which the cycle of norm and crisis is deactivated to attain the truth of non-separation or 'becoming-one'; and as a social form with affective content in which the mode of knowledge transmission passes through states of the body that are best characterized as affects – powers of action with primarily non-cognitive content. This is politics at a fundamental level of re-imagination. Agamben's response to the apparatuses of a sovereign power that reduce life to mere survival, and to the biopolitics that discipline life to produce useful subjects, is to disassemble these apparatuses to affirm the life of the human as 'pure potentiality'. To the degree that the martial arts affirm a form-of-life in this way, they center the practitioner in the new horizon of political action that emerges when the apparatuses of sovereignty and biopolitics are neutralized.

Theoretical analysis in martial arts studies provides an opportunity to bridge the gap between practice and politics and opens a new direction or horizon in which to rethink and expand the practice beyond the dojo. In his form-of-life essay, Agamben can be read to suggest that *thought* is the crucial element in opening a passage from the often-narrow concerns of martial arts training to an open experimentation with what collective life could be. To be sure, he does not mean thought as a purely cognitive phenomenon, or a set of formal theories about the truth of the body. 'I call thought the nexus that constitutes the forms of life in an inseparable context as form-of-life. I do not mean by this the individual exercise of an organ or a psychic faculty, but rather an experience, an experimentum that has as its object the potential character of life and human intelligence' [Agamben 1993/2000: 9]. In this sense, thought imbues the forms, postures, techniques, katas, sparrings, and images of the martial arts with an experiment concerning the potential character of life. They become experiments in 'experience' that form the basis of an evolving common power: 'the necessarily potential character of any community' [Agamben 1993/2000: 10]. Despite the secrecy that has characterized martial arts traditions, they would seem increasingly to be a kind of global commons – a 'common power' [Agamben 1993/2000: 9] – in which the life of potential opens up a practice that allows practitioners to explore the collective outcomes of a freeing relation to violence.

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