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«THE POWERFUL, NON-ORGANIC LIFE WHICH GRIPS THE WORLD».

VITALISM AND ONTOLOGY IN GILLES DELEUZE*

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ABSTRACT: It is well known that Gilles Deleuze is the heir of a complex vitalistic tradition, beginning with Henri Bergson's Creative Evolution and spanning through an important part of 20th century French philosophy. According to this line of thought, philosophy has to sharpen its vision in order to grasp the irreducible nature of the living. On one hand Deleuze seems to explicitly follow these intuitions, on the other though he strives to find a viable ontological framework for an actual philosophy of



life, reaffirming the Nietzschean notion of being as becoming, the Bergsonian virtual coexistence of memory and Scotist univocity of the being. Through such operation, Deleuze actually seems to distance himself from a simply vitalistic approach, and to build instead an original metaphysics that understands life as a powerful inorganic force crossing all levels of reality. The organic, thus, is what traps and diverts (*détourne*) this impersonal and germinal life. Aim of the presentation is to clarify the originality of Deleuze's vitalistic ontology and point to its ambiguities and debts towards other philosophical traditions. Even if Deleuze apparently overturns his vitalistic roots, it is nevertheless undeniable that the vital domain will engage him throughout all of his work.

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Everything I've written is vitalistic, at least I hope it is.

G. Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 1972-1990

1. Intro

If Gilles Deleuze felt compelled to stress, *ex post*, the vitalistic roots of his philosophy, we could suspect that he was not fully convinced or, more likely, that he was unsure of whether current philosophical debate had grasped the vitalistic core of his thought. Both scenarios entail an ambiguity. I will not deny that life is one of the key concept of his metaphysics, both on a theoretical and on an “inherited” level. However, it is also undeniable that his view on life is very different from both common sense and from the classical (or even contemporary) philosophical reflection on it. On the one hand, Deleuze surely inherited several vitalistic intuitions from the French philosophical debate; on the other hand, he recasted these influences in a new ontological framework which transformed the concept of life in an inorganic, pre-individual force germinating in actual reality. At the same time, when discussing and elaborating the notion of life throughout his work, he often offers some unsettling remarks that seemingly juxtapose life to death, perception to imperceptible, and becoming to eternity. Aim of this text is to clarify the originality of Deleuze’s vitalistic ontology and point to its ambiguities and debts to philosophical tradition. Is Deleuze – apart from the aforementioned quote – a truly vitalistic philosopher? What is then the relation between life and ontology in Deleuze’s thought?

2. Vitalistic turn. Deleuze’s Bergsonism

Among the various influences that constitute the ground of Deleuze’s philosophy, Henri Bergson surely plays a major role. Deleuze famously dedicates to Bergson’s philosophy an important

book and some articles¹; moreover, Bergson's influence crosses the entire work of Deleuze. In order to first understand what the concept of life really means to Deleuze, an inquiry into Bergsonism seems then inevitable. I use this word – Bergsonism – for a precise reason: Deleuze does not “receive” Bergson's philosophy in a pure, direct or passive way. When Deleuze starts being interested in Bergsonian philosophy, namely in the 50's, the reception of Bergsonism has in fact reached a turning point. During the first three decades of twentieth century, the major image of Bergson was that of a psychological, spiritualist philosopher, primarily concerned with the internal nature of temporality and consciousness². The great popularity of Bergsonism in the cultural milieu of *Belle époque* coexists with a strong criticism of his most prominent colleagues. This “bad” philosophical fame reached the top with the poisonous pamphlet *La fin d'une parade philosophique: le bergsonisme* by Georges Politzer³, which condemned Bergsonism as an old philosophy, not capable of grasping the relevant problems of contemporaneity. Things changed in the 40's, significantly after the death of Bergson himself in 1941: previous critics of Bergson's philosophy, like Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Georges Canguilhem, began rediscovering some of his intuitions, teaching some classes on

¹ G. Deleuze, *La conception de la différence chez Bergson*, in *Les études bergsoniennes* - vol. IV, PUF, Paris 1956, pp. 79-112; Id., *Bergson (1859-1941)*, in M. Merleau-Ponty (edited by), *Les philosophes célèbres*, Editions d'Art Lucien Mazenod, Paris 1956, pp. 292-299; Id., *Bergsonism* (1966), Zone Books, New York 1991; Id., *A Return to Bergson*, in *Bergsonism*, cit., pp. 115-118.

