

CHAPTER 9

Absolute Immanence

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LIFE

By virtue of a striking coincidence, the last texts published by Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze before their deaths have at their centre the concept of life. The meaning of this testamentary coincidence (for what is at issue in both cases is something like a will) goes beyond the secret solidarity between two friends. It implies the statement of a legacy that clearly concerns the coming philosophy, which, to make this inheritance its own, will have to take its point of departure in the concept of life towards which the last works of both philosophers gesture. (Such, at least, is the hypothesis guiding this inquiry.)

Foucault's text is entitled 'Life: Experience and Science', and was published in the January – March 1985 issue of *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* (it was submitted to the journal in April 1984 and therefore constitutes the last text to which the author could have given his *imprimatur*, even if it takes up and modifies a text of 1978).¹ What characterizes these pages, which Foucault conceived as a great homage to his teacher, Georges Canguilhem, is a curious inversion of what had been Foucault's earlier understanding of the idea of life. It is as if Foucault, who, with *The Birth of the Clinic*, had begun under the inspiration of Xavier Bichat's new vitalism and definition of life as 'the set of functions that resist death', ended by considering life instead as the proper domain of error. 'At the limit,' Foucault writes, 'life . . . is what is capable of error . . . With man, life reaches a living being who is never altogether in his place, a living being who is fated "to err" and "to be mistaken."² This displacement can be seen as further documentation of the crisis that Foucault, according to Deleuze, experienced after the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. But what is at issue here is surely something more than disappointment or pessimism; it is something like a new experience that necessitates a general reformulation of the relations between truth and

the subject and that, nevertheless, concerns the specific area of Foucault's research. Tearing the subject from the terrain of the *cogito* and consciousness, this experience roots it in life. But insofar as this life is essentially errancy, it exceeds the lived experiences and intentionality of phenomenology: 'Does not the entire theory of the subject have to be reformulated once knowledge, instead of opening onto the truth of the world, is rooted in the "errors" of life?'³

What is the nature of a knowledge that has as its correlate no longer the opening to a world and to truth, but only life and its errancy? Alain Badiou, who is certainly one of the most interesting philosophers of the generation immediately following Foucault and Deleuze, still conceives of the subject on the basis of a contingent encounter with truth, leaving aside the living being as 'the animal of the human species', as a mere support for this encounter. It is clear that what is at issue in Foucault is not simply an epistemological adjustment but, rather, another dislocation of the theory of knowledge, one that opens onto entirely unexplored terrain. And it is precisely this terrain, which coincides with the field of biopolitics, that could have furnished Foucault with the 'third axis, distinct from both knowledge and power', which Deleuze suggests he needed, and which the essay on Canguilhem defines *in limine* as 'a different way of approaching the notion of life'.

PHILOSOPHY OF PUNCTUATION

Deleuze's text, which will be our sole subject of study for the rest of this chapter, bears the title 'Immanence: A Life . . . ' ('Immanence: Une vie . . . ') and appeared in the journal *Philosophie* two months before the philosopher's death. Unlike Foucault's essay, it is a brief piece that has the cursory *ductus* of a summary note. Even its title, despite its vague and almost suspended appearance, must have been carefully considered. The two key concepts are neither united in a syntagma nor tied by the particle 'and' (which is so characteristic of Deleuze's titles); instead, each term is followed by a punctuation mark (first a colon, then ellipsis dots). The choice of this absolutely non-syntactical articulation (which is neither hypotactic nor paratactic but, so to speak, atactic) of the two terms is surely not accidental.

Elements for a philosophy of punctuation are, with the exception of the brief indications in Adorno's essay, almost entirely lacking.⁴ It has been observed that in philosophical texts, not only nouns but also adverbs can acquire the dignity of genuine terms (Puder and Löwith have noted the special function of the adverbs *gleichwohl* and *schon* in, respectively, Kant and

Heidegger). It is less well known that even punctuation marks (for example, the hyphen in expressions such as Being-in-the-world) can take on a technical function (the hyphen is, in this sense, the most dialectical of punctuation marks, since it unites only to the degree that it distinguishes and distinguishes only to the degree that it unites). Deleuze himself has suggested that punctuation has a strategic importance in his works. In *Dialogues*, after developing his theory of the special meaning of the conjunction 'and', he adds, 'It is too bad, for that matter, that many writers do away with punctuation, which in French also holds for AND.'⁵ If one keeps in mind the simultaneously destructive and creative character that this theory attributes to the particle at issue ('and' [*et*] takes the place of 'is' [*est*] and disarticulates ontology, yet 'and' also 'makes language spin', introducing *agencement* and stuttering), this implies that in the title 'Immanence: A Life . . .', the use of the colon between 'Immanence' and 'A Life' as well as of the final ellipsis dots carries out a decisive intention.

