

## *Special Section on Life:*

### ON THE SURFACE OF THINGS: Transient Life and Beauty in Passing

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#### PHILOSOPHY ON THE SURFACE

Different conceptions of life might be said to fall between two extremes. On one extreme, we find more objectifying, indeed reductive conceptions: here life itself seems to disappear in the very claim to account for it. On the other extreme, we find more subjectifying conceptions: here the sense of immanent self-relation and its dynamic enjoyment is held to make intimate contact with life as lived. A purely objective account seems difficult to endorse finally, if life *disappears* in its being accounted for. An entirely immanent orientation raises for us questions about the passing of life *beyond* self-relating enjoyment. By contrast to these two, one might suggest that life as *transient* (*trans-ire*: to go across) communicates more in the *passage* between these extremes. Our question then: How relate this transience, neither objective nor subjective, to the passing of life, to passing as passing?

In addressing this question, we need to recall that part of philosophy's vocation is to be true to the surface of things, in the transience of life on earth. Surfaces intermediate transient life. Beauty is crucially relevant as an intermediate happening, to be true to which, I will suggest, we have to be mindful of the *saturated surfaces* of things. In beauty the surface of life and the depth

enigmatically communicate. Beauty is an intermediary of transient life that communicates what cannot be completely objectified and what exceeds every self-relation of the human subject. In beauty the surface and the depth communicate because beauty is the depth communicating itself. Life as transient is also an intermediate happening, and passes between being at all and not being. Beauty is intimately related to this transience of the interim of life, showing something of surplus significance on the surface of things. Beyond the excessively objectifying approach and the excessively subjectifying, it communicates an affirming sense of the excess of life itself, even in its fugitive passing. Fugitive beauty calls on our mindful attention.

But one might ask: Is it, in fact, part of philosophy's vocation to allow us to live on the surface of the earth? Have not philosophers repeatedly pointed beyond the surface and away from the earth? Do not Nietzscheans, reactionary to this pointing beyond, now point back and chant about remaining true to the earth? But surely we can only be true to the earth, behold what is on it, by attaining to the surface of things, a surface in no way exclusive of something above the earth? Not being able to be on the surface of the earth can be induced by various causes, some intellectual, some spiritual, some due to aesthetic and religious viewpoints which denigrate the surface, some due to lies in the soul which hinder us from seeing what is before us, some due to philosophical strategies that look only with suspicion on the surface.

Restoring what it means to stand on the earth, and resurrect the surface of things puts one in mind, paradoxically, of the Platonic analogy of the cave. We live underground, and when freed we undertake a painful and blinding ascent to the surface of the earth, there to be able to behold a light only equivocally present under the surface. Platonic ascent is often now said to be treasonous to the surface of the earth, but we could read this ascent differently. Is it not the sun that enables the earth to be the dynamic, becoming, intelligible, indeed worthy and good reality it is? Without it not only the underground, but also the surface would be plunged into darkness. To live in the light of the sun we need to be on the surface and behold the shine on things. Indeed is not *eidōs* intimately connected with the "look" of things? The "look" of things cannot be separated from the surface that shows itself to our attentive mindfulness. The *eidōs* shines on the surface of things to the looking that is mindful of the "look." Part of the

ancient vocation of philosophy was said to be "saving the appearances." Such saving knowing would be a matter of *doing justice* to what is shown on the surface. If on the surface there is surplus rather than defect, the justice of saving knowing might well have to draw on reserves on agapeic mindfulness.

Of course, the analogy of the cave recalls the ancient theme of Hades. One must ask: Is there not also a kind of hell with which we have to come to terms? In Hades beauty is under the shadow of darkness and the shades below seem to lack living beauty. But notice here how moving in the dark, whether coming to the surface, or sinking deeper into darkness, allows *different directionalities* for our underground motion. We can move up, we can stay where we are, we can also move down. Some movements in the dark in modernity have taken to heart the power of Hades, but rather than ascend to the surface, their motion is *descending*, into another darkness below the floor of the cave. We seem seized by the notion that our motion is not to come again to the surface of things but rather to descend below all surfaces where there is a truer darkness that the surface hides, even as the surface also shows some foreboding of it.

It is obvious that significant currents of contemporary thought have wanted to invert Plato, but what is the meaning of that inversion? Does it, in fact, allow us to live on the surface of the earth? I think the answer has to be qualified in the opposite direction. A true inversion of Platonism would less allow us to have peace on the surface, as complete the disturbing descent, not only back into the cave, but below the ground of the cave into even more infernal darknesses.

