

Research Article

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Thinking from the Home: Emanuele Coccia on Domesticity and Happiness

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Abstract: This article traces the idea of domesticity through the work of Emanuele Coccia to explain his conception of happiness. Coccia argues that it is only by taking domestic concerns seriously that philosophy can begin to theorize the possibility of happiness today, claiming that rather than beginning with the polis, “philosophy must think the city from the home, and the home from the kitchen.” The article begins by situating Coccia’s work in the tradition of Giorgio Agamben’s critical project and then explores the idea of the home from his 2016’s *The Life of Plants* through 2020’s *Metamorphoses* to understand the reason for devoting an entire book to the topic in 2021’s *Philosophy of the Home*. The final sections of this article turn to *Philosophy of the Home* itself to explain his conception of happiness more concretely, focusing on his conceptions of love and interdependency, as well as the fundamental importance of nourishment and the kitchen.

Keywords: domesticity, nourishment, plants, dwelling, cooking, food, economy, oikēiosis, subjectivity, oikonomia

1 *Oikonomia and Politeia*

In the introduction to Emanuele Coccia’s 2022 *Philosophy of the Home*, entitled “The Home beyond the City,” the author notes the privileged relationship that philosophy has had with the city and the effect this has had on our conception of ethics and happiness. It is in the city that philosophy “was born, where it learned to speak, and within its walls that it has always imagined its past and its future” – beginning with Croton and Athens, Pythagoras, and Plato, where philosophy was born; to Syracuse, “where philosophy gave in to the temptation to take power”; to Rome, where “the desire to make ‘living justice’ was radicalized to the point of identifying thought with right and the law”; to Paris and Frankfurt, where “philosophy became an object of instruction” and so on, “the list of cities in which philosophy was made and has lived is without limit.”¹ The effect that this privileged relationship has had on philosophy is immense, shaping its ends, desires, and methods from the start.

One of the most striking effects this relationship has had, according to Coccia, is on our conception of the home. He calls the ideals of urban philosophy “a true...*trompe-l’oeil*, a dream of clear skies made of liberty and collective fantasies of which the primary purpose has been the forgetting of the home, of reducing it as much as possible into a state of surrender in order to forget about it without any sense of culpability.”² As noted in previous sections, the home has been, since its Greek inception, the place of the necessary, repetitive drudgery of manual labor and dirtiness, opposed in every way to the free, unique action of politics and the purity of *theoria*. That is, since its inception, philosophy has sought to put the thought of domestic space out of mind

¹ Coccia, *Maison*, 9–10.

² *Ibid.*, 17.

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wherever possible in order to focus on “higher ideals” in the public sphere such as justice and truth. Philosophy was born, and continues to operate, from a position which has “subtracted/entrenched (*a retranché*) domestic space from/within the horizon of [philosophy’s] own [political] preoccupations.”³ I emphasize the double meaning of the French *retrancher* in Coccia’s work here in translating what is in the Italian edition *dismesso* in order to signal that what philosophy does is at once *remove* properly domestic questions *from* the realm of philosophical inquiry, while at the same time *inscribing* questions of the management of the home *into* the political preoccupations of philosophy itself. This occurs because since Aristotle, the political has been tied to the juridical (the just to the legal), and philosophy’s fundamental gesture has been to separate this “confused ensemble” from the domestic, subjecting the latter to the former.

Coccia argues that the exception to this trend, however, is “the first great Greek treatises on *oikonomia*,” which were concerned with “the order and government of the home.”⁴ He is referring here, of course, to a genre of practical and ethical texts that emerged in the fifth century BCE and continued to be popular into the third-century CE in Greece and Rome. These texts, as Čelkytė explains, typically “present a discussion of property (its acquisition, preservation and expenditure) and then moves on to the discussion of the proper treatment of one’s servants, wife and (male) child, thus covering all the ground typical of *oikonomia*.”⁵ They offer both practical advice on the proper management of the household, as well as reflection on the proper ends of wealth acquisition and household management which allow their reader to live a good life. That is, they are both instruction manuals and works of practical philosophy, or ethics. They instruct us in how to deal with the everyday necessities of managing the resources we need, of organizing our household and estate, so that we can live a flourishing life.

The science of economics, of conducting our domestic life, in each of these texts is ultimately oriented toward achieving happiness, or as Xenophon puts it, to become “a beautiful and good man,” something that only occurs in the public realm of politics.⁶ According to Leshem, Aristotle goes so far as to say in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the virtue of *sophrosyne*, perhaps one of the most essential virtues insofar as it is the condition for the possibility of living with the right relation toward pleasure itself, is etymologically derived from keeping economic life in check “because it keeps unharmed (*suzei*) economic rationality (*phronesis*).”⁷ For the economists of the Greek and Roman worlds, temperance and practical wisdom in the home in other words create the conditions for the possibility of a public, virtuous life in the *polis*, and thus should be considered a theory of the possibility of happiness.

But while “the first great Greek treatises on *oikonomia*” were indeed concerned with “the order and government of the home,” it nevertheless remains the case that for the Greeks, the concern for the household was at best a propaedeutic for philosophical, which is to say political, life. Coccia argues that the subordination of domesticity to the interests of the state by philosophy “is far from innocent.” Indeed, as we will see, it is another name for the tradition which produces the biopolitical regimes of modernity. Furthermore, because of this tendency, “the home has become a place in which prejudice, oppression, injustice, and inequality have remained hidden, forgotten, and reproduced mechanically and unconsciously through the ages,” where both sexism and speciesism have been “produced, affirmed, and justified.”⁸ By deliberately forgetting about the home, philosophy has abandoned everything within it to “the forces of genealogy and private property,” and in effect “rendered happiness unthinkable.”⁹ It has, in other words, abandoned it to the juridical order of biopolitics. The contemporary home, he writes, is like a “kind of Platonic cave, the ruins left over from an older age of humanity,” constructed around ideals of past centuries – both materially, in the way they are constructed, and conceptually, in the ways that we inhabit them spiritually – rather than one that is appropriate to the present.¹⁰

³ Ibid., 15; Coccia, *Filosofia della casa*, 7.

⁴ Coccia, *Maison*, 15.

⁵ Čelkytė, “Bryson’s *Oikonomikos*,” 206.

⁶ Xenophon, *Oikonomikos*, 11.

⁷ Leshem, “*Oikonomia*,” 232.

⁸ Coccia, *Maison*, 15.

⁹ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰ Ibid., 20.

He proposes to rethink the home, to have philosophy take the home seriously, to philosophize as if the home, our most intimate and first world, were the condition of the existence of the city, and not the other way around. After all, although public, political, urban spaces present us with opportunities for living, shopping, walking, exploring, socializing, and working, at the end of the day we nevertheless “must return to our own home, because it is always only in and through a home that we live on this planet.”¹¹ Coccia’s philosophy proposes to conceive of the city, as he puts it in *Metamorphoses*, as “nothing but a collection of homes,” rather than the home as simply a part of a city. Only by philosophizing from the home – an easy thing for him to say, writing these essays under lockdown in 2020 – does he think we will be able to think the possibility of happiness in the present. Only by considering the reality of our most intimate spaces on their own terms, rather than on those of the state, will we be able to offer a critique of the state that doesn’t put its interests first, but rather inverts the direction of power to instead demand food, shelter, and community as the end of political life.