THE COLON: IMMANATION

In treatises on punctuation, the function of the colon is generally defined in terms of an intersection of two parameters: a pause value (stronger than the semicolon and less than the period) and a semantic value, which marks the indissoluble relation between two meanings, each of which is in itself partially complete. In the series that goes from the equals sign (identity of meaning) to the hyphen (the dialectic of unity and separation), the colon thus occupies an intermediary function. Deleuze could have written 'Immanence Is a Life', or 'Immanence and a Life' (in the sense in which 'and' takes the place of 'is' to create an *agencement*) and, furthermore (according to the principle underlined by J. H. Masméjan⁶ that only a comma can take the place of a colon): 'Immanence, A Life'. Deleuze instead used a colon, clearly because he had in mind neither a simple identity nor a simple logical connection. (When Deleuze writes in the text, 'one can say of pure immanence that it is A LIFE, and nothing else', it suffices to recall the title's colon to exclude the possibility that he intends an identity between 'immanence' and 'a life'.) The colon introduces something more than an *agencement* between immanence and a life; it introduces an *agencement* of a special kind, something like an absolute *agencement* that also includes 'non-relation', or the relation derived from non-relation of which Deleuze speaks in his discussion of the relationship to the Outside in his book on Foucault. If we take up Adorno's metaphor of the colon as a green light in the traffic of language – the aptness of which is verified by punctuation treatises, which classify the

colon among 'opening' marks – we can then say that between immanence and a life there is a kind of crossing with neither distance nor identification, something like a passage without spatial movement. In this sense, the colon represents the dislocation of immanence in itself, the opening to an alterity that nevertheless remains absolutely immanent: that is, the movement that Deleuze, playing on Neoplatonic emanation, calls *immanation*.

ELLIPSIS DOTS: VIRTUALITY

Analogous remarks could be made for the ellipsis dots that close (and that at the same time leave open) the title. One could even say that the value of the ellipsis dots as a technical term is nowhere as apparent as in the very title 'Immanence: A Life . . .'. Elsewhere, Deleuze observes how Céline's use of ellipsis dots deposes the power of syntactical ties: '*Guignol's Band* achieves the ultimate aim: exclamatory sentences and suspensions that do away with all syntax in favour of a pure dance of words.'⁷ The fact that an asyntactical and, more generally, asemantic element is present in punctuation is implicit in the constant relation between punctuation and breathing that appears from the very first treatises on punctuation and that takes the form of a necessary interruption of meaning ('the middle dot', one reads in Dionysius Thrax's *Grammar*, 'indicates where one is to breathe'). But here the ellipsis dots function not so much to suspend meaning and make words dance outside all syntactic hierarchy as to transform the very status of the word 'life', from which the ellipsis dots become inseparable. If terminology, as Deleuze once said, is the poetry of philosophy, here the rank of *terminus technicus* falls neither to the concept *life* nor to the syntagma *a life*, but solely to the nonsyntagma *a life*. . . . Here the incompleteness that is traditionally thought to characterize ellipsis dots does not refer to a final, yet lacking, meaning (Claudel: 'a period is everything; an ellipsis is not everything'); rather, it indicates an indefinition of a specific kind, which brings the indefinite meaning of the particle 'a' to its limit. 'The indefinite as such,' Deleuze writes, 'does not mark an empirical indetermination, but a determination of immanence or a transcendental determinability. The indefinite article cannot be the indetermination of the person without being the determination of the singular.'⁸

The technical term *a life* . . . expresses this transcendental determinability of immanence as singular life, its absolutely virtual nature and its definition through this virtuality alone. 'A life', Deleuze writes, 'contains only virtual entities. It is composed of virtualities, events, singularities. What one calls virtual is not something lacking in reality.'⁹ Suspending all syntactic ties, the

ellipsis dots nevertheless maintain the term 'life' in relation to its pure determinability and, while carrying it into this virtual field, exclude the possibility that the indefinite article 'a' might (as in Neoplatonism) transcend the Being that follows it.

BEYOND THE COGITO

Considered as a simultaneously asyntagmatic and indivisible block, the title 'Immanence: A Life . . .' is therefore something like a diagram condensing the thought of the late Deleuze. At first glance, it already articulates the fundamental character of Deleuzian immanence, that is, its 'not referring to an object' and its 'not belonging to a subject' – in other words, its being immanent only to itself and, nevertheless, in movement. It is in this sense that Deleuze evokes immanence at the beginning of the text, under the name of 'transcendental field'. Here 'transcendental' is opposed to 'transcendent', since it does not imply a consciousness but is solely defined as what 'escapes all transcendence, both of the subject and of the object'.¹⁰ The genesis of the notion of transcendental field can be found in Deleuze's *Logic of Sense*, with reference to Sartre's 1937 essay *La Transcendence de l'ego*. In this text (which Deleuze judges to be 'decisive'), Sartre posits, according to Deleuze, 'an impersonal transcendental field, not having the form of a synthetic personal consciousness of a subjective identity'.¹¹ Here Deleuze makes use of this concept – which Sartre does not succeed in fully liberating from the plane of consciousness – to reach a pre-individual and absolutely impersonal zone beyond (or before) every idea of consciousness. It is impossible to understand Deleuze's concept of transcendental field or its strict correlate, the concept of singularity, if one does not register the irrevocable step they take beyond the tradition of consciousness in modern philosophy. Not only is it impossible, according to Deleuze, to understand the transcendental, as Kant does, 'in the personal form of an I'; it is also impossible (here Deleuze's polemical target is Husserlian phenomenology) 'to preserve for it the form of consciousness, even if we define this impersonal consciousness by means of pure intentionalities and retentions, which still presuppose centres of individuation. The error of all efforts to determine the transcendental as consciousness is that they think of the transcendental in the image of, and in resemblance to, that which it is supposed to ground.'¹² From Descartes to Husserl, the *cogito* made the transcendental possible as a field of consciousness. But if it thus appears in Kant as a pure consciousness without any experience, in Deleuze, by contrast, the transcendental is resolutely separated from every idea of

consciousness, appearing as an experience without either consciousness or subject: a transcendental empiricism, in Deleuze's truly paradoxical formula.