² G. Bianco, *Après Bergson. Portrait de groupe avec philosophe*, PUF, Paris 2015.

³ G. Politzer, *La fin d'une parade philosophique: le bergsonisme* (1929), in Id., *Contre Bergson et quelques autres. Écrits philosophiques 1924-1939*, Flammarion, Paris 2016, pp. 127-133.

Bergson⁴, both being also deeply influenced by the seminal works of Jean Wahl⁵ and Vladimir Jankélévitch⁶.

What is interesting is that a large part of this revaluation was based upon a newly appreciated Bergsonian vitalism, discovered in particular in *Creative Evolution*. According to Canguilhem, Bergson is one of the few philosophers capable of grasping life, without trapping it in a mechanistic explanation⁷: in fact, Bergson through the concept of *élan vital* («vital impetus»⁸) overcomes an anthropocentric view, shifting his theoretical focus from human being to life in itself, conceived as an energetic creation process. What was before perceived in Bergsonism as a vague psychologism, it is now grasped as a non-reductionist attitude towards life phenomena.

Deleuze's reception of Bergsonism is inevitably affected by this complex cluster of authors, interests and dialogues. A large part of Deleuzian vitalism thus derives from such particular reception of Bergson as a primarily vitalistic, non-reductionist philosopher: the last chapter of his *Bergsonism*, «*Élan vital* as a movement of differentiation»⁹, speaks for itself. Here Deleuze derives from Bergson's philosophy the idea of difference as a process of ongoing *differentiation* predating its particular contents: «it is as Life were merged into the very movement of differentiation, in ramified series»¹⁰.

⁴ M. Merleau-Ponty, *L'union de l'âme et du corps chez Malebranche, Biran et Bergson* (1947-1948), Vrin, Paris 1968; and G. Canguilhem, *Commentaire au troisième chapitre de L'évolution créatrice* (1943), in Frédéric Worms (edited by), *Annales bergsoniennes, III: Bergson et la science*, PUF, Paris 2007, p. 99-160.

⁵ J. Wahl, *Vers Le concret. Études d'histoire de la philosophie contemporaine. William James, Whitehead, Gabriel Marcel* (1932), Vrin, Paris 2004.

⁶ W. Jankélévitch, *Henri Bergson* (1931), Duke University Press, Duke 2015.

⁷ G. Canguilhem, *Knowledge of Life* (1967), Fordham University Press, New York 2008, p. 174.

⁸ H. Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (1907), Cosimo, New York 2005, p. 94.

⁹ G. Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, cit., p. 92-119.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

3. *Ontological framework: virtuality, becoming, univocity*

Deleuze's interest in the philosophy of Bergson should not be reduced to a simple search for a vitalistic thought, capable of opposing other merely mechanistic approaches to the living. His reception of Bergsonism, even if mediated, is not passive: as he explicitly admits, he made some eccentric operations on Bergson's philosophy¹¹, forcing his concepts in new directions. More generally, Deleuze primary interest, particularly during 60's, is the research of a new differential ontology, able to oppose itself to Hegelian dialectic¹².

Deleuze's interpretation of Bergsonism is thus guided not by a simple vitalistic need, but also and first by an ontological one. What Deleuze sees in Bergson is a proper ontology, standing as an original reinterpretation of Kantian transcendental philosophy¹³. In this context, it is undeniable that Deleuze steers Bergsonism towards a strictly ontological direction: the concept of life as differentiation is introduced, in *Bergsonism*, by the concept of virtuality. In order to generate the real, the difference must in fact coincide with a virtual power that can actualise itself in reality. The notion of virtuality, which Bergson introduced in *Matter and memory* in order to define the nature of memory, and later extended to reality itself within *Creative evolution* is recast by Deleuze as an ontological device. What is virtual is not simply the past, as a reservoir of memories, but an ontological dimension that precedes the actual state of things. The multiple processes of differentiation inhere first to an ontological and monist dimension where all differences coexist: «the coexistence of all the degree, of all the levels is virtual, only virtual. The

¹¹ Id., *Negotiations, 1972-1990* (1990), Columbia University Press, New York 1995, p. 6.