Coccia’s concern with the relationship between the home and the city, the role that philosophy has in mediating this relationship and the repercussions that this relationship have for our happiness are perhaps the oldest and most fundamental to his oeuvre. That is, although the themes of this most recent book might seem to appear out of nowhere – a strange departure from the work on plant life, butterflies, advertising, and the imagination – they in fact provide the context for the rest of his work, and are in many ways what his previous books have been building toward for the last two decades. In order to explain this, we must return to his first published essay and contextualize his thought within the tradition of his mentor and one-time collaborator, Giorgio Agamben. We will see that Coccia’s insistence on conceptualizing a new understanding of life is in many ways a response to Agamben’s call to think the possibility of a “happy life” which utilizes the concept of *l’usage* to enact an effective state of exception that suspends and escapes the biopolitical regime. After doing this, we will turn to Coccia’s works as he develops his own conception of *usage* through an insistence on imagination and mediality in his early and middle works between 2005 and 2013. From here, we will see his interest in images evolve into a more ecologically informed thought in *The Life of Plants*, transforming the concept of *usage* into one of home-building. Finally, we will return to *Philosophy of the Home* with a fully developed understanding of the context and significance of the ideas at work there in order to explain how the techniques and modes of thinking in this text offer original contributions to the attempt to articulate a form-of-life that both takes biological and ecological life seriously, but does not allow itself to be reduced to *bare* life. Such a conception of the home is one that effectively allows us to rethink our relationship with other forms of life, our reliance upon them that in his earliest work is called *l’usage*. After considering the general form of this home that enacts an “effective state of exception” from the juridical order, the final section focuses on the act of cooking in particular, the *ur-form* of *l’usage* which Coccia argues ultimately creates the condition for the possibility of a “happy life.”

2 “The Mystery of Anomie”: Foundations

Emanuele Coccia’s first published work (as far as I can determine) is a 2004 review of Giorgio Agamben’s 2003 text *State of Exception (Homo sacer, II, 1)* in *Revue Critique* no 684. The article is entitled “Le Mystère de L’Anomie,” and anticipates ideas that would become more pronounced in the final section of his doctoral dissertation which he was writing at the time of the review. The text begins with a reading of major themes in Agamben’s text – such as the nature of *auctoritas* and *potestas*, and the fundamental role that the state of exception plays in the foundations of Western law – but uses them as a means to explore his own interests as the review continues – principally, the relation between philosophy, life, and “anomie”, and the importance of the concept of *χρᾶών*, *Brauch*, or *usage*, which will serve as the model for his idea of “interpenetration” and

¹¹ Ibid., 13–4.

“mutual projection” in later works. It is worth spending a moment with this text because it allows us to explore the immense – but almost entirely unspoken – influence that Agamben has had on Coccia’s work.

Agamben’s massive *Homo Sacer* project, spanning twenty years of research and nine primary volumes, has had a deep influence on philosophy in the last thirty years. Begun in 1995 with *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* and completed in 2015 with *Stasis: Civil War as Political Paradigm*, the project’s interests are diverse and wide reaching, allowing Agamben to take a sweeping view of western politics, theology, and philosophy. The project is a thoroughgoing investigation into the nature of sovereignty and life which utilizes, among other things, obscure Roman legal terms and monastic fraternal rules to explain the nature of power in the modern world. At the center of the project is a distinction in classical Greek philosophy that Agamben introduces at the very beginning of the first book in the series, between *bios* and *zoe*. He tells us that “the Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the word ‘life’,” but instead “used two terms that...are semantically and morphologically distinct: *zoe*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or group.”¹² This conceptual distinction between the simple *fact* of living and that of a particular *way* of living, in Agamben’s reading, is grounded in the relation between the *oikos* and the *polis* that emerged in the transition from the archaic to classical era of Greece.¹³

Agamben notes in Aristotle the division between the “natural life” that exists in the realm of necessity and the domain of the *oikos* on one hand, and the “political life” that exists in the realm of freedom and the domain of the *polis* on the other. In the *oikos*, issues such as nourishment, reproduction, clothing, sleep, and other needs of the body are dealt with – largely by those who are unfree, such as women and slaves – which leaves men free, in the *polis*, to deal with issues that have to do with the higher and uniquely human activities of governance, art, and philosophy. *Zoe*, in other words, must be constrained in order for *bios* to function properly, and necessity must be overcome in order for freedom to exist. For Agamben, one of the most foundational gestures in Western metaphysics is the division between these two categories, and the use of law and a series of apparatuses throughout history to decide the limit between bare life and the qualified life of the citizen. Against Foucault’s claim that biopolitics is a uniquely modern paradigm, Agamben’s reading of Aristotle shows that the techniques for distinguishing these categories are present at the very foundation of Western politics, and that the separation from and subjugation of the *oikos* to the *polis* is one of the most fundamental gestures of the metaphysical tradition to which we are subject. In Coccia’s review of the text, he will stress that it is not necessarily the distinction between the home and the city that is of consequence, but the binding of the city to the *law* and *its* subjugation of the home that is the problem. This idea, as we will see later, is the starting point for Coccia’s own reflections on happiness in *Filosofia della casa*. The figure of the *homo sacer*, in Agamben, is simply the most glaring example of the power that juridical apparatuses assert over existence through a capacity to exclude bare life from the law while at the same time subjecting it to its rule. It is, in other words, the clearest expression of the manner in which an exception proves the rule of the system of law.

In *State of Exception*, Agamben turns from the figure of the *homo sacer* to the “state of exception” or *Justitium*, which likewise demonstrates the nature of sovereignty and the rule of law through the capacity the sovereign has to suspend law itself – or again, that the exception is the foundation of the rule. Coccia’s review of the text focuses on this point and insists on the fundamental relationship that the law has to “anomie” more than any other idea in Agamben’s book. As we will see in the next section, the concept of “anomie” will have deep political implications in Coccia’s doctoral dissertation. For now, he writes that “the law lives from the exception and cannot be constructed except in the position of a space of absolute anomie,” and later that “the state of exception – anomie – is not a fact that the law has to face, but the true state of the law itself.”¹⁴ After these first few sections that take up *State of Exception* explicitly, Coccia turns from Agamben’s *critical* considerations to his own *speculative* ones. This relation, in fact, might be a good explanation of the relation between the two thinkers in general: where Agamben’s critical project ends, Coccia’s speculative realism begins.

¹² Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁴ Coccia, “Le Mystère de L’Anomie,” 421–2.

In the remainder of the review, Coccia reflects on the possibility of what Agamben elsewhere calls “the coming thought,” and argues that “if exception and anomie are inseparable from the law, it is ‘the practical and political mystery of their separation’ that we must learn.” According to Coccia, after Agamben, “the political task par excellence will not be flight before the law, but indeed the ironic gesture of accomplishing it by taking it to its logical extremes.” This takes the form of extreme constructions of one’s own methods of living exemplified in the *forma vitae* of the Franciscans and other mendicant orders that would be so extensively analyzed by Agamben nearly a decade later in 2011’s *The Highest Poverty*.¹⁵ In the mendicant orders, the strict rules articulated for their unique form-of-life creates a perpetual state of exception, or anomie, with respect to the law of the state. The tight, paradoxical relationship between law and anomie means that taking on the extreme discipline of monastic life – and perpetually negating the rights (to property, to riches, etc.) guaranteed by the juridical order – is the only way to escape the apparatuses of capture that rules the world of power and biopolitics. He calls this an “effective state of exception” (*état d’exception effectif*), one which turns the reality of the paradoxical relationship between law and anomie away from the excessive power of the state and toward a form of liberation. Taking the lessons of the Franciscans to heart, Coccia writes that “the philosophy to come, must tend to constitute a life whose only right would be to no longer have any relationship with the law,” or the juridical order.¹⁶

He suggests we do this not by attempting to *escape* from the law, but rather by “studying” it in order to separate the juridical order from the political. The western tradition has mistakenly spent its time trying to distinguish “the confused ensemble” of the juridical and the political “from *oikonomia* (the domestic science)” and “that which was called in the Middle Ages *scientia monastica* (the science of singular and separated lives, in opposition to associative life).” Instead, what we must aim at is a different division: between the juridical on one hand and the realm of life on the other hand. This is because “the boundary that defines the existence of the political does not lie between individual existence and collective existence, nor does it aim to separate public life from private life.” Rather, “private life is politically inseparable from public life,” and “individual existence is ultimately politically impossible to distinguish from collective existence,” meaning that “politics is the science of both private and public or communal life, of both individual and collective existence.”¹⁷ He refers us to the political philosophy of Ibn Bajja (Avempace), who claims that the perfect city is one where there is no law and tells us that Agamben is secretly part of this tradition insofar as he points us toward an “effective state of exception” from the juridical.