Thus liquidating the values of consciousness, Deleuze carries out the gesture of a philosopher who, despite Deleuze's lack of fondness for him, is certainly closer to Deleuze than is any other representative of phenomenology in the twentieth century: Heidegger, the '*pataphysical*' Heidegger of the wonderful article on Alfred Jarry, the Heidegger with whom Deleuze, through this incomparable Ubuesque caricature, can finally reconcile himself.¹³ For *Dasein*, with its Being-in-the-world, is certainly not to be understood as an indissoluble relation between a subject – a consciousness – and its world; and *alētheia*, whose centre is ruled by darkness and *lēthē*, is the opposite of an intentional object or a world of pure ideas. An abyss separates Heidegger's concepts from the Husserlian intentionality from which they derive, and it is this abyss that, in displacing these concepts along the line that goes from Nietzsche to Deleuze, makes them into the first figures of the new postconscious and postsubjective, impersonal and non-individual transcendental field that Deleuze's thought leaves as a legacy to 'his' century.

THE PRINCIPLE OF IMMANENCE

A genealogy of the idea of immanence in Deleuze must begin with the third and eleventh chapters of Deleuze's great monograph on Spinoza. Here the idea of immanence has its origin in Spinoza's affirmation of the univocity of Being in contrast to the Scholastic thesis of *analogia entis*, according to which Being is not said of God and finite creatures in the same way. 'For Spinoza, on the other hand,' Deleuze writes,

the concept of univocal Being is perfectly determinate, as what is predicated in one and the same sense of substance in itself, and of modes that are in something else. . . . Thus it is the idea of immanent cause that takes over, in Spinoza, from univocity, freeing it from the indifference and neutrality to which it had been confined by the theory of a divine creation. And it is in immanence that univocity finds its distinctly Spinozist formulation: God is said to be the cause of all things *in the very sense (eo sensu)* that he is said to be cause of himself.¹⁴

The principle of immanence, therefore, is nothing other than a generalization of the ontology of univocity, which excludes any transcendence of Being. Yet through Spinoza's idea of an immanent cause in which agent and patient coincide, Being is freed from the risk of inertia and immobility with which

the absolutization of univocity threatened it by making Being equal to itself in its every point. Spinoza's immanent cause produces by remaining in itself, just like the emanational cause of the Neoplatonists. But the effects of Spinoza's immanent cause do not leave it, unlike those of the emanational cause. With a striking etymological figure that displaces the origin of the term "immanence" from *manere* ('to remain') to *manare* ('to flow out'), Deleuze returns mobility and life to immanence: 'A cause is immanent . . . when its effect is 'immanate' in the cause, rather than emanating from it.'¹⁵

Immanence flows forth; it always, so to speak, carries a colon with it. Yet this springing forth, far from leaving itself, remains incessantly and vertiginously within itself. This is why Deleuze can state – with an expression that shows his full awareness of the decisive position that immanence would later assume in his thought – that 'immanence is the very vertigo of philosophy'.¹⁶

What is Philosophy? gives what one could call the theory of this vertigo. The extreme consequences of the concept of 'immanation' are drawn out in the idea that the plane of immanence, like the transcendental field of which it is the final figure, has no subject. It is immanent not to something, but only to itself: 'Immanence is immanent only to itself and consequently captures everything, absorbs All-One, and leaves nothing remaining to which it could be immanent. In any case, whenever immanence is interpreted as immanent *to* Something, we can be sure that this Something reintroduces the transcendent.'¹⁷ The risk here is that the plane of immanence, which in itself exhausts Being and thought, will instead be referred 'to something that would be like a dative'. The third 'example' of Chapter 2 presents the entire history of philosophy, from Plato to Husserl, as the history of this risk. Deleuze thus strategically makes use of the absolutization of the principle of immanence ('immanence is immanent only to itself') to trace a line of immanence within the history of philosophy (one that culminates in Spinoza, who is therefore defined as the 'prince of philosophers') and, in particular, to specify his own position with respect to the tradition of twentieth-century phenomenology. Starting with Husserl, immanence becomes immanent to a transcendental subjectivity, and the cipher of transcendence thus reappears at its centre:

This is what happens in Husserl and many of his successors who discover in the Other or in the Flesh, the mole of the transcendent within immanence itself . . . In this modern moment we are no longer satisfied with thinking immanence as immanent to a transcendent; *we want to think transcendence within the immanent, and it is from immanence that a breach is expected* . . . The Judeo-Christian word replaces the Greek logos: no longer

satisfied with ascribing immanence to something, immanence itself is made to disgorge the transcendent everywhere.¹⁸

(The allusion to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas – two philosophers whom Deleuze, in fact, considers with great interest – is clear.)

But immanence is not merely threatened by this illusion of transcendence, in which it is made to leave itself and to give birth to the transcendent. This illusion is, rather, something like a necessary illusion in Kant's sense, which immanence itself produces on its own and to which every philosopher falls prey even as he tries to adhere as closely as possible to the plane of immanence. The task that thought cannot renounce is also the most difficult one, the task in which the philosopher constantly risks going astray. Insofar as immanence is the 'movement of the infinite'¹⁹ beyond which there is nothing, immanence has neither a fixed point nor a horizon that can orient thought; the 'movement has engulfed everything', and the only possible point of orientation is the vertigo in which outside and inside, immanence and transcendence, are absolutely indistinguishable. That Deleuze encounters something like a limit point here is shown by the passage in which the plane of immanence appears as both what must be thought and as what cannot be thought: 'Perhaps this is the supreme act of philosophy: not so much to think THE plane of immanence as to show that it is there, unthought in every plane, and to think it in this way as the outside and inside of thought, as the not-external outside and the not-internal inside.'²⁰

A LIFE

In this light, the indication contained in Deleuze's 'testament' acquires particular urgency. The philosopher's supreme gesture is to consign immanence to the title 'Immanence: A Life . . .', that is, to consider immanence as 'a life . . .'. But what does it mean for absolute immanence to appear as life? And in what sense does Deleuze's title express his most extreme thought?