This is what we have often found after Hegel. Hegel sublates the surface of things into self-mediating spirit in a philosophy of immanence where rational thought is consummated in absolute self-knowing. After him his ascent to absolute self-knowing is reversed, and the negative power of the dialectic produces what I would call a de-sublation. Instead of us being sublated to the highest standpoint of the identity of human and divine power, divine power is desublated to human power. Initially the fruits of that de-sublation are harvested in a claim which ingests the otherness of the divine into human power, sublates, that is, de-sublates the transcendent otherness of the divine into human power. This is well known in Feuerbach, Marx and others. But thereafter this follows a second de-sublation: human power is itself a surface, fronting for inhuman power or powers (however defined). It now appears that Hegelian reason is fated to

front for some non-rational other, say, the machinations of will to power. The first de-sublation promises the ultimate power of the divine to us humans. The second de-sublation that follows now descends into what is below reason. The divinity of the human is a god that fails, and the subject becomes less object than abject.

Again there is the theme of depth here, but it reverses the Platonic analogy of the sun which draws us beyond the cave towards the transcendence of the good. In the cave we are underground men, but now the analogy suggests a de-sublating directionality, pointing down and down into original darkness. We are digging below the cave to pits where the sun seems not to penetrate. Of course, on this view, even on the surface of the earth, the sun does not shine either, and in the end all is dark. This turn away from higher transcendence and the penetration of our transcending into the lower underground is something we find with Schopenhauer, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche and many others right into our own time, for instance, Bataille. There is dissimilitude here but it emerges from below. It is the abyss, the dark origin, it is the inhuman. The fate of reason is to be revealed to itself as not reasonable. The inhuman is the immanent other of the human. All of this has implications for our understanding of life also, as we shall see.

Relevantly, in the Platonic directionality, beauty is the intermediate happening where the sensuous and supersensuous are in communication, and eros is not merely impelled beyond itself by its own negative self-determining energy but is drawn beyond by the loving lure of the beautiful or good.<sup>1</sup> Coming to the surface is an ecstasis which participates in that love of the beautiful. By contrast, in the scenario of inverted Platonism, below the underground, where could we find a comparable role to play for the beautiful? My suspicion is: nowhere. Rather, under the underground we are more likely to find more dirt, rather than tunnels of darkness that, were they to lead us back to the surface, would bring us to encounter again the glory of beauty. This would be a joyful occasion of renewing our love on the surface—rejoicing after the darkness that an

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<sup>1</sup>While Plato is generally said to stress the *eidos* as beyond, its transcendence to appearance, a certain understanding of the “look” of things suggests also a non-disjunctive sense where surface and beyond communicate, as is acknowledged to be the case with beauty in the *Phaedrus* (250d), for instance: “For the beautiful alone this has this fate (*moira*), to be the most showing (*ekphanēstaton*) and most lovely (*erasmiōtaton*).”

abundance of beauty is there for us to behold on the surface. This return to the surface does not always happen. More likely, it is a certain fixation on the ugly that will engage our obsessions and anxieties. Here we find more the deformation than the form, more the repulsive than the attractive, more the disgusting than the serene. Even when the fluidity of life is noticed, it is the disgusting fluids, or the fluids of life as disgusting, that contaminate us. We drown Christ in piss.

Has beauty restorative power? Returning to Schopenhauer, it is remarkable that for him beauty can save us, if only episodically, from the devouring darkness of the will. But how it can do so, is a good question. Despite the darkness under the underground, the beautiful frees us into a more serene compartment. Equally, Nietzsche preaches that it is art that saves from the truth. The truth is the dark horror underneath, but art gives us the surfaces that protect us from that horror. The "*as if*" truths (that is, "lies") of art save us from *the* truth of horror. Nietzsche knew he was between a rock and a hard place. The Greeks were superficial out of profundity, he said—profoundly, in perhaps a tone of superficiality. I mention Schopenhauer and Nietzsche since with them there is some desire to recover, or at least come to terms with, the surface. To be truly on the surface of things need not be inimical to the gift of beauty and its restorative power. Whether their approaches are adequate to what restoration requires is another question and I doubt they are.