Later, in *Philosophy of the Home*, Coccia will suggest that in order to rethink this distinction effectively, we must begin thinking from the home, rather than the state. The long history of the “confused ensemble” of politics and law, it would seem, makes thinking the distinction by using the categories of the political impossible. In other words, the reason why we ought to begin from the home is not that the home should impose its categories on the *polis*, but that in order to conceive of (happy) life, we must *begin* with the life of the home and think *toward* the life of the city in order to divide it effectively from the apparatuses of law which aim to capture life and render it bare. Beginning with political life (which is fundamentally bound up with the juridical division between *zoe* and *bios*) and then attempting to derive a sense of happy private life *from* it, à la Aristotle, will inevitably lead to a form of biopolitics that perpetuates the unthinkability of a form-of-life that is not simply “a purely physico-biological determination,” i.e., *vita nuda*.¹⁸

3 Happiness and *Usage*: Toward a Philosophy of the Home

Near the end of the review, he explicitly introduces the centrality of the all-important theme of happiness, or the “happy life” which will be the center of *Philosophy of the Home*. He asks, how it is possible to “create an

¹⁵ Coccia, “Mystère de L’Anomie.”

¹⁶ Ibid., 426.

¹⁷ Ibid., 429.

¹⁸ Ibid., 433.

effective state of exception in which the law is like our plaything” and “what happens to life in such a state?” Most importantly, he claims that “happiness” is what we should call “the reality of this existence” – i.e., life that effectively suspends the juridical order and thereby “passes through the gates of justice unharmed” – which “it remains necessary to sketch in form and practical constitution.”¹⁹ Although he does not fully draw out the nature of such a state (it is not until *Philosophy of the Home* that we get a full picture of this), this final section does give some clues as to what it might mean and crucially sets up themes that will preoccupy his thought in the coming decades.

Coccia argues that what ultimately characterizes the juridical order is that it “takes as its object the mode in which a life puts itself in relation with itself and with the world.” A law “is defined as nothing other than the possibility of thinking the relation of a human life with other things and living beings in terms of an arbitrary, contingent relation, and thus susceptible to being managed, being artificially modified – a relation, in sum, in which the subject can always be separated from his life, things, and the world.” I imagine that he has in mind here, for example, are the arbitrary political distinctions drawn up in the African continent to serve European colonial interests, or the juridical and biopolitical distinctions that create the conditions for the Holocaust. Against this, he writes that Agamben comes closest to “defining a form of life that coincides with” the kind of effective state of exception which would allow us to separate the juridical from the thought of life in the concept of “*l’usage*.” Although the term would be developed at great length in Agamben’s final book in the *Homo Sacer* project (2014’s *The Use of Bodies*), taking it in a slightly different direction, Coccia’s interpretation here is that of “a life inseparable from the world in which it is placed” and “the sphere of irredeemable worldliness in which life cannot be separated from the world of which it has need.” This conception stands “in direct opposition to the purely contingent and arbitrary relation between man and his world” established by the law.²⁰ Coccia explicitly connects this conception of *usage* with Agamben’s form-of-life, which is defined as “life which cannot be separated from its form,” and which consequently “it is not possible to isolate something like bare life.” The juridical order is, in the last analysis, an attempt to separate humanity from the world, and Coccia claims that it is perhaps *only* outside of the “original inseparability and essential indistinction between man and the world” that bare life is made possible. He argues that “*l’usage* is perhaps the relation of inseparability and essential indistinction which reattaches life to its form, and the living being to the world in which it lives.”²¹

This conception of *usage* as the “sphere of irremediable worldliness in which life cannot be separated from the world it needs, and where things cannot be thought except in their relation to the life which sustains them” would serve as the most important throughline of Coccia’s work for the next two decades. As we will see, this term will, through a series of transformations, become the concept of home-building in Coccia’s later work. It would take new forms in each of his work, from his interpretation of the “material intellect” in Averroes, to the *vita sensitiva* of *Sensible Life*, to the “mutual projection” and interpenetration of *The Life of Plants* and *Métamorphoses*, and ultimately develop into the concepts of dwelling and home-building in *Philosophy of the Home*.

4 Medial Texts: *The Transparency of Images to Sensible Life*

Between the review of *State of Exception* and 2016’s *The Life of Plants*, Coccia’s interests only gradually build toward a new conception of life. They begin by developing a robust theory of mediality which grows out of a reading of Averroes and consistently develops a counter theory to the subject oriented philosophy that has dominated the Western tradition since around the time of Thomas Aquinas. This insistence on thinking about our relation to the world through media (rather than from the substantial being of the subject) will shift from

¹⁹ Ibid., 431.

²⁰ Ibid., 432.

²¹ Ibid., 432–3.

being centered on the “image” to something like “life” only in *The Life of Plants*. There is very little that is directly connected to anything like *usage* in these intermediate texts, but it is worth referring to them briefly in order to see the entirety of Coccia’s trajectory. Let us spend just a moment, then, with the key points from a few of these works in order to trace his development in the intervening decade, before turning more fully to the more robust theories of life and the home that begin to coalesce in the years between 2016 and 2022.

Although it might not be apparent from the themes outlined in the review article analyzed above, Emanuele Coccia began his career as a medievalist, with a dissertation entitled *La trasparenza delle immagini*, on Averroes and Averroism. Around this time, he also published articles on the Averroist Siger of Brabant’s reading of Aristotle’s *Physics*, Bernard of Clairvaux’s conception of monastic life, the poetic and political culture surrounding Dante, and the epistemological status of moral truth in the medieval period. His dissertation focuses on Averroes’ theory of the unity of the intellect described most fully in the “long commentary” on Aristotle’s *De Anima*. Coccia’s text argues that Averroes’ claim that the unity of truth implies that there is only one “mind” – the so-called material intellect – in turn means that the intellect ought to be read as a *medium* where individual human thoughts become “transparent” to others. For Averroes, the imagination is the highest form of *individual* human thought. This leads Coccia to claim that when the content of imagination is translated into rational thought in the material intellect, it becomes perceptible and understandable to other imaginations in individual human beings, meaning that it is through *images* that consciousness relates to the rest of the world. The material intellect acts, in other words, as a medium that exists between beings, one whose consistency is constituted by images. Thought, under this paradigm, is not the sort of thing that occurs *within* individual consciousness, but rather stands *between* beings as a kind of a-personal and in-human medium that replaces “the issue of the subjectivity of thought with that of mediality.”²² This interest in the constitutive nature of mediality will shape Coccia’s conception of the home in his later work.