Deleuze begins by specifying what we could have imagined, namely, that to say that immanence is 'a life . . .' is in no way to attribute immanence to life as to a subject. On the contrary, 'a life . . .' designates precisely the being immanent to itself of immanence, the philosophical vertigo that is by now familiar to us: 'one can say of pure immanence that it is A LIFE, and nothing else. It is not immanence to life; rather, immanence that is in nothing is in itself a life. A life is the immanence of immanence, absolute immanence . . .'.²¹ At this point, Deleuze gives a succinct genealogical sketch by means of references to passages in Fichte and Maine de Biran.

Immediately afterwards, as if realizing the insufficiency of his references and fearing that his final thought might remain obscure, he has recourse to a literary example:

No one has related what a life is better than Dickens, by taking account of the indefinite article understood as the index of the transcendental. A good-for-nothing, universally scorned rogue is brought in dying, only for those caring for him to show a sort of ardent devotion and respect, an affection for the slightest sign of life in the dying man. Everyone is so anxious to save him that in the depths of his coma even the wretch himself feels something benign passing into him. But as he comes back to life his carers grow cold and all his coarseness and malevolence return. Between his life and death there is a moment which is now only that of a life playing with death. The life of the individual has given way to a life that is impersonal but singular nevertheless, and which releases a pure event freed from the accidents of inner and outer life; freed, in other words, from the subjectivity and objectivity of what happens: *Homo tantum* with which everyone sympathizes and which attains a soil of beatitude.²²

Deleuze's reference is to the episode in *Our Mutual Friend* in which Riderhood nearly drowns. It suffices to skim these pages to realize what could have so forcefully attracted Deleuze's attention. First of all, Dickens clearly distinguishes Riderhood the individual and the 'spark of life within him' from the scoundrel in which he lives: 'No one has the least regard for the man: with them all, he has been an object of avoidance, suspicion and aversion; but the spark of life within him is curiously separable from himself now, and they have a deep interest in it, probably because it is life, and they are living and must die.'²³ The place of this separable life is neither in this world nor in the next, but between the two, in a kind of happy netherworld that it seems to leave only reluctantly:

See! A token of life! An indubitable token of life! The spark may smoulder and go out, or it may glow and expand, but see! The four rough fellows seeing, shed tears. Neither Riderhood in this world, nor Riderhood in the other, could draw tears from them; but a striking human soul between the two can do it easily. He is struggling to come back. Now he is almost here, now he is far away again. Now he is struggling harder to get back. And yet – like us all, when we swoon – like us all, every day of our life, when we wake – he is instinctively unwilling to be restored to the consciousness of this existence, and would be left dormant, if he could.²⁴

What makes Riderhood's 'spark of life' interesting is precisely this state of suspension, which cannot be attributed to any subject. It is significant that Dickens refers to this state as 'abeyance', using a word that originates in legal parlance and that indicates the suspension of rules or rights between validity and abrogation ('the spark of life was deeply interesting while it was in abeyance, but now that it got established in Mr Riderhood, there appears to be a general desire that circumstances had admitted of its being developed in anybody else, rather than in the gentleman').²⁵ This is why Deleuze can speak of an 'impersonal life' situated on a threshold beyond good and evil, 'since only the subject who incarnated it in the middle of things made it good or bad'.²⁶ And it is in relation to this impersonal life that Deleuze's brief reference to Maine de Biran becomes fully comprehensible. Starting with *Mémoire sur la décomposition de la pensée*, Maine de Biran's entire work is motivated by the indefatigable attempt to grasp, prior to the I and the will and in close dialogue with the physiology of his time, a 'mode of existence that is so to speak impersonal'.²⁷ Maine de Biran calls this mode of existence 'affectibility' [*affectibilité*] and defines it as a simple organic capacity of affection without personality that, like Condillac's statue, becomes all its modifications and yet, at the same time, constitutes 'a manner of existing that is positive and complete in its kind'.²⁸

Not even Dickens's text, however, seems to satisfy Deleuze. The fact is that the bare life that it presents seems to come to light only in the moment of its struggle with death ('a life should not be contained in the simple moment in which individual life confronts universal death').²⁹ But even the next example, which is meant to show impersonal life insofar as it coexists with the life of the individual without becoming identical to it, bears on a special case, one that lies in the vicinity not of death but of birth. 'The smallest infants,' Deleuze writes, 'all resemble each other and have no individuality; but they have singularities, a smile, a gesture, a grimace, events that are not subjective characters. The smallest infants are traversed by an immanent life that is pure potentiality [*pure puissance*], even beatitude through suffering and weaknesses.'³⁰

One could say that the difficult attempt to clarify the vertigo of immanence by means of 'a life' leads us instead into an area that is even more uncertain, in which the child and the dying man present us with the enigmatic cipher of bare biological life as such.