Some forms of post-Nietzschean thought practice what one might call *agenda philosophizing*, and of course the agenda here is to push through relentlessly the project of inverting Platonism. (Is it fair to say that Deleuze almost obsessively pursues this agenda?) If this is the agenda, why at all seek to come to the surface of things, to behold there things of astonishing beauty? If there is no sun, should not the "true" inversion take us below the cave into even more dismal darkness? But does not the desire to drive through this agenda of reversal show the logic of the reviled "Platonism"—now as inverted logocentrism, where everything is re-viewed according to the *idée fixe* of what is to be avoided? It would be better not to try to make any sense. And yet some "project" to make sense is still at work. The studied production of the senseless makes sense as the result of an agenda, but thus it finds itself contradicting itself, not quite senselessly, but in a manner that pays unacknowledged homage to what it would invert. Being dragged back down into hell as the true inversion of Platonic

heaven is evident in the production of the ugly according to the agenda of a certain aesthetic philosophy. Beauty comes to meet one, but one immediately crosses to the other side of the road; but to cross the road to escape means one has not escaped what one wants to avoid. Love of the ugly, hatred of the beautiful – are these Siamese twins? Are love of the beautiful, hatred of the ugly also twins? But suppose one truly were to love the ugly, would there not be something lovely about the ugly? To love the ugly—would this not be the love of a god? The god who looks on the lovely where we only recoil in disgust? If we were to follow this thought through ethically and religiously, would we ourselves not have to love those who are hateful? Would we have to affirm a God who loves even the evil, forgives it because there is more in the evil than evil?

#### **ON THE SURFACE AND THE OBJECTIVISING REDUCTION**

The sciences have diversely tried to define life,<sup>2</sup> but without decrying science, one could ask about certain *scientific* temptations that recurrently emerge in reflections on its characteristic approaches. Important considerations include the following. What is given is rendered in terms of the theoretical neutrality of an objectified thereness. We are supposed to put out of play our own more subjective involvements, assume a more spectatorial rather than participatory orientation. This is all very well, in relation to close attention to what shows itself from itself, and not in terms of what we might impute to it, in the likeness to ourselves. The injunction is that there is to be no anthropomorphism. We are not to project ourselves and our desires onto the otherwise neutral thereness, and all this in the light of knowing what is as it is. The greatness of this orientation can be an epistemic respect for the otherness of what shows itself as such, now truthfully granted its being for itself, outside the anthropomorphic projections we might otherwise impose on things. Similarly a scientific understanding of life is to be objective in that sense. We cannot project on it our own life, for then we would meet only ourselves again and not what is living as other to us.

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<sup>2</sup> See Morange, *Life Explained*.

Of course, putting ourselves entirely in suspension is impossible. For the objective orientation is itself one of our *valued* orientations, and while its directionality is said to regard the neutral thereness as other, it still is *our* orientation, and we cannot so escape ourselves that we are entirely removed from the picture. If we were entirely removed from the picture, there would be no picture, and hence no objective understanding of life in its non-anthropomorphic otherness. The project of objectification turns out to be a project of the subject—though its primal focus on the objective as other often disguises this from the subject so oriented.

It is also the case that reflection on the project of objectivity casts in doubt the merely spectatorial orientation also. I mean the orientation that claims no involvement with what is beheld, no participation in the given reality under investigation. The more we wake up to what is at play in the scientific orientation, I would suggest, the more we see that it concerns the determination of *a certain kind of between*: between us and what is there, with concern to give an account of what is there, as precise, determinate and univocal as possible. Determinability itself is inseparable from objectification, but determining is an engagement we undertake in a middle space between ourselves and what shows itself for this univocalizing consideration. Part of that determination is the effort to fix precisely the character of life, the precise enabling conditions that allow its emergence, conditions to which what happens on the surface can be reduced and rendered in exact mathematical formulations to the highest degree possible. In some quarters the point will be to determine the emergence of the living from the non-living. Thus is a certain extreme reached that mirrors the initial prohibition on anthropomorphisms. Remember that the prohibition barred the attribution of human characteristics to what is other than the human, in the interests of, at best, allowing the non-human to show itself as other to us. Here with a more reductionist view of life, the point is not to project life into the enabling conditions that are necessary for the emergence of life. Rather the non-living is that relative to which the living is to be understood. But to what extent then is this the claim to derive the living from the dead, a claim that surreptitiously projects a dead condition as the base ground, or the necessary enabler, of what emerges as not dead but living?

We are dealing here with *thresholds*. On one side of the threshold is the non-living, on the other side of the threshold is the living. How is the threshold crossed? We cannot but approach the non-living side of the threshold from some position *within* life. Hence inevitably what we know of what is on the other side of the threshold is not entirely separable from our necessarily presupposed emplacement *within* life itself. How possible is it then entirely to neutralize a kind of projection of life on non-life? Do we not risk a kind of *inverted* anthropomorphism—that is, a projection guided by just the agenda *not* to find on the other side of the threshold anything that is redolent of the living side of the divide? Is not such a project of inverted anthropomorphism still a kind of anthropomorphic projection? A threshold is always a between space, and if the threshold is of crucial importance, can we ever, in fact, approach the happening of life without in some way presupposing our necessary emplacement in life itself? If we were to give an “absolute” account of life in terms of the non-living, would we have no account at all? Indeed, would the very project as such show its impossibility in its hypothetical realization?