Further, the dissertation’s final section concerns objections to Averroism – principally from Latin Aristotelians such as Thomas Aquinas – and the *political* implications of Averroes’ thought which continue the line of thought begun in the *Exception* review. According to Coccia, the threat posed by Averroes to the Church comes from the fact that he does not conceive of reason as an agreement of individual, free consciousness with *law*, as it is for Aquinas. According to Aquinas, reason is important because it allows us to accord ourselves with the order imposed on the cosmos by God, allowing us to participate in the divine economy of God’s administrative rule. In Averroes, on the other hand, since the relations that occur in thought are constituted by *images* rather than the adequation of individual reason to the administrative regulations that would place us within the divine economy, then Averroism asserts the essentially “anomic” nature of thought. That is, it stands outside of, and opposed to, any given system of *law*. The activity of thought, in Coccia’s reading of Averroes, does not aim at the establishment of a *polis* as it does in the work of Aquinas, but rather exists outside of the city-state, in the realm of living that in *Sensible Life* occurs through the mediation of images. As in the review, Coccia finds the *relation* between things (what was in the review called *usage*) to be more fundamental than the substance of the things themselves. In both the epilogue to *The Life of Plants* and throughout *Philosophy of the Home*, Coccia will again assert the externality of philosophy to the law and the juridical order and commit himself to the “secret complicity” with Avempace’s anomic political philosophy that he asserted of Agamben in “Le Mystère.”

In *Sensible Life*, first published in 2010, Coccia remains with the medial nature of images and the imaginary in a continuing critique of subject oriented philosophies. The text steps away from Averroes in particular, and broadens the field of vision to explore the independent life that images have outside of both subjective consciousness and bare matter. Images are “a *special being*, a sphere of the real that is separate from the other spheres” of consciousness and matter. Images exist in before and after consciousness and cannot be reduced to the contents of the mind or even thought, as they might have been conceived in *La trasparenza*. “Let us not think of the medium as a purely cognitive or noetic space,” he writes. Rather, “every image is the Being of knowledge that acts outside of the subject, a sort of *objective unconscious*.”²³ Although the

²² Coccia, *La Trasparenza*, 140.

²³ Coccia, *Sensible Life*, 52.

theme of this work is “the sensible” in all of its forms, in this text, the medial relationship that we have with the world remains centered, for the most part, on the visual. It is not until after this work that Coccia begins to turn away from the *image* toward more bodily and ecological themes in his conception of mediation which we will investigate in the following section.

Perhaps most importantly for our investigation, Coccia spends a significant amount of time exploring the concept of *clothing* and *fashion*, themes that will re-emerge in *Philosophy of the Home* as well as his most recently published *La Forma Vita*, written with former creative director of Gucci and current head of Valentino, Alessandro Michele.²⁴ In a chapter titled “Making the World our Skin,” Coccia places aligns himself with Agamben’s reading in *The Open* against “a renowned Heideggerian *logion*” by claiming that humanity “does not *make* ‘experience of the Open’” but rather that “his being and his body itself *are* open” insofar as they are themselves the skin and clothing of the world. “Our being-in-the-world does not...have the feature of thrownness,” but rather “man has a relationship with the world that is similar to the relationship that every animal has with its own skin.” That is, we are the skin of the world and relate to the world through our being clothed in it. It is here that we get Coccia’s first intimations of a physical and ecological mediation that approaches the concept of *usage* outlined in the review. He writes that “our primary and most immediate relation with the world is the one defined by clothing” which is thereby “our first world, our first *home*.” Clothing, in this conception, “is our first world – our first *oikos* – and the home is an extension of clothing.”²⁵ This more concrete mediation between body and world that occurs through home-building, and thereby makes way for the “effective state of exception” that makes happiness possible, will become the central theme of his works beginning with 2016’s *The Life of Plants*. In those works, as we will see, Coccia begins to insert his own ecological perspective into this analysis, creating a truly unique position that allows him to create a discourse distinct from that of Agamben, but nevertheless still committed to the project of conceiving of a “happy life” in the modern world.

5 Being, Dwelling, Breathing: Living as World-Making and the Home as Identity

Early in *The Life of Plants*, Coccia argues that the key difference between vegetal and animal life is that while the former embodies “the most direct and elementary connection that life can establish with the world,” the latter “seems never to have had immediate relations with the inanimate world” and “[requires] the mediation of other beings in order to survive.” Plants “require nothing but the world, nothing but reality in its most basic components” and “transform everything they touch into life, [making] out of matter, air, and sunlight what, for the rest of the living will be a space of habitation, a world.”²⁶ In other words, “the life of plants is a cosmogony in action, the constant genesis of our cosmos,” and therefore, vegetal life is responsible for making this ball of rock we live on *habitable*.²⁷ Concretely, plant life produces “all the objects and tools that surround us [such as nourishment, furniture, clothes, fuel, and medicine],” as well as the atmosphere through the “organic exchange of gasses [i.e. oxygen],” and even our bodies since “the animal organism is constructed entirely and simply from the organic substances produced by plants.”²⁸ He reminds us that “like the vast majority of stars, the Earth is not by definition inhabitable,” it is not simply “a soil that hosts and welcomes,” but rather had to be *made* so, and must *continually* be made habitable through the ongoing biological processes of plants. “The cosmos,” he writes, “is not inhabitable in itself – it is not an *oikos*, it is an *ouranos*,” not a home

²⁴ It should be noted that at the time of writing, this book has not yet been released, but will be out by the time of its publication. The author intends to return to the important theme of clothing in Coccia’s work in a future essay.

²⁵ Coccia, *Sensible Life*, 91.

²⁶ Coccia, *Life of Plants*, 5–8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

but a sky.²⁹ The *oikos* exists *only* because of the life of plants; both in the ontic sense which holds that earth is our “home” because it is the place where we build houses, but also in the ontological sense in which plant life is the condition for the possibility of dwelling as such. They are what makes the planet *hospitable*.

In other words, this is not just a contingent, material fact, but a metaphysical change wrought by vegetal life. Because of the way that plants have produced the conditions in which we live in such a *radical* way, transforming a portion of the heavens into a *world*, they “challenge one of the pillars of the biological and natural sciences of the past few centuries.” Namely, “the priority of the environment over the living, of the world over life, of space over the subject.” Plants “demonstrate that living beings *produce the space in which they live* rather than being forced to adapt to it.” For Coccia, this is because “they have modified the metaphysical structure of the world for good” to be one in which living means constructing a home, fashioning one’s own environs as a condition of its own life.³⁰ There seems to be a subtle distinction here between the work of plants and of animals, one in which the former creates the *conditions* in which habitation is possible, so that the latter must necessarily produce an *actual dwelling* as a result of this transcendental condition of living on earth. “It is,” he writes, “already *by existing* that plants modify the world globally without even moving, without beginning to act.” For plants, “to be’ means...to *make world [faire monde]*,” and “reciprocally, to construct (our) world, to make world is only a synonym of ‘to be’.”³¹ In either case, however, he calls the relationship between an organism and its environment one of “mutual projection,” one in which “the living being identifies itself with the world in which it is immersed.” It is here that we can see Coccia’s first original contribution to the theory of *usage* that was so central to his reading of Agamben and the creation of happiness in the earlier work. We see this relationship most clearly in our own households, where “we project ourselves in the space closest to us, and we make of this portion of space something intimate.” For humans, the home is “a portion of world that has a particular relation to our own body,” it is “a kind of ordinary, material *extension* of our body.”³² To live in a world (i.e. in a cosmos) produced by vegetal life, in other words, means that *being* is the same as *dwelling*, or that the art of living is a process of *oikeiosis*, of making a portion of the world one’s home.