THE ANIMAL ON THE INSIDE

In the history of Western philosophy, bare life as such is identified at a decisive moment. It is the moment in which Aristotle, in *De anima*, isolates

the most general and separable meaning of 'living being' [*zōon*] among the many ways in which the term is said. 'It is by living,' Aristotle observes,

that the animal is distinguished from the inanimate. But life is said in many ways, and we say that a thing lives if any one of the following is present in it – thought, sensation, movement or rest in a place, besides the movement implied in nutrition and decay or growth. This is why all plants seem to us to live. It is clear that they have in themselves a principle and a capacity by means of which they grow and decay in opposite directions. . . . This principle may be separated from others, but the others cannot exist apart from it in mortal beings. This is evident in the case of plants; for they have no other capacity of the soul. This, then, is the principle through which all living things have life. . . . By 'nutritive faculty' [*threptikon*] I mean that part of the soul that even the plants share.³¹

It is important to observe that Aristotle does not at all define what life is. He merely divides it up in isolating the nutritive function and then orders it into a series of distinct and correlated faculties (nutrition, sensation, thought). What is clearly at work here is the exemplary principle of Aristotle's thought, the principle of the ground. This principle consists in reformulating all questions that have the form of 'what is it?' as questions that have the form of 'through what thing (*dia ti*) does something belong to something else?'. 'The *dia ti*', the 'through-what', or 'why', we read in *Metaphysics*, 1041 a II, 'is always to be sought in the following fashion: through what thing does something belong to something else?'. To ask why (*dia ti*) a thing is said to be a living being is to seek the ground through which life belongs to this thing. The undifferentiated ground on whose presupposition individual living beings are said to be alive is nutritive life (or vegetative life, as it was called by ancient commentators, referring to the particular status of plants in Aristotle as obscurely and absolutely separated from *logos*).

In the history of Western science, the isolation of this bare life constitutes an event that is in every sense fundamental. When Bichat, in his *Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort*, distinguishes 'animal life', which is defined by its relation to an external world, from 'organic life', which is nothing other than a 'habitual succession of assimilation and excretion', it is still Aristotle's nutritive life that constitutes the background against which the life of superior animals is separated and on which the 'animal living on the outside' is opposed to the 'animal on the inside'. And when, at the end of the eighteenth century, as Foucault has shown, the State started to assume the

care of life and the population as one of its essential tasks and politics became biopolitics, it carried out its new vocation above all through a progressive generalization and redefinition of the concept of vegetative or organic life (which coincides with the biological heritage of the nation). And today, in discussions of *ex lege* definitions of new criteria for death, it is a further identification of this bare life – which is now severed from all cerebral activity and subjects – that still decides if a particular body will be considered alive or, instead, abandoned to the extreme vicissitudes of transplantation.

But what, then, separates this pure vegetative life from the ‘spark of life’ in Riderhood and the ‘impersonal life’ of which Deleuze speaks?

UNATTRIBUTABLE LIFE

Deleuze is aware that he enters a dangerous territory in displacing immanence into the domain of life. Riderhood’s dying life and the infant’s nascent life seem to border on the dark area once inhabited by Aristotle’s nutritive life and Bichat’s ‘animal on the inside’. Like Foucault, Deleuze is perfectly conscious of the fact that any thought that considers life shares its object with power and must incessantly confront power’s strategies. Foucault’s diagnosis of the transformation of power into biopower leaves no doubts on the matter: ‘Against this power that was still new in the nineteenth century,’ Foucault writes, ‘the forces that resisted relied for support on the very thing it invested, that is, on life and man as a living being. . . . Life as a political object was in a sense taken at face value and turned back against the system that was bent on controlling it.’³² And Deleuze remarks: ‘Life becomes resistance to power when power takes life as its object. Here again, the two operations belong to the same horizon.’³³ The concept of resistance here must be understood not merely as a political metaphor but as an echo of Bichat’s definition of life as ‘the set of functions that resist death’. Yet one may legitimately ask if this concept truly suffices to master the ambivalence of today’s biopolitical conflict, in which the freedom and happiness of human beings is played out on the very terrain – bare life – that marks their subjection to power.

If a clear definition of ‘life’ seems to be lacking in both Foucault and Deleuze, the task of grasping the sense of ‘life’ in Deleuze’s last work is all the more urgent. What is decisive here is that its role seems exactly opposed to the one played by nutritive life in Aristotle. While nutritive life functions as the principle allowing for the attribution of life to a subject (‘This, then, is the principle through which all living things have life’), *a life* . . . , as the

figure of absolute immanence, is precisely what can never be attributed to a subject, being instead the matrix of infinite desubjectification. *In Deleuze, the principle of immanence thus functions antithetically to Aristotle's principle of the ground.* But there is more. While the specific aim of the isolation of bare life is to mark a division in the living being, such that a plurality of functions and a series of oppositions can be articulated (vegetative life/relational life; animal on the inside/animal on the outside; plant/man; and at the limit, *zoē/bios*, bare life and politically qualified life), *a life ...* marks the radical impossibility of establishing hierarchies and separations. The plane of immanence thus functions as a principle of virtual indetermination, in which the vegetative and the animal, the inside and the outside and even the organic and the inorganic, in passing through one another, cannot be told apart:

A life is everywhere, in all the moments a certain living subject passes through and that certain lived objects regulate: immanent life carrying along the events or singularities which do nothing more than actualise themselves in subjects and objects. This indefinite life does not itself have moments, however close together they might be, but only meantimes [*des entre-temps*], between-moments. It neither takes place nor follows, but presents the immensity of the empty time where the event can be seen that is still to come and yet has already passed, in the absolute of an immediate consciousness.³⁴

At the end of *WP*, in one of the most important passages of Deleuze's late philosophy, life as absolute immediacy is defined as 'pure contemplation without knowledge'. Here Deleuze distinguishes two possible modes of understanding vitalism, the first as act without essence, the second as potentiality without action:

