

articulated by Plato in the *Sophist*, between the absoluteness of the concept and the creative freedom of negation.

Nevertheless, can we be content with this starting-point today? A discussion of this issue would take us beyond the bounds of this essay. It would force us in any case to re-examine the axioms of classical metaphysics, to unearth the secret, which Hegel himself underestimates, of the link between finitude, infinity, and existence within a mathematical paradigm. Doubtless we would learn that, as Descartes once glimpsed, it is possible, in light of contemporary mathematics, and namely of the Cantorian treatment of the infinite, to begin purely and simply with the infinite.

Let us say that a contemporary metaphysics would deserve the name of metaphysics to the degree that it both rejected archi-metaphysical critique and upheld, in the Hegelian style, the absoluteness of the concept. On the contrary, it would not deserve this name if, elucidating from the beginning the infinity of being as mathematisable multiplicity, it would lack any reason whatsoever to postulate the undetermined.

Doubtless this would no longer properly speaking be a dialectical metaphysics, if it is indeed the case that it would no longer need to have recourse to the theme of a historical auto-determination of the undetermined. Rather, it would affirm, in a Platonic style (and therefore metaphysically) albeit in a style bereft of any hyperbolic transcendence of the Good (and therefore outside of metaphysics) that for everything which is exposed to the thinkable there is an idea, and that to link this idea to thought it suffices to decide upon the appropriate axioms.

This is why one could propose that such an enterprise should present itself under the paradoxical name of a metaphysics without metaphysics. Its task would be, in line with Mallarmé's request, with which I conclude, to address a "demand to the world that it adjust its dread to rich and numbered postulates" [*"une sommation au monde qu'il égale sa hantise à de riches postulats chiffrés"*].

Translated by Alberto Toscano

## Of Life as a Name of Being, or, Deleuze's Vitalist Ontology\*

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Deleuze's thought is always placed transversally with regard to its own distinctions. Like every great philosopher, Deleuze constructs the apparatus of categorial opposition simply in order to determine the point that abstracts itself from it, the line of flight that absorbs within itself the apparent extremities of this apparatus. This is the profound meaning of the methodological maxim that Deleuze ceaselessly reaffirms: take things by the middle; do not first try to find one extremity and then move towards the other. No. The middle must be grasped so that the sense of the trajectory of thought is not fixed by a principle of order or of succession; but so that it is instead fixed by the moving metamorphosis that actualises one of the extremities into its most detached counterpart. This procedure could bear the name of the anti-Cartesian method. There is a non-Cartesian philosophy in Deleuze just as there is a non-Aristotelian theater in Brecht.

Where Descartes negatively and reflexively fixes the first certainty within a chain of reasons, Deleuze affirmatively and impersonally grasps a line of flight by the middle.

Where Descartes leaps to the external guarantee of his references by means of the big Other, Deleuze intuitively, at infinite speed, the continuity of metamorphosis, the micro-economic exchange of the small same and its other, or the macro-economic exchange of the small other and the big Same.

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It is, indeed, algebra *contra* the differential.

The key injunction of Deleuzian ontology is this: being cannot be bound to any category, to any fixed disposition of its immanent distribution. Being is univocal insofar as beings are never classed or distributed according to equivocal analogies.

Let us take the following question for example: "What is a sexuated or sexual being?" It is strictly impossible to construct the intuition of such a being if one begins by identifying man, or the masculine; it is no more possible to do so by starting - even if this is conceived of as an exception or a rupture - from the feminine, from the supposed interiority of a femininity. One must instead attain the inflexion point where, in a topology of bifurcation, man's becoming-woman and woman's masculine territoriality intersect. Man can thus only be thought as the actualisation of his feminine virtuality. Or rather: man can only be thought at the point in which he can no longer be assigned to masculinity, because his feminine virtuality is itself a line of flight from masculine territoriality. We therefore think sexual being only when we place ourselves in the indiscernibility between a movement of feminisation and a suspension of masculinisation, the two exchanging their energies in the indiscernible.

In other words, sexual being, thought in terms of its being, in terms of the modal activation of its being, is not sexuated, it is not even sexual, if one understands by "sexual" a repertoire of properties. Whatever this repertoire may be, even if one complicates it to infinity, sexual being can only be intuited in this unassignable and indiscernible in-between in which all properties are metamorphosed into each other.

That being is bereft of properties is an old thesis. However, Deleuze renews this thesis by arguing that being is the active neutralisation of properties by the inseparable virtualisation of their actual division.

That being can be defined as the im-proper is also an old thesis; this is precisely what Plato intends to say when he affirms that the Good, which is the name of being, is not an idea. For any idea is the being-actual of a property, and the Good does not designate any property whatsoever, as it is that on the basis of which any property, or any idea, comes to obtain the power of division that it itself establishes.