¹² The explicit confrontation is here with his master Jean Hyppolite and his important work on Hegel, *Logic and existence*, edited in 1952 (Suny Press, New York 1997).

¹³ G. Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, cit., pp. 20-21.

point of unification is itself virtual»¹⁴. Now we can begin to understand the ontological fold in notion of life within Deleuze's philosophy. Nevertheless, Deleuze's thought does not coincide with the mere, if eccentric reinterpretation of Bergsonian intuitions: it instead weaves together various notions coming from several other historic moments. For reasons of brevity, I will outline just two more points that I consider particularly significant in order to understand the ontological framework in which Deleuze grafts (and transforms) this notion of life.

The first one is Deleuze's notorious interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy¹⁵ that brings him to redefine the relations between being and becoming. According to Deleuze, Nietzsche is not a pessimistic "abyssal" philosopher, but an authentic thinker of life, which he conceives as a relation between active and reactive forces¹⁶. In the process, Nietzsche abolishes the classical understanding of movement as a non-substantial transition between two substances (i.e. in the theory of local movement by Aristotle): through the notion of the eternal return of the same, «being is affirmed of becoming»¹⁷. Becoming is thus not a transition from non-being to being, but coincides with the substantial state of being, always on the verge of transforming itself.

If, then, the genesis of difference is linked to a virtual domain and to a substantial becoming, life too, which is in fact a virtual becoming, must inhere first and foremost to an ontological plane preceding its actualisations. We are here in the heart of Deleuze's ontology, in which the virtual character of the difference and the coincidence of becoming and being require a new understanding of being itself. In order to achieve such a new understanding, Deleuze turns back to the famous dispute over the

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁵ *Id.*, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1964), Continuum, London-New York 1986.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

nature of being between two major medieval thinkers: Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus. Thomas theorizes the analogy of being: given the real distinction between being and existence, being must be said in multiple senses of all entities. In doing so, Thomas, according to Deleuze, allows a strictly hierarchical categorization of beings, which are ordained through the analogical device of participation, from beasts to God, although with strict thresholds between them. On the other hand, Scotus reinstates the one and only ontological proposition¹⁸: the univocity of being, in which being is said in one and only sense of all entities. There is only one common voice of being¹⁹, according to Deleuze. Univocity does not mean however a concrete neutralization of differences, but rather their belonging to a common and inclusive horizon, with no pre-established hierarchy: «In effect, the essential in univocity is not that Being is said in a single and same sense, but that it is said, in a single and same sense, *of* all its individuating differences or intrinsic modalities»²⁰.

Bergsonian virtuality, Nietzschean being as becoming and Scotist univocity of being are then the theoretical foundations of Deleuze's ontology, unified under the notion of the «plane of immanence», as a virtual surface that precedes and actualises every degree of the real²¹. In constituting this ontological framework, the role of life seems now ambiguous: if, as we have said already, the notion of life as differentiation refers to Bergsonian vitalism, the general ontology built by Deleuze seems to downsize organic life. The common voice of being cannot be, in fact, organic: organic life is one of many indefinite, individuating differences, not an ontological genesis for them. It

¹⁸ Id., *Difference and Repetition* (1968), The Athlone Press, London 1990, p. 35.

¹⁹ A. Badiou, *Deleuze. The Clamor of Being* (1997), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2000, pp. 19-30.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 36

²¹ G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, Columbia University Press, New York 1994, pp. 35-60.

is a product of this common voice of being and, as we will see, even a diversion (*détournement*) from it. Does this mean that life progressively disappears from Deleuze's thought? If we have to follow the statement quoted at the outset of this presentation, that is not the case.