Vitalism has always had two possible interpretations: that of an idea that acts but is not – that acts therefore only from the point of view of an external cerebral knowledge (from Kant to Claude Bernard); or that of a force that is but does not act – that is therefore a pure intentional Awareness (from Leibniz to Ruyer). If the second interpretation seems to us to be imperative, it is because the contraction that preserves is always in a state of detachment in relation to action or even to movement and appears as a pure contemplation without knowledge.³⁵

Deleuze's two examples of this 'contemplation without knowledge', this force that preserves without acting, are sensation ('sensation is pure

contemplation') and habit ('even when one is a rat, it is through contemplation that one "contracts" a habit').³⁶ What is important is that this contemplation without knowledge, which at times recalls the Greek conception of theory as not knowledge but touching [*thigein*], here functions to define life. As absolute immanence, *a life* . . . is pure contemplation beyond every subject and object of knowledge; it is pure potentiality that preserves without acting. Brought to the limit of this new concept of contemplative life – or, rather, living contemplation – we cannot then fail to examine the other characteristic that, in Deleuze's last text, defines life. In what sense can Deleuze state that *a life* . . . is 'potentiality, complete beatitude'?³⁷ To answer this question we will, however, first have to further deepen the meaning of the 'vertigo' of immanence.

PASEARSE

Among the works of Spinoza that have been preserved, there is only one passage in which he makes use of the mother tongue of Sephardi Jews, Ladino. It is a passage in the *Compendium grammatices linguae hebraeae*³⁸ in which the philosopher explains the meaning of the reflexive active verb as an expression of an immanent cause, that is, of an action in which agent and patient are one and the same person. *Se visitare*, 'to visit oneself', the first Latin equivalent that Spinoza gives to clarify the meaning of this verbal form (which in Hebrew is formed by adding a prefix not to the normal form but to the intensive form, which in itself already has a transitive meaning), is clearly insufficient; yet Spinoza immediately qualifies it by means of the singular expression *se visitantem constituere*, 'to constitute oneself visiting'. Two more examples follow, whose Latin equivalents (*se sistere*, *se ambulation dare*) strike Spinoza as so insufficient that he must resort to the mother tongue of his people. In Ladino (that is, in the archaic Spanish spoken by Sephardim at the time of their expulsion from Spain), 'to stroll' or 'to take a walk' is expressed by the verb *pasearse* ('to walk-oneseff', which in modern Spanish is instead expressed as *pasear* or *dar un paseo*). As an equivalent for an immanent cause, which is to say, an action that is referred to the agent himself, the Ladino term is particularly felicitous. It presents an action in which agent and patient enter a threshold of absolute indistinction: a walk as walking-oneseff.

In Chapter 12, Spinoza poses the same problem with reference to the corresponding form of the infinitive noun (in Hebrew, the infinitive is declined as a noun):

Since it often happens that the agent and the patient are one and the same person, the Jews found it necessary to form a new and seventh kind of infinitive with which to express an action referred to both the agent and the patient, an action that thus has the form of both an activity and a passivity. . . . It was therefore necessary to invent another kind of infinitive, which expressed an action referred to the agent as immanent cause . . . , which, as we have seen, means 'to visit oneself, or 'to constitute oneself as visiting' or, finally, 'to show oneself as visiting' [*constituere se visitantem, vel denique praebere se visitantem*].³⁹

The immanent cause thus involves a semantic constellation that the philosopher-grammarians grasp, not without difficulty, by means of a number of examples ('to constitute oneself as visiting', 'to show oneself as visiting', *pasearse*) and whose importance for the understanding of the problem of immanence cannot be underestimated. *Pasearse* is an action in which it is impossible to distinguish the agent from the patient (who walks what?) and in which the grammatical categories of active and passive, subject and object, transitive and intransitive therefore lose their meaning. *Pasearse* is, furthermore, an action in which means and end, potentiality and actuality, faculty and use enter a zone of absolute indistinction. This is why Spinoza employs expressions such as 'to constitute oneself as visiting', 'to show oneself as visiting', in which potentiality coincides with actuality and inoperativeness with work. The vertigo of immanence is that it describes the infinite movement of the self-constitution and self-manifestation of Being: Being as *pasearse*.

It is not an accident that the Stoics used precisely the image of the walk to show that modes and events are immanent to substance (Cleanthus and Chrysippus, indeed, ask themselves: who walks, the body moved by the hegemonic part of the soul or the hegemonic part itself?). As Epictetus says, with an extraordinary invention, the modes of Being 'do Being's gymnastics' (*gymnasai*, in which one should also etymologically hear the adjective *gymnos*, 'bare').⁴⁰

BEATITUDE

In this light, Deleuze's notes on Foucault, published by François Ewald under the title 'Desire and Pleasure', contain an important definition. Life, Deleuze, says, is not at all nature; it is, rather, 'desire's variable field of immanence'. Given what we know of Deleuzian immanence, this means that the term 'life' designates nothing more and nothing less than *the immanence of*

desire to itself. It is clear that for Deleuze, desire implies neither alterity nor a lack. But how is it possible to conceive of a desire that as such remains immanent to itself? Or in other words, how is it possible to conceive of absolute immanence in the form of desire? To phrase the question in the terms of Spinoza's *Compendium*: how is it possible to conceive of a movement of desire that does not leave itself, that is, simply as immanent cause, as *pasearse*, as desire's self-constitution as desiring?