In *The Life of Plants*, Coccia introduces two particular, concrete ways that plants have altered the transcendental conditions of life on earth in this way. On one hand, they have made the world a place of *nourishment*, in which in order to live, one must *eat*. It is, after all, only on the condition that autotrophs produce the nutrients that heterotrophs need to survive that life is thinkable at all. Plants have, in other words, made life something that fundamentally *metabolizes* in order to *be*. Although this is a theme introduced in this book, it is not until later texts like *Metamorphoses* and *Philosophy of the Home* that it becomes a more central aspect of his understanding of life. We will return to the development of this theme in the final section of this article, where we explore the massive claim that philosophy must “think the city from the home,” and the home, in turn, “from the place of the kitchen.” That is, that for Coccia, the philosophy of happiness begins in the kitchen, and turns its attention to the cosmos from there.

The more important concrete change treated at length in *The Life of Plants*, however, is that the oxygenation of earth through photosynthesis has made it possible and necessary to dwell because the earth is now an *atmosphere*. “Leaves,” he writes, “have imposed upon the vast majority of living beings a unique environment: the atmosphere,” and argues that it is because of this medium through which we live that we are able to have a shared world in the first place.³³ That I draw in breath that is produced by plant life, and exhale carbon dioxide which is used by plants to photosynthesize, attests to the interdependence of living beings on one another, as well as the fact that the basic acts of living (breathing and eating) are the production of an environment, an atmosphere and biosphere. This is, again, not a contingent fact, but a structuring characteristic of life on earth itself. “The climate,” he argues, “is the name and the metaphysical structure of *mixture*,”

²⁹ Ibid., 95–6.

³⁰ Ibid., 10.

³¹ Ibid., 38.

³² Ibid., 34.

³³ Ibid., 26.

the term that signifies that we are at once “a cosmic unity” with other life, and at the same time distinct and separated from it.³⁴ With this conception of the atmosphere, Coccia transforms the theory of media present from *The Transparency of Images* to *Goods* into an ecological concept, one which cleaves much more closely to a novel theory of life which will be fully articulated in *Philosophy of the Home*.

The book as a whole is about the “metaphysics of mixture” created by plant life, which for our purposes refers to the relationship whereby we are related to our surroundings. “Mixture” for Coccia, following the Stoic Alexander of Aphrodisias, means not “simple juxtaposition,” *parathesis*, in which “different things form a single mass while preserving the limits of their body and without sharing anything; nor “fusion,” *sunchusis*, in which “the quality of each component is destroyed to produce a new object which has a different nature and quality from that of the originary elements”; but rather “total mixture,” *krasis*, in which “bodies occupy each other’s place while preserving their quality and individuality.”³⁵ This conception allows us to think of “place or environment” as “ontologically and formally autonomous from the living organism that inhabits them,” while at the same time tying them indelibly to one another.³⁶

Such a conception allows us to think a relationship between organism and environment in a way that allows the former to be “in” the latter while at the same time allowing the latter to be “in” (or from/with/in) the latter without necessitating that one be subsumed conceptually by the other. Atmosphere, the name for mixture on earth, allows for interpenetration, for the world to live within me at the same time that I project myself into the environment and create the place of my dwelling. For this reason, “the world is not an autonomous entity independent of life, it is the fluid nature of any medium: climate, atmosphere.”³⁷ The atmosphere makes living synonymous not just with dwelling but also with breathing, so that our mode of being is, at its most fundamental, respiration – production of atmosphere – as homemaking.

In *Metamorphoses*, his next book and most ambitious work to date, Coccia develops this and many other themes introduced in the earlier text. While the majority of *Metamorphoses* is concerned with an understanding of life as movement, of metamorphosis through forms, Coccia nevertheless acknowledges that we “never liberate ourselves from our obsession with the home,” a place of the cosmos which is “ours and no one else’s,” which protects us from “the sun, the wind, the rain, the world,” that is, the “outdoors.” More essentially, he argues that the home is the very principle which creates identity, “the archetype of the border” between what is within and what is without, going so far as to say that “it is thanks to the home that there exists a ‘me and you’.”³⁸ This is the case because the home creates our essential sense of interiority and exteriority, the condition for the concepts of similarity and difference. Here, we see his earlier critique of subjectivity from *Transparency of Images* and *Sensible Life* come to fruition. Subjectivity and selfhood, in this conception, does not precede relations and mediation, but is instead produced *by* our relation to the world. It is only through a relationship of necessity (*Brauch*) with the world, only because we are always already *open* to the world by dwelling in it and remaining *indebted* to it – another translation for *χρεών* – that subjectivity and selfhood is possible.

Such border experiences, places where there are distinctions between inside and out, friend and enemy, etc. – or in a word, *media* – are the site from which we must think political concepts, according to Coccia.³⁹ It is the medial, the realm of *usage*, the zone in which the effective state of exception has the opportunity to be enacted, the anomic dwelling place of thought where the juridical might be suspended that the *possibility* of rethinking life outside of the law – which is to say, the *truly* political, according to the earlier analyses – arises. When speaking of the concept of the home in *Metamorphoses*, Coccia writes that our relation to it “structures our political experience” (since for him, “the city is nothing but a collection of homes”), as well as “our experience of things” (since “that which we call ‘economy’ is nothing but the attempt to make the individual and the home coincide”). Finally, Coccia notes that the home “defines also and above all the relation between

³⁴ Ibid., 27.

³⁵ Ibid., 50.

³⁶ Ibid., 38.

³⁷ Ibid., 49.

³⁸ Coccia, *Metamorphoses*, 166, all trans. mine.

³⁹ Coccia, *Metamorphoses*, 119.

other beings and ourselves, as well as between living things and the space that surrounds them,” a claim that hearkens back to the essential cosmological relation between organism and environment, or between the living and the world, established through the concept of the atmosphere mentioned earlier.⁴⁰ In other words, our conception of the home not only structures our political and economic ideas, but the ideas of ecology as well, meaning that the home ought to be the starting point for evaluations of normative claims (in politics and *oiko-nomy*) as well as ontological claims (in *oiko-logy*). Given this importance accorded to the concept of the home for our understanding of ourselves, our world, and our place within it in both *The Life of Plants* and *Metamorphoses*, it might not come as a surprise that Coccia’s next book was entitled *Philosophy of the Home*.

6 “The New Home, or the Philosopher’s Stone”

In an interview from 2021, Coccia explained the idea of *Philosophy of the Home* in perhaps the simplest way. There, he described the home as “the collection of objects and subjects that we put close together and that we want to be close to [which] is designed to make our lives better.” For this reason, he also says that the “essence of the home is expressed through this ‘better,’ this *being* better,” which makes the home “a moral object, not an architectural one.”⁴¹ Given the tight connection in Coccia’s work between dwelling and living, being and doing, it should come as no surprise that the home is here conceived of as a way of ameliorating our relationship to the environment. In calling the home a primarily “moral object” and not an “architectural one,” Coccia asserts that the life we live within the home can never be reduced to the *zoe* that Aristotle believed existed there. Or, to put it another way, the life within the home is not moral because it allows us to live an upstanding life of the citizen *outside* of the home. It is, instead, the place where we experiment with “the good life” itself. Our life within the home is not good insofar as it conforms to the legal or juridical order of the state, but is good insofar as it the home allows us to at once live a form of life that is deeply engaged with the world around us in a relationship of *l’usage* while at the same time being a form of life that we articulate ourselves, that is an expression of our moral existence and not *simply* that of bodily necessity.