But Deleuze also transforms the theme of the im-propriety of being. In fact, Deleuze thinks that in Plato the trans-ideal im-propriety of the Good is still a property, the transcendent property of the improper *par excellence*. How is one to think being as improper without thereby attributing to it some kind of transcendent hyper-property? How is one to avoid ultimately making the improper into the very property of being? The path undertaken by Deleuze is the one he calls of immanence, or of

univocity. One day Deleuze wrote to me, in capital letters: "immanence = univocity". But what precisely does this mean? It means that the impropriety of being is nothing other than the defection of its properties by means of their virtualisation. Inversely, the properties of beings are nothing other than the terminal simulacrum of their actualisation. Being is thus the de-propriation of the proper of property, but also the appropriation of its own im-propriety. That is, it is the movement of two movements, or rather: the neutral movement of the Whole, such that within it the division of beings occurs on the basis of the indivisible or indiscernible character of the movement that separates them.

This is the fundamental reason why being deserves the name of life. We have now come to the real question. Why should being, conceived of as univocity or immanence, receive the name of "life"? Why should being as power be the "powerful inorganic life that grips the world"? In philosophy, assigning the name of being is a crucial decision. It expresses the very nature of thought. Even the name "being", if chosen as the name of being, harbours a decision that is by no mean tautological, as can be readily seen in Heidegger. And of course any name of being conditions the further nominations that it induces. Thus in Heidegger we witness the turning movement that envelops and displaces *Sein*, *Dasein*, and, at the end of the line, *Ereignis*. Or, in my own case, the disjunctive series that goes from the multiple to the void, from the void to the infinite, and, at the end of the line, from the infinite to the event.

What is it in Deleuze that fixes the thought of being to its Nietzschean name, life? This: that being must be evaluated as power, but as an impersonal, or neutral, power.

Being is power because it is strictly coextensive to the actualisation of the virtual and the virtualisation of the actual; or, in other terms, to the im-propriation of the proper and the propriation of the improper. Or coextensive to the unbinding disjunction of multiple beings, and to Relation, which defines the Whole. And because in this "and", in this conjunction, one must think the moving gap as a movement of being itself, which is neither virtualisation nor actualisation, but rather the indiscernible middle between them, the movement of two movements, the mobile eternity that links two divergent times.

This is also the reason why being is neutral. Because it is a power to metamorphose that which presents itself as categorial division into an eternal return of the same, a power of affirmatively subtracting itself from the disjunctions that it ceaselessly effectuates. Being is modalisation through the middle of that which appears to be distributed. Therefore, it

also does not allow itself to be thought in terms of any distribution whatsoever.

This is the profoundly Deleuzian sense of the Nietzschean statement: beyond good and evil. Good and evil are here the moral or genealogical projection of any categorial division whatsoever. One could say, with Deleuze: beyond the one and the multiple, beyond identity and difference, beyond time and eternity. But "beyond" obviously does not signify either a synthesis or a third, transcendent, term. "Beyond" means: in the middle; there where in the rhizomatic network virtualisation and actualisation are exchanged into each other being is that which activates the essential falsity of the true and virtualises the truth of the false; being is that which lets the goodness, the infernal goodness of evil, emerge, and also that which lets the terrible malevolence of the good unfold.

Nevertheless, it is still both insufficient and inexact to say that being's neutrality consists in identifying itself neither with good nor with evil; neither with the false nor with the true. This "neither nor" misses the "and and" of metamorphosis. Because being is the becoming-false of the true, the becoming-true of the false, and in its neutrality is free to be both good and evil.

But the "and and" is itself still insufficient, still too categorial.

As we all know, Deleuze hated logic; the linguistic and logical turn that philosophy underwent at the beginning of the century was for him a great misfortune. Deleuze regarded the mortification of the powerful Anglo-American world of Melville and Whitehead by the ruminations of analytical philosophy as a troubling spectacle.

Logic, ever since Aristotle, has been nothing other than the encoding of the categories, the triumph of property over impropriety. One would need to extract from Deleuzian univocity another logic altogether; a logic in which, with regard to categorial distribution, we cannot rest content with the usual connections. The "and and", the "either or", the "neither nor": these all exhaust and dilapidate the powerful neutrality of being. One would need to think a moving superimposition of the *and*, the *or*, and the *nor* such that one could say: being is neutral, for any conjunction is a disjunction, and every negation an affirmation.