Spinoza's theory of 'striving' (*conatus*) as the desire to persevere in one's own Being, whose importance Deleuze often underlines, contains a possible answer to these questions. Whatever the ancient and medieval sources of Spinoza's idea (Harry A. Wolfson lists a number of them, from the Stoics to Dante), it is certain that in each case, its paradoxical formulation perfectly expresses the idea of an immanent movement, a striving that obstinately remains in itself. All beings not only persevere in their own Being (*vis inertiae*) but *desire* to do so (*vis immanentiae*). The movement of *conatus* thus coincides with that of Spinoza's immanent cause, in which agent and patient cannot be told apart. And since *conatus* is identical to the Being of the thing, to desire to persevere in one's own Being is to desire one's own desire, to constitute oneself as desiring. *In conatus, desire and Being thus coincide without residue.*

In his *Cogitata Metaphysica*, Spinoza defines life as *conatus* ('life is the force by which a thing perseveres in its own Being'). When Deleuze writes that life is desire's variable field of immanence, he therefore offers a rigorously Spinozan definition of life. But to what degree can life, thus defined in terms of *conatus* and desire, be distinguished from the nutritive potentiality of which Aristotle speaks and, in general, from the vegetative life of the medical tradition? It is worth noting that when Aristotle defines the characteristic functions of the nutritive soul (*threptikē psychē*) in *De anima*, he makes use of an expression that closely recalls Spinoza's determination of *conatus sese conservandi*. Aristotle writes: 'It [*trophē*, nutritivity] preserves its substance. . . . This principle of the soul is a potentiality capable of preserving whoever possesses it as such [*dynamis estin boia sōzein to echon autēn hēi to iouton*].'⁴¹ The most essential character of nutritive life, therefore, is not simply growth but above all self-preservation. This means that whereas the medico-philosophical tradition seeks carefully to distinguish the various faculties of the soul and to regulate human life according to the high canon of the life of the mind, Deleuze (like Spinoza) brings the paradigm of the soul back to the lower scheme of nutritive life. While decisively rejecting the function of nutritive life in Aristotle as the ground of the attribution of a subjectivity, Deleuze nevertheless does not want to abandon the terrain of life, which he identifies with the plane of immanence.⁴²

But what does it then mean to 'nourish'? In an important essay, Émile Benveniste seeks to determine a unity for the many, often discordant meanings of the Greek word *trephein* (to nourish, to grow and to coagulate). 'In reality', he writes,

the translation of *trepheō* by 'nourish' in the use that is actually the most common does not suit all the examples and is itself only an acceptance of both a broader and a more precise sense. In order to account for the ensemble of semantic connections of *trepheō*, we have to define it as: 'to encourage (by appropriate measures) the development of that which is subject to growth'. . . . It is here that a peculiar and 'technical' development is inserted, and it is precisely the sense of 'curdle'. The Greek expression is *trephein gala* (*Od.* 9. 246), which must now be literally interpreted as 'to encourage the natural growth of milk, to let it attain the state toward which it is tending'.⁴³

If the original meaning of *trepheō* is 'to let a being reach the state toward which it strives', 'to let be', then the potentiality that constitutes life in the original sense (self-nourishment) coincides with the very desire to preserve one's own Being that, in Spinoza and Deleuze, defines the potentiality of life as absolute immanence.

It is, then, possible to comprehend why Deleuze writes that a life is potentiality, complete beatitude. Life is 'composed of virtuality';⁴⁴ it is pure potentiality that coincides with Being, as in Spinoza, and potentiality, insofar as it 'lacks nothing' and insofar as it is desire's self-constitution as desiring, is immediately blessed. All nourishment, all letting be is blessed and rejoices in itself.

In Spinoza, the idea of beatitude coincides with the experience of the self as an immanent cause, which he calls *acquiescentia in se ipso*, 'being at rest in oneself', and defines precisely as *laetitia, concomitante idea sui tamquam causa*, 'rejoicing accompanied by the idea of the self as cause'. Wolfson has observed that in Spinoza, the reference of the term *acquiescentia* to *mens* or *anima* may reflect Uriel Acosta's use of *alma* and *espírito* with *descansada*.⁴⁵ But it is far more important that the expression *acquiescentia in se ipso* is an invention of Spinoza's, which is not registered in any Latin lexicon. Spinoza must have had in mind a concept that, as an expression of an immanent cause, corresponded to the Hebrew reflexive verb; but he was forced to confront the fact that in Latin, both the verb *quiesco*, 'to rest', and its compound *acquiesco*, 'to be at rest', are intransitive and therefore do not allow a form such as *quiescere* (or *acquiescere*) *se*, 'resting oneself' (whereas Ladino, by contrast, furnished him with the form *pasearse*, in which agent and patient are identical, and could in

this case perhaps have offered the reflexive *descansarse*). This is why he forms the expression *acquiescentia*, constructing it with the preposition *in* followed by the reflexive pronoun *se*. The syntagma *acquiescentia in se ipso*, which names the highest beatitude attainable by human beings, is a Hebrewism (or a Ladinoism) formed to express the apex of the movement of an immanent cause.⁴⁶

It is precisely in this sense that Deleuze uses the term 'beatitude' as the essential character of 'a life . . .'. *Beatitudo* is the movement of absolute immanence.

PERSPECTIVES

It is now possible to clarify the sense in which we were able to state at the beginning of this chapter that the concept of 'life', as the legacy of the thought of both Foucault and Deleuze, must constitute the subject of the coming philosophy. First of all, it will be necessary to read Foucault's last thoughts on biopower, which seem so obscure, together with Deleuze's final reflections, which seem so serene, on 'a life . . .' as absolute immanence and beatitude. To read together, in this sense, is not to flatten out and to simplify; on the contrary, such a conjunction shows that each text constitutes a corrective and a stumbling block for the other. Only through this final complication is it possible for the texts of the two philosophers to reach what they seek: for Foucault, the 'different way of approaching the notion of life', and for Deleuze, a life that does not consist only in its confrontation with death and an immanence that does not once again produce transcendence. We will thus have to discern the matrix of desubjectification itself in every principle that allows for the attribution of a subjectivity; we will have to see the element that marks subjection to biopower in the very paradigm of possible beatitude.