The physical home is the artifact of our attempt to ameliorate our relationship to the world, to project ourselves into a space both according to our need with an openness to being affected by it. In other words, to *make things “better,”* however we understand that term. It is for this reason that “every house is a purely moral reality.”⁴² As we will see, in a spin on the Levinasian idea of ethics before ontology, for Coccia, the *architectural* building of homes is always accompanied – and indeed metaphysically *preceded by* – a *moral theory*. “We construct homes to host,” as he puts it, “in the form of intimacy, the portion of the world – made of things, people, animals, plants, atmospheres, events, images, and memories – which make happiness itself possible.”⁴³ It is here that we begin to clearly see the relation that Coccia makes between dwelling and happiness: the small portion of the world into which we project our mode of being facilitates our manner of living in a way that we feel inseparable from. It derives not primarily from a feeling of delight or pleasure in some ontic thing in the world, but in the feeling that we *belong* somewhere, that there exists a place “where we are *naturally* ourselves,” and where we find things we need to get by in our daily existence.⁴⁴ That is, a place where “life cannot be separated from its form,” where our mode of being – our *ethos*, as he calls it in *Sensible Life* – is natural and necessary, and is therefore a place where “it is not possible to isolate something like bare life.” Such a relation with the world, however, cannot be forced or created through the juridical order, that is, with the institution of a rule or the institution of laws.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 167.

⁴¹ <https://www.salonemilano.it/en/articles/domestic-space-and-happiness-interview-emanuele-coccia>.

⁴² Coccia, *Philosophie de la Maison*, 14. All trans. mine.

⁴³ Coccia, *Maison*, 14.

⁴⁴ Coccia, *Metamorphoses*, 167.

The book begins, appropriately, with a chapter on “Moving.” In *Metamorphoses*, Coccia exhaustively explored the myriad ways that life moves from form to form, giving an Ovidian picture of the world as a constant process of change and becoming. In that book, as noted above, this came into tension with our desire to be at home, a tension that led to a broader reflection on the biosphere, oiko-logy, and world-building as multi-species architecture in the final chapters. That is, the tension had to be sublated from the personal to the global in order for it to be resolved. In *Philosophy of the Home*, then, he returns to the same tension to address the issue in greater depth and give a more satisfying account of domesticity at the personal level. The chapter begins by describing the anxiety of moving. Moving is, after all, a temporary period of *not* dwelling in one place. It reduces us, temporarily, to bare life, to existence separated from a form of dwelling. In “The Things of the Home,” he describes the relationship with everyday objects which form the basis of our material relationship with the world itself through the home. The chapter describes one of his moves to a new apartment, when his things, because of an error, didn’t arrive until several days after he did. Although he was in a physical space, technically in a home, he had absolutely no real relation to the world. He couldn’t *do anything* without the things that made up his home.⁴⁵ It was the process of moving, however, that “opened the doors of the Idea of the home,” and allowed him to “study everything that makes a place a home.” None of the elements of domesticity “had anything to do with architecture or design,” but rather, he found that the home is, as we have already established, the “moral reality *par excellence*,” a “psychic and material artifact that allows us to be in the world better than allowed by nature.” A home is, as he writes, “the disparate ensemble of facts and narratives that allow us to understand how to be happy with others.” Or, to put it in terms we have seen elsewhere in his work, “‘Home’ is nothing but the name of the aggregate of techniques aiming to establish the adequation between self and planet, a cosmic fold which, for a time, makes the mind and matter, soul and world, coincide.”⁴⁶ It is, in other words, the place where our form of life is necessary, where it is possible (to use the language from his review of Agamben) to conceive of our life as inseparable from the things which support it.

This occurs through a process of construction, of building a world, language that goes back to *The Life of Plants*. This construction refers both to the accumulation of furniture, books, pots and pans, knick-knacks, and clothing, as well as the building of intimacy with others, plants, non-human animals, and other people, which over time we come to call “mine.” In *Metamorphoses*, Coccia argued that the home was the reason for the existence of the “me,” and expands here by writing that while the “me” has been understood historically as a “strange immaterial entity confined to a supernatural dimension,” it is in fact much more mundane than that.⁴⁷ What we call “ours” is the contingent set of things we carry with us, the love and family that we forge with others, the memories and stories that give our lives consistency, the objects that facilitate our mode of life, anything that makes us feel comfortable and “at home” in the world.

It also helps to philosophize, to reflect upon the things, spaces, and relations that make a home itself in the conditions of modernity, rather than those of past centuries under whose reign we still live. In the chapter on “Love,” Coccia argues that what makes us modern is the way that we “have at the center of modernity a revolutionary moral project which has placed quotidian life – defined bits most trivial and ordinary dimensions, work and love – to the heart of every one of our political, economic, social, and material preoccupations.” That is, the recentring of political life around things that in antiquity would have been considered private matters, matters of the *oikonomia*. In his earlier work, Coccia insisted on the need to think the political in distinction from the juridical. In “Love” and “Social Media,” he comes closest to explaining how this might be possible. Both social media and love are domains which have the potential to determine the shape of the public sphere *from within the private*, rather than the other way around. He may have in mind here the way that laws constrain the sexuality of LGBTQ + people, and how this may cause activists to think that the problem is *politics* or *the political*, rather than the *laws*, the *juridical* order which controls our activities in the bedroom. By beginning with private conceptions of love and building a political order *from* it, without reference to the

⁴⁵ Coccia, *Maison*, 67.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 25–7.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

juridical – e.g., by promoting and engaging in “free love” – life might be conceived of in a new way. In social networks, the inside of other people’s homes and lives are open to us in radically new ways. They have the potential to allow us extraordinary new insights into the lives of others without the mediation of state agencies, law and order, or corporate media. Consider, for example, the role that TikTok has played in allowing the world to see the genocide in Gaza since October 7th. The effect that it has had on global opinion has made this period in Palestinian liberation more visible than ever before. In both cases, the line between the personal and the political is blurred, and crucially set apart from the juridical. Or, to put it another way, it allows us to disengage the political from the legal, to disentangle the “confused ensemble” in favor of a new conception of life that begins from within our own dwelling place.