4. From organic to inorganic. Gothic avatar, crystallization, metallurgy

The project of an inorganic vitalism develops itself in particular during the 70's and the 80's, notably during Deleuze's collaboration with Félix Guattari.

The notion of «body without organs», which appears already in *Logic of Sense*²², becomes clearer in *A Thousand Plateaus*. It is an expression derived from a radiophonic poem written by Antonin Artaud, *Pour en finir avec Le jugement de Dieu*²³: within it Artaud depicts the functions of organs as a trap that is useless and dangerous at the same time. Deleuze refers to the Body without organs as a body that dismantles and disorganises his operations: «A body without organs is not an empty body stripped of organs, but a body upon which that which serves as organs [...] is distributed according to crowd phenomena, in Brownian motion, in the form of molecular multiplicities»²⁴. Deleuze links here organism – and human organism in particular – to organic life, conceiving it as a process of differentiation that predetermines the possibility of actual perception: it is, in his opinion, a diversion from the common power of being, which is strictly inorganic. Apart from the vaguely political and emancipatory tone of these Deleuzian intuitions, there are here interesting philosophical implications. Deleuze gives to the inorganic field a

²² G. Deleuze, *Logic of sense* (1969), Columbia University Press, New York 1990, p. 90 and p. 203.

²³ A. Artaud, *Pour en finir avec Le jugement de Dieu* (1947), in *Pour en finir avec Le jugement de Dieu suivi de Le théâtre de la cruauté*, Gallimard, Paris 2003.

²⁴ G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London 1987, p. 30.

primary place in the constitution of reality, and at the same time conceives organic life as a diversion. According to Deleuze, moving the theoretical focus from human to the living is not enough, because organic life is still a form of subjectivity, a representation that subtends the «primacy of human beings»²⁵. On the contrary, the inorganic field is impersonal, yet alive. Deleuze gives here the example of the Gothic avatar made by Worringer:

This streaming, spiralling, zigzagging, snaking, feverish line of variation liberates a power of life the human being had rectified and organisms had confined, and which matter now expresses as the trait, flow, or impulse traversing it. If everything is alive, it is not because everything is organic or organized but, on the contrary, because the organism is a diversion of life. In short, the life in question is inorganic, germinal, and intensive, a powerful life without organs, a Body that is all the more alive for having no organs, everything that passes *between* organisms²⁶.

Deleuze makes also the example of the process of crystallization, which was previously studied by Gilbert Simondon²⁷. Building up an original philosophy that understands all levels of reality through multiple processes of individuation – beginning with the inorganic field and arriving up to social contexts²⁸ – Simondon often uses as an example the process of crystallization. Once a seed crystal is implanted in an amorphous substance, it immediately triggers a process of individuation, in which the crystal generates itself as an energetic system through a continuous amplification that could keep going on, as the crystal is endowed with an indefinite power of growth²⁹. These intuitions are deeply extended in significant sections of *A Thousand Plateaus* and *Cinema 2*, in which Deleuze (partially with Guattari) reflects on the figure of the crystal: what the crystal shows is in fact the inorganic nature of life.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 498.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 499.

²⁷ Deleuze was in the 60's one of the few lecturers of Simondon, which «presents the first thought-out theory of impersonal and pre-individual singularities» (G. Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, cit., p. 344).

²⁸ G. Simondon, *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*, Éditions Jérôme Million, Grenoble 2013.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

Before organic, psychological and social actualisations, there is a common inorganic power, an amplifying process of crystallization that never cease to span across actual states of things. According to Deleuze what is visible, in the cinema of crystal-image, is the inorganic but vital foundation of reality: «The crystal-image was not time, but we see time in the crystal. We see in the crystal the perpetual foundation of time, non-chronological time, Cronos and not Chronos. *This is the powerful, non-organic Life which grips the world*»³⁰.