This is the wealth and, at the same time, the ambiguity contained in the title 'Immanence: A Life . . .'. To assume this legacy as a philosophical task, it will be necessary to reconstruct a genealogy that will clearly distinguish in modern philosophy – which is, in a new sense, a philosophy of life – between a line of immanence and a line of transcendence, approximately according to the following diagram.

It will be necessary, moreover, to embark on a genealogical inquiry into the term 'life'. This inquiry, we may already state, will demonstrate that 'life' is not a medical and scientific notion but a philosophical, political and theological concept, and that many of the categories of our philosophical tradition must therefore be rethought accordingly. In this dimension, there

will be little sense in distinguishing between organic life and animal life or even between biological life and contemplative life and between bare life and the life of the mind. Life as contemplation without knowledge will have a precise correlate in thought that has freed itself of all cognition and intentionality. *Theōria* and the contemplative life, which the philosophical tradition has identified as its highest goal for centuries, will have to be dislocated onto a new plane of immanence. It is not certain that, in the process, political philosophy and epistemology will be able to maintain their present physiognomy and difference with respect to ontology. Today, blessed life lies on the same terrain as the biological body of the West.

26. *FB*, pp. 17 and 23.
27. *FB*, XIII, p. 78.
28. Balzac, *Le Chef d'Oeuvre Inconnu*.
29. Laurence Gowing, 'Cézanne, the Logic of Organized Sensations', in *Cézanne, the Late Work*, New York, 1977.
30. Cf. Poussin, *Orion Aveugle*, which is also the title of a book by Claude Simon on Poussin's masterpiece.
31. *FB*, p. 31.
32. As Merleau-Ponty reminded us with respect to Freud's essay *Leonard da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood*, in 'Le Douce de Cézanne' (1945), in *Sens et Non Sens* (Paris: Nagel, 1948).
33. We know that Deleuze preferred to borrow the language of psychiatry to that of psychoanalysis. For two reasons: to avoid the dialectical structures still present in psychoanalysis, and out of a preference for the description of symptoms and postures, rather than the assignation of aetiologies.
34. *LS*, p. 10.
35. Collector of solar energy, and first depository of propitiatory emblems in Homer.
36. *WP*, 1989.
37. Cf. Laertius, VII, 74, 'Phantasia comes first, then ...'
38. This *brief History of Reason* comes at the end of *The Critique of Pure Reason*.

Chapter Nine: Absolute Immanence

1. This text has been reprinted in Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), IV, p. 763.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 774.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 776.
4. Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, 'Satzzeichen', *Akzente*, 6 (1956).
5. *D*, p. 73.
6. J. H. Masméjan, *Traité de la Ponctuation* (Paris, 1781).
7. Gilles Deleuze, *ECC*, p. 112.
8. Gilles Deleuze, 'Immanence: Une Vie ...', *Philosophie*, 47 (1995): 6.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
11. *LS*, p. 98.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
13. The history of the relations between Heidegger and Deleuze – through Blanchot, for example, and the often unacknowledged Heideggerian dimension of contemporary French philosophy – remains to be written. In any case, however, it is certain that the Heidegger of Deleuze is altogether different from the Heidegger of Lévinas and Derrida.
14. *EP*, p. 67.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 180.
17. *WP*, p. 45.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 46–7.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.
21. Deleuze, 'Immanence: Une Vie ...'. See below.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 439.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 440.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 442.
26. Deleuze, 'Immanence: Une Vie ...'.
27. Pierre Maine de Biran, 'Mémoire sur la Décomposition de la Pensée', in *Oeuvres*, Vol. 3 (Paris: Vrin, 1988), p. 388.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 370.
29. Deleuze, 'Immanence: Une Vie ...'.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Aristotle, *De Anima*, 413 a 20–b 10.
32. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), pp. 144–5; the original is in *La Volonté de Savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), pp. 190–91.
33. p. 92.
34. Deleuze, 'Immanence: Une Vie ...' p. 5.
35. *WP*, p. 213.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 342.
37. 'Immanence: Une Vie ...'.
38. Spinoza, *Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1925), 3: 361.
39. *Ibid.*
40. See Victor Goldschmidt, *Le Système Stoïcien et l'Idée de Temps* (Paris: Vrin, 1969), pp. 22–3. Deleuze cites this passage in *LS*, p. 147.
41. Aristotle, *De anima*, 416 b 12–20.
42. When Aristotle defines the intellect (*nous*) by its capacity to think itself, it is important to remember that he has already considered a self-referential paradigm, as we have seen, in his discussion of nutritive life and its power of self-preservation. In a certain sense, thought's thinking itself has its archetype in nutritive life's self-preservation.
43. Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971), p. 252.
44. 'Immanence: Une Vie ...', p. 6.
45. Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 325.
46. The term *acquiescentia* is registered in the *Thesaurus* of neither Estienne nor Teubner. As to the ablative construction of *acquiescere* with *in* (in the sense, Estienne specifies, of *acquiescere in re aliqua, aut in aliquo homine, cum quadam animi voluptate, quieteque consistere et oblectari in re aliqua, in qua prius in dubio aut sollicitudine anima fuisset*), it is never used with the reflexive pronoun.