The chapters on “Twins,” “Domestic Animals,” and “Gardens and Forests” operate much like that on “Love.” In each of them, Coccia considers the ways in which the coming home, the home that would allow happiness to exist – felicity, homeliness, the adequation between the world and the self – is a fundamental reconsideration of our relationship to other humans, animals, and plants, respectively. That is, they allow us to philosophize outside of the juridical order and attempt to approach Others again outside of its influence. In each of these chapters, Coccia presents an extended meditation on the ways that contemporary society has foreclosed the possibility of thinking such a coincidence of existence with other forms of life, be they plant or animal. “Gardens and Forests” considers the “Vertical Forest” apartment buildings designed by Boeri Studio in Milan. The skyscrapers are home to over two thousand species of trees growing on the exterior of the buildings and are designed to increase biodiversity in the city by providing an ecological niche for insects, birds, and other animals to exist within the urban landscape itself. Although the modern city is a virtual desert, hostile to all life except that of humans and a small set of domestic animals, the Vertical Forest proposes a conception of the home where plants, animals, and humans exist in the same space while preserving their own identities.⁴⁸ In fact, it is only by beginning to dwell with plants and animals that civilization as we understand it came about in the first place. He points out that cities, and more fundamentally domestication itself, originated when “man began to plant, to cultivate, and to ameliorate by selection the edible herbs, roots, and trees that he found,” as well as “taming and firmly attaching to his person certain animals with whom to exchange food and protection.” While it is obviously true that humans radically changed plants and animals through processes of domestication, it is just as true that by adapting our modes of life to the needs and biological processes of plants and animals, we were domesticated by them as well. Because of these processes of mutual projection, he argues that “the urban revolution is nothing but the consequence of agriculture and the possibility of accumulating and conserving food in the same place for a period of time.” That is to say, that “the city is an emanation of the garden.”⁴⁹

7 Cooking the World

The concluding chapter of the text, on “Kitchens,” however, is perhaps the most important in the reconceptualization of the home, and the rethinking of happiness, in the entirety of the book. In it, he goes as far as to say that while “philosophy must think the city from the place of the home,” as we said in the previous sections, the home itself must be thought “from the place of the kitchen.”⁵⁰ That is, it is only through an understanding of the kitchen, as the “heart of the home,” that we can approach the question of happiness, reconceive the city, and philosophize at all. It is through cooking that we most clearly conceive of a happy relationship with the world, one of *l’usage* where “a life that is inseparable from the world in which it is placed” and “the sphere of irredeemable worldliness in which life cannot be separated from the world of which it has need.” In the kitchen, life is at once a biophysical process and a moral reality par excellence, the site where the contours of the happy life can be seen most clearly.

⁴⁸ <https://www.stefano-boeri-architetti.net/project/lungomare-bari-vittorio-veneto/>.

⁴⁹ Coccia, *Maison*, 163.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.

Although this article has focused more on the role played by the production of an atmosphere through breath and photosynthesis, we mentioned above that nourishment has been a central concern of Coccia's since *The Life of Plants*, where the role of plants as base of the trophic pyramid was a persistent theme. There, plants are "the only breach in the self-referentiality of living" through their autotrophic ability to escape the "parasitism, [the] universal cannibalism that belongs to the domain of the living" and which makes of all other life "an immense cosmic tautology."⁵¹ Autotrophy, a "Midas-like power of nutrition" which "allows plants to transform into nourishment everything they touch and everything there is," is like their capacity to produce oxygen "not just a radical form of alimentary autonomy," but "above all the capacity to transform the solar energy dispersed into the universe into a living body."⁵² Along with the production of an atmosphere, the production of a troposphere – or more accurately, a biosphere – is perhaps the most important way that plants have created the conditions under which we dwell on earth.

In *Metamorphoses*, most of the section on "Reincarnation" is devoted to the question of nourishment, which above all "signifies the transfusion of the life of others into our own body." To eat, he writes, "is to fuse two lives into a single one," and shows that "the life which animates us is neither individual nor specific," but "remains in a body only to leave in the nourishment of individuals of an infinite variety of other species." Nourishment demonstrates, in other words, that "the life of any one of us that we consider personal is in fact essentially anonymous, universal, capable of animating any kind of living body whatsoever."⁵³ Like his description of "Moving" above, eating "is the proof of not only the spatial, but also the metaphysical instability of living things." Like moving, nourishment shows that "nobody [perpetually] possesses anything, even our bodies and our identities," nobody "is ever fully at home, even in their own body," and "nobody on earth *has* a permanent home," but rather "never ceases to change house and occupy the life and the bodies of others."⁵⁴ It is the "most common, most repeated form of metamorphosis" out of all of the forms described in *Metamorphoses*, and sits at the center of the text as a testament to its significance.⁵⁵ It should come as no surprise, then, that it is from the kitchen that Coccia believes we must understand the essence of the home.

Numerous social scientists have recently studied the kitchen's importance in the emotional and spiritual aspects of the home.⁵⁶ While many functionalist oriented authors have characterized the kitchen as a "laboratory" (or place of work, *labor*) or "a machine for the preparation of meals," others like Munro highlight the way that the kitchen exists "frontstage" in the emotional topography of domestic life, and see the "kitchen as a metaphor of complex, multi-cultural reality."^{57,58,59,60} At the same time, Hand and Freeman note the emergence of "the *idea* that the kitchen constitutes the symbolic heart of the home," while others note the importance of the kitchen in "the performance ... of everyday life."^{61,62} The kitchen, understood at the very minimum as a place to prepare for and carry out the consumption of food, is perhaps one of the defining features of any place that we call a "home." It allows us, alongside a place to sleep or rest, the most essential functions necessary to the continuation of life in what is supposed to be a safe and sheltered place.

Coccia begins the chapter by reflecting on his own culinary incompetence during the majority of his life. This was not "a partial ignorance, but a radical disconnection from the entirety of those processes which allow certain parts of the world to become edible." He attributes this to the fact that the education "that we have received contains enormous lacunae with respect to everything having to do with the care of the self, not just

⁵¹ Coccia, *Life of Plants*, 7.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵³ Coccia, *Metamorphoses*, 115–6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 121–2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵⁶ Meah, "Materializing Memory," 15.

⁵⁷ Lloyd and Johnson, "Dream Stuff."

⁵⁸ Van Caudenberg and Heynen, "Rational Kitchen."

⁵⁹ Llewellyn, "Urban Village," 23.

⁶⁰ Munro, "Disposal of Place," 218.

⁶¹ Hand and Southerton, "Home Extensions," 675, emphasis in original.

⁶² Freeman, *Modern Kitchen*.

nourishment.” We live, as he writes, in the “great age of industrial gastronomy” in which “for a thousand reasons, food arrives on the table already made, precooked, in boxes or in colored sachets that require the least amount of preparation possible.” Throughout the course of the twentieth century, due to the Green revolution in agriculture, the emergence of the restaurant as a place of provisioning, and the rise of supply side economic production and global consumerism in the production of home foods, we are among the first generations in human history for whom knowledge of agricultural practices, home economics, and cooking processes are not necessary for survival. Coccia says that this gap in our knowledge is not just “moral or cognitive,” but rather signifies “not being in the world,” and standing “short of a real relation which would tie us to everything that makes up the world.”⁶³ Without an understanding of food, without a relationship to the kitchen, we simply cannot achieve the kind of relationship to the cosmos described so far in this article or conceive of the possibility of *l’usage* which would allow for a happy relationship with it. Coccia argues for the significance of cooking, and the importance of the kitchen for living into the conception of happiness presented so far, for two reasons.

First, cooking is, as he puts it, “the transcendental form of all relations within reality,” insofar as cooking “demonstrates that there is no pure relation with the world, and that we cannot enter a relation of intimacy with the world without transforming it.” All of the abstract language of reciprocal projection, being as worlding, and so on, is made concrete in his claim that “we are the cooks of the world,” that “we never stop cooking it, transforming it while at the same time transforming ourselves with our own cooking.” When we cook, we take some part of the world and, using tools designed to facilitate our relationship with the planet itself, transform that part of the world into something radically new, something better fit to our purposes, something *better*. “Everything,” he writes, “is constantly taken up in a process of reciprocal manipulation,” another name for the “reciprocal projection” mentioned throughout this article.⁶⁴ Not even *looking* at the world is pure contemplation, he argues, but a process of cooking in which our senses transform the raw material of the world, in a Kantian sense, into something better (for us), clearer, more comprehensible, more digestible.