Thresholds are very much related to surfaces. For a surface is also a between space – on one side, one reality, on the other side, another, and the between is the space of possible communication between those two sides. If there is radical heterogeneity between the two sides, would one have a surface at all? For on or in or through such a “surface” of heterogeneity, there would be no interface. Radical heterogeneity would allow no communication between the two sides, and hence no threshold could be crossed. For what is crossing but communication in and across a between? Must one not have rather a relation that mixes the like and the unlike? A threshold, like all between, requires an intermediation of sameness and difference, an interplay of likeness and unlikeness. A surface is the *metaxu* of this interplay. Hence how we relate to surfaces is all important. There is no approach to what is hidden in the surface, or beyond it, or its depth, without genuine cognitive and ontological respect for the surface as such, that is, for the surface as a *metaxu*, and hence as an interface.

The issue then is whether there is any approach to life which does not necessarily presuppose life. If we seek to reduce the living to the non-living, or to show the conditions needful for the emergence of the living from the non-living, one still has to ask if this approach, indeed any approach, can entirely escape



being already emplaced in the sphere of the living as such? Even if we try in the depths of life to discover the non-living as source of the living, can we do this without indebtedness to given life precisely as given—and given on the surface? The point I make is not to deny non-living conditions enabling life but to ask whether the univocal determination of these conditions can ever be entirely true to the happening of life as such. Life is presupposed as “more,” even in the approach that would reduce it to the “less” than living. This self-confirming emplacement in the between of life, of cause, is taken to be a limitation to be overcome by more reductionistic approaches to life. But the between of life is itself a presupposition of these reductionistic approaches themselves. There is something we cannot escape here, and we ought to ask if it has immense significance for the understanding of life.

A science of life that ends up with no life is in a fugue state relative to this inescapability. It has not remained true to the surface of things. In its plumbing of the depths it brings us death rather than life. One thinks of Wordsworth’s famous words: “We murder to dissect.” We take apart, we kill, we take the life from something to understand it. We do understand something but life dies in this anatomy of life. If this is all there is to knowing life, knowledge is an invasion of, an assault on, what it seeks to know. Even then an assault is an act that *lives* from hostility. Would a knowing that does not kill have to be a loving of what it knows? One might ask if even the most extreme reductionism is in the debt of this love. Affirming something as true reveals a love of truth, and a love of the reality as so affirmed. But loving itself is always a living—a new living of the life known, and in a sense, a living augmented in coming to know in love.

Beauty, I would say, brings us closer to this loving knowing. It brings us closer to the erotics of knowing, perhaps even the agapeics, but I cannot dwell on this right now. In the main I now want to attend to the stress on univocal determinability that is worthy of note when the scientific orientation will express itself in determining certain structures as necessary for a living being to be alive at all. Suppose we consider the integrity of a living organism. The project of objectification might be satisfied with the determination of structures in so far as they can be expressed in the precisions of mathematical formulations. Well and good: without structure we seem left with a mere formless indeterminacy. But the issue of life is not a matter of structure as such but of what *passes* in the

structuring. If we only stress structure, then structure and what is passing in the structure are disjoined from each other. We have to ask if rather here with the living organism structure indicates a *structuring* that itself cannot be simply determined in the language of structure—here now taken as an order that is fixed and determinate. One recalls Bergson's famous *élan vital*. I take this as a suggestion in the face of the tendency to a more fixed spatialization in the event of structure itself. Structure as such is not adequate to the temporalization, the becoming evident in life as life, in life as passing in the structuring and not just formulated in the fixed structure. The *élan vital* is rejected, of course, by scientists, because it resists precise univocalization. But perhaps the issue of life is not just one of scientific determinability and precise univocalization but rather a question of *passing qua passing*.

We do speak of life as passing. Structure is not a passing, though it may enable passage. Passing qua passing exceeds structure. There is no necessary life in structure qua structure. Is structure itself self-explicatory? You might say that it is immanently determining, indeed self-determining in the case of *organic structure*. There is obviously something to this: here is dynamic structure, since it unfolds in an active formation, proceeding from an immanent principle. If this is so, there is an *energy* of structure that reveals a (self) structuring that just as passing cannot be just a structure. There is structure perhaps but the life that passes in the structure and as structure is not just a structure. Should we call these structures a matter of infrastructure – and then refer to what passes in and through the infrastructure? But if so, the point cannot be a dualism of infrastructure and what passes through it. This is a case where the great question of Yeats is apposite: how can we tell the dancer from the dance? Here we cannot tell—in an absolutely univocal way. In life, we cannot make an absolute division between infrastructure