This neutral connective, this "and-or-nor", is given the name of disjunctive synthesis by Deleuze. One must then say: being, as neutral power, deserves the name of "life" because it is, as relation, the "and-or-nor", the disjunctive synthesis. Or equally, and to the same extent, the conjunctive analysis, the "or-and-nor". Life is in fact both specifying and individuating, it separates and unbinds; but to the same extent it incorporates, virtualises, and conjoins. Life is the name of neutral-being

in terms of the "and-or-nor". It is the neutral creativity that maintains itself between disjunctive synthesis and conjunctive analysis.

This is why Deleuze is the one who thinks through one of Nietzsche's fundamental ideas with the greatest profundity. Nietzsche emphasizes that life produces gaps of value, being both evaluating power and active divergence. But in itself life is neutral and literally in-valuable. Life, as Nietzsche says, cannot be evaluated, which also means: there is no life of life, because it is only from the standpoint of a life that a being can be evaluated. This is univocity: there is no being of being. And if "life" can serve as a name of being, it is because there could never be a life of life. There is nothing but the movement of life, itself thinkable as the in-between of the movements of actualisation and virtualisation. This is why being's power, which is being itself, is neutral, impersonal, unassignable, indiscernible. It is to this collection of non-properties that the name of "life" belongs.

It has not been long since the publication of my book on Deleuze, but I am already being reproached, as though I was affirming a careless and unsustainable paradox, of having said that Deleuze's philosophy implies an ascetic conception of thought, that it is opposed to spontaneity, that it demands a radical break with the demands of the self.

Let us ask then: what kind of thought can correspond, in the manner that it constructs its intuitions, to the neutrality of being? How can one reach the point of exchange and separation of movements, the impersonal, unassignable, indiscernible point? How can one dissolve the bounded pretensions of our actual-being in the great integral circuit of the virtual?

Deleuze is at least as consistent with his fundamental theses as Nietzsche. Nietzsche knows that everything must be affirmed, that the dionysiac Noon leaves no stretch of the Earth outside the sway of its thinking activation. For Nietzsche, once they are grasped through the core of power which reaffirms their coming, all the figures of force can be integrated into Dionysos, who dismembers and recomposes himself through them in that laughter of which the gods have died. Nietzsche knows that the name "life" names the integral equality of being. How could non-categorial neutrality be unequal? Nevertheless, Nietzsche draws from this two conclusions that might at first sight appear paradoxical: the aristocracy of thought, the primacy of the strong. We must ask however: who or what is the strong? Strong is he who wholly affirms the equality of being, weak he who maintains himself unequally within this equality, he who abstracts and mutilates the joyous neutrality of life. But thought in this fashion, force is by no means self-evident,

unproblematic. It demands effort and concentration, the removal of all the categories in terms of which we construct the opaque shelter of our actuality, our individuality, our self. "Sobriety, sobriety!" - as written in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Sobriety, because spontaneous opulence, the derisory confidence in what one is, categorizes us in a paltry and limited region of being. Yes, asceticism, stoicism, because to think one must find the means of overcoming limits, in order to go the very extremes of what one is capable of. Asceticism, because we are constituted and judged by life "according to a hierarchy that considers things and beings from the point of view of power". To be worthy of inorganic life is not to concern oneself unduly with the satisfaction of one's organs. The nomad is he who knows not to drink when he is thirsty, who perseveres under the heat of the sun when he would instead wish to sleep, who sleeps alone under the desert sun when he dreams of rugs and comfort. Nomad thought is attuned to the neutrality of being and to metamorphosis by the stubborn exercise whereby one leaves oneself, what one is, behind.

Nietzsche's "become what you are" must be understood as follows: you are only that which you become. But to come there where the impersonal force of the outside activates this becoming one must treat oneself as a disjunctive synthesis, as a conjunctive analysis, one must separate and dissolve oneself. Those who do this are the strong.

This clarifies the idea that great health is achieved in sickness, which makes of health an affirmation and a metamorphosis, not a state or a satisfaction. It also clarifies how the hero of the flexible word, through whom indiscernible life speaks, could be Beckett's hero, exhausted, truncated, head planted in a jar and streaming with tears. And some would still deny that thought, that the thought of life, is an asceticism?

There is in truth a terrible pain in Deleuze which functions as the anti-dialectical condition of joy. It is the self's preparation so that being may express through one's hands and mouth its unique clamour.

Life is the name of being only for him who does not take life as a gift or a treasure, or as mere survival, but rather as a thought that takes place there where all categories fail. All life is bare. All life is denudation, divestment, the dissolution of all organs and codes. Not in order to move towards some sort of nihilistic black hole, but rather to maintain oneself at that point where actualisation and virtualisation are exchanged into one another; to be a creator, what Deleuze calls a "purified automaton", a surface more and more porous to the impersonal modalisation of being.