At the same time, the process of cooking also puts constraints on us, insofar as we cannot make *just anything* into food, can’t do *just anything* with the ingredients that *are* available. Further, the food produced by our cooking, the product of our co-production with the cosmos, transforms *us* when we eat it, fills us up, pleases us, heals us, and makes *us* better. The process of cooking transforms us, since “we are never the same person after a meal,” but something whose very atoms are made up of new stuff. Cooking shows that to make a home, to be at home means always to traverse and be traversed by other bodies, other life, other things, to change them and be changed by them in a constant process of reciprocal projection or manipulation. He refers back to one of the first ideas of *The Life of Plants*, writing that “we often forget that the energy that animates animals and plants is simply solar energy that plants capture with their bodies and infuse into the mineral flesh of the Earth, make usable to all living things.” That is, all energy in the troposphere is sunlight cooked up by plants.⁶⁵

For this reason, the kitchen is the place in the home where all the things which make dwelling on earth possible are centered. In the kitchen, diverse forms of life are brought together, beings from all across the planet, and transformed into something necessary for the continuation of life, metamorphosed into forms that in turn feed those with whom we share intimate relations. At the dinner table, intimacy can be formed, stories told that create relations of familiarity, bread can be shared with others, making something shared out of our very flesh. If the work that is required to make possible a shared existence, an “ephemeral and arbitrary harmony of people and things,” is dependent on the process of making common experience with those we are intimate with, then the kitchen is perhaps the most essential function a house can perform. This goes for our close relations as well as global ones.

⁶³ Coccia, *Maison*, 171–2.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 175–6.

If we see the city from the home, rather than the other way around, and philosophize from the *kitchen* to understand the home itself, then we see that “cities [are already] are much more vast than we ever imagined.” Human cities are not possible “without wheat, corn or rice, without apples, pigs, cows and sheep,” to the extent that “it is non-humans which make cities habitable.”⁶⁶ In this claim, we see the global and political significance of the claims made about happiness throughout Coccia’s work. While this article has focused primarily on the home as the place of our – for lack of a better term – “individual” existences, it is in order to extend the ideas cultivated there to the planet as a whole, to formulate a politics that conforms to the logic of the home. When we begin to think the home from the position of the kitchen, we are then able to extend the culinary and *oiko*-logical principles of morality into a more general relationship with the world, to transform it into a politics. Such a politics would be fundamentally ecological, taking into consideration the lives of not only other humans, but other plants, animals, bacteria, and all other forms of life on earth. It would begin from the premise that all dwelling is dwelling-with and requires an ethical comportment which begins with the recognition that we are always already enmeshed with others in our every action. This is fundamentally different from the relations posited by the Greek *oikonomikos* insofar as while their project imposed a vision of the home derived from the exigencies of the political and the urban, Coccia’s philosophy takes the principles of the domestic and extends them into the direction of the political. Such an inversion of the directionality of thought, he argues, allows us to more effectively conceive the possibility of a politics of happiness.

Such a sense of dwelling, an *oiko*-logical view of the world, shows the implication of every living being on earth and can serve as the point of view through which to approach global problems. By philosophizing from domesticity, rather than from the city, by inverting the approach of traditional western metaphysics, disengaging the political from the juridical by conceiving it through the domestic, and “spending more time in the kitchen,” as Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz suggested, we might better find the tools to conduct “research into personal and shared happiness” and invent “that harmony, at once ephemeral and variable which permits life to be expressed in terms of pleasure and conviviality.”^{67,68} Not only for ourselves and those within our family, but those with whom we share the planet.

8 Conclusions

It should be clear from the analysis above that Agamben’s critical project serves as an unspoken foundation for Coccia’s work. Admittedly, besides the introduction that Agamben wrote for Coccia’s first book, and the massive book on *Angeli* that the two edited in 2009, there are just a handful of times that Agamben is mentioned in Coccia’s work, but they are important. After the dissertation, the only time Agamben’s work is cited directly is in the first chapter of *The Life of Plants*, when Coccia draws on *The Open* in referring to the effect that the “anthropological machine” has had on our conception of the life of plants. Then, Agamben’s name reappears twice in places of extreme honor in the acknowledgements of *Goods* and *Métamorphoses*. In each case, Agamben’s name is set aside from the long list of those Coccia wishes to thank: “For a number of different reasons ... Agamben [and three others] are at the origin” of *Goods*, and he writes in *Metamorphoses* that the book “affirms the unity of all living beings present, future, and past, and the unity of the living being with the matter of the world: this is what has often been called pantheism,” then adds that “discussions over time with Giorgio Agamben have left a deep impression upon me.” I would like to suggest that although there is no critical engagement with Agamben beyond this review, he is like a magnetic field, creating the shape of Coccia’s thought in profound ways.

The critical project set up by the *Homo Sacer* series is one that investigates all the ways that the Western tradition has subjected life to power, and I would like to suggest that we should read Coccia’s thought as a

⁶⁶ Ibid., 180.

⁶⁷ de la Cruz, “Response to Sor Filotea,” 274.

⁶⁸ Coccia, *Maison*, 181

speculative response to it, one that is deeply informed by the insights of the Agambian critical project. What do we do and how do we think in the wake of Agamben's conception of the biopolitical regime of modernity? The foundational gesture of the tradition analyzed by Agamben is the division of *zoe* and *bios* that the Greeks conceptualized along the gendered lines of their social organization in the classical era. As we have seen, it is precisely this division that is decisive for Coccia's approach to happiness in *Philosophy of the Home*. For Agamben, it is play and inoperativity (or an effective state of exception) that renders happiness possible, and we just saw that Coccia finds in the conception of *usage* a capacity to make law "a plaything" and create an effective state of exception. Elsewhere for Agamben, it is the openness to being (or *Brauch*) which allows for happiness. Finally, as Agamben writes, "'happy life' should be rather, an absolutely profane 'sufficient life' that has reached the perfection of its own power and its own communicability – a life over which sovereignty and right no longer have any hold."⁶⁹ I would like to suggest that it is the attempt to articulate this "efficient state of exception," the *usage* that is said in many ways throughout Coccia's work, the attempt to rethink life in a way that disentangles it from law by beginning with the home and opposing the Greek division of life which gives precedence to the *polis* (and its juridical structures) which constitutes the essence of his work up to this point.

That is, although happiness and the home are themes that only emerge in *Philosophy of the Home*, they are the undercurrent that have shaped the rest of his thought. Coccia has said that his thought is not political because an insistence on politics "ultimately reduces the power and the sense of philosophy," but we should read avoidance of the language of politics as an attempt to short circuit the concepts of the juridical by rethinking life on other terms. That is, his work is political, but in a sense that is entirely foreign to the discourses of politics that run through the history of Western thought from Aristotle to Agamben. It is a political philosophy that asks us to begin from the sites to which the Western tradition has typically relegated what it deems "bare life." It asks us to reconsider our categories of life by beginning in the least likely places: those domains which even in critical modernity have often been shied away from for fear of reducing life to "a purely physico-biological determination." By beginning with the kitchen, the home, clothing, the garden, love, and so on, and taking them seriously as philosophical concerns, Coccia's thought proposes a method for disentangling the "confused ensemble" of law and politics, and *reconceiving* politics through an "anomic" culinary and domestic thought. It is an anomic politics which considers not just our own happiness, but that of the other beings with which we share this planet. It presents us with a vision of the happy life which is "an absolutely profane 'sufficient life' that has reached the perfection of its own power and its own communicability – a life over which sovereignty and right no longer have any hold."

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⁶⁹ Agamben, *Means without Ends*, 114–5.

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