A third example proposed by Deleuze is eventually that of the metallurgist, who works on something that is an inorganic and yet already living matter: «I have found the best approximation of this non-organic life in primitive metallurgy. [...] It is precisely this matter-movement that made the success of the travelling metallurgist [...] who knew the process of the matter-movement, who was indexed on the process of the matter-movement. [...] If this process is vital, it does not prevent, as a result, that it is non-organic»³¹.

5. Conclusion. Life of things, death of “person”

Deleuze’s conception of life is quite bizarre: as we have said, it departs from organic vitalism, and progressively becomes an ontological inorganic becoming. I will not deny that the idea of an inorganic vitalism seems then very counter-intuitive, and that it opens up many theoretical problems.

First, in giving to life an inorganic consistence, Deleuze overturns the very notion of death: if, in a classical vitalist approach death is often negatively interpreted, as the end of relations between parts or as the depletion of the energy of a living being, within such inorganic vitalism things change

³⁰ G. Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1989, p. 81.

³¹ Class taught by Gilles Deleuze in Vincennes, *Anti-Oedipus et autres réflexions*, 05-27-1980, transcription by Frédéric Astier, http://www2.univ-paris8.fr/deleuze/article.php?id_article=68 (my translation).

radically. If everything is inorganically alive, therefore even death must be an inorganic and pre-individual phenomenon: Deleuze, quoting XVIIIth century physiologist Xavier Bichat, claims that death is no more conceivable as a significant instant, but that it is coextensive to life. Therefore, what lives is at the same time crossed by partial deaths³². Organic death is then only one aspect of death itself, notably its personal one; on the other hand, there is a strangely impersonal death, inorganic, without previous relations with a subject. «There is always a “one dies” more profound than “I die”» claims Deleuze, quoting Maurice Blanchot³³: beyond the organic and personal death, a more profound death never ceases to happen, Deleuze’s vitalism is then partially overshadowed by a mysterious “deathalism” (*mortalisme*)³⁴.

Second, the notion of inorganic life seems to conflict with Deleuze’s insistence on becoming as a substantial force. Such inorganic and common voice of the being cannot exist in time and space, cannot in fact move forward, but it constitutes instead the ontological grounding that connects all reality. Therefore, one could conceive inorganic life as an eternal being, a non-chronological time (and space) that forces becoming up to its limit, where it transforms itself in an impersonal, imperceptible and indiscernible plane that «blend[s] in with the walls»³⁵. Life, then, seems to lose all the creative movement, all the energy that usually distinguishes it from what is inert.

These undeniable problems seem unsolvable only if we use the lens of a classical vitalism in order to understand Deleuzian philosophy: pushing Deleuze’s concepts towards an orthodox vitalism means however neutralizing their metaphysical originality in relation to philosophical tradition. An inquiry on the concept

³² See the class taught by Gilles Deleuze in Vincennes, *Foucault – Le Pouvoir*, 03-11-1986, http://www2.univ-paris8.fr/deleuze/article.php3?id_article=464.

³³ Id., *Difference and Repetition*, cit., p. 113.

³⁴ See the example of the man dying, in Id., *Pure Immanence, Essays on Life*, Zone Books, New York 2001, p. 28.

³⁵ G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, cit., p. 279.

of life in Deleuze should not reduce its complex – and often ambiguous – oscillation between ontological demand and vitalistic interest. Deleuzian bet is to liberate life from organic barriers and organized living beings, in order to grasp its embeddedness within a unique, impersonal Nature. Therefore, in a way reminiscing some recent philosophical reflection, the deep historical divide between things and persons starts to fade³⁶. If there is a common and inorganic voice of being, this excluding threshold disappears, replaced by indefinite individuating differences inherent to common and immanent plane; at the same time, inert matter and things lose their typical objectification, getting instead closer to living beings in their very genesis. Things and people stops to oppose themselves reaching the common inorganic voice, the complete bliss that Deleuze, in his last writing, significantly calls «A life»³⁷.

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³⁶ See R. Esposito, *Two. The machine of Political Theology and Place of Thought*, Fordham University Press, New York 2015.

³⁷ G. Deleuze, *Pure Immanence*, cit., p. 27.