Where then lies the problem with Deleuze's ontology? I would say that, as in Nietzsche, it is to be found in the theory of the sign, the theory of that which acts as a sign or signals. That which acts as a sign for the

impersonal in the personal, for the virtual in the actual, for the eternal return within chance, for memory in matter; synthetically: that which acts as a sign for the Open in the Closed.

Would I be faithful to Deleuze if I did not voice here my reticence, my resistance? For I am convinced that nothing acts as a sign, and that in retaining this stigmata, even in the extremity of its diminishment, of its exiguous differentiability, Deleuze still concedes too much to some sort of hermeneutics of the visible.

As is well known Nietzsche's theory of the sign is circular. Thus Zarathustra is identified as his own precursor, the rooster that announces his own arrival. That which acts as a sign of the overman is the overman himself, where the overman is understood as nothing other than the sign in man of the overman's own coming; the event cannot be distinguished from its own announcement. Zarathustra is the sign of Zarathustra. Nietzsche's madness consists in coming to this point of indiscernibility, where, according to his own proclamation, one must rend oneself apart in order "to break the history of the world in two". The madness lies then in the fact that the only sign of that "great politics" which is to sunder the world is that meager singularity which, under the name of Friedrich Nietzsche, wandering alone and unknown in the streets of Turin, declares its imminence.

But Deleuze, like Nietzsche, must simultaneously inscribe into closed and disjoined actual beings their belonging to the great virtual totality. However, he must also annul this inscription so that the neutrality of being does not find itself distributed into categories. The closed must carry the sign of the open, must itself act as this sign. Otherwise, how are we to elucidate the very possibility of thought? How are we to understand that we sometimes find ourselves compelled to 'disclose' our actuality? The sign of the open, or of totality, is that no closure is complete. As Deleuze says, "the set is always kept open somewhere, as if by a taut thread that attaches it to the rest of the universe". This thread, as taut as it may be, is a thread of Arianna. It is a concentrated expression of Deleuze's ontological optimism. As closed and disjoined as actual beings may be, the presence of a tiny stigmata in them guides thought towards the total life which distributes them. Without this we would be unable to think, given that nothing can ever begin absolutely, the closed according to the open, or according to its virtuality.

But it is also necessary for Deleuze's ontology that there be no sign, that nothing in itself act as a sign. For otherwise being would no longer be univocal. There would be a sense of being according to being, or being *qua* being, and a sense of being according to the sign of being. Which is

why Deleuze, when speaking of objects, must simultaneously affirm that they have an actual and a virtual part; but that these parts are indiscernible. Thus the virtual part of the object, which is precisely its opening, that which in it signals towards totality, is not really a sign, because its function as a sign cannot be distinguished from that with regards to which it acts as a sign. In reality, the point of opening of closed sets is even less than a taut thread. It is a component both wholly taken within closure and nevertheless completely open, and thought cannot separate these two aspects, and consequently cannot isolate the sign.

Just like Nietzsche, Deleuze, in order to hold to the postulate of univocity, which is the condition for deciding on life as a name of being, must pose that all things are, in an obscure sense, signs of themselves; not of themselves as themselves, but of themselves as provisional simulacra, or precarious modalities, of the power of the Whole.

But if something is a sign of itself and its dimension as sign is indiscernible from its being then the following two statements are equivalent: everything is life, everything is sign.

Life will be the name of being if being is thought in terms of the univocal power of sense. The name of being will be relation if being is thought in terms of the universal and equivocal distribution of signs.

I believe that this move reintroduces equivocity at the very heart of being. Perhaps categorial distribution, having been chased from the great macroscopic classifications, makes its return at the microscopic level, when the indiscernibility of the components of beings turns them equivocally towards the disjunctive synthesis of life and the conjunctive analysis of relation.

One could also put it as follows: Deleuze constructs an immense, virtuosistic, and ramified phenomenological apparatus in order to write the ontological equation: being = event. But at the most exiguous point of this apparatus of capture, one indeed finds that what in being is *its* being is never an event, so that being remains equivocal.

This is why, having learnt from this genius, I have found it imperative to claim that the pure multiple, the generic form of being, can never welcome the event within itself as its virtual component; but, on the contrary, that the event itself takes place by a rare and incalculable supplementation.

Therefore I have had to sacrifice the Whole, sacrifice Life, sacrifice the great cosmic animal whose surface Deleuze has enchanted with his work. The general topology of thought is no longer, as he once declared, "carnal or vital". Rather, it is caught in the crossed nets of severe

mathematics, as Lautréamont called them, and of the stellar poem, as Mallarmé would have put it.

Ultimately, of the two great dice-throwers of the end of the XIXth century, Nietzsche and Mallarmé, we have each chosen our own. It remains that we share the great philosophical passion for the game. Yes, as he once wrote: to think is to throw dice.

Translated by Alberto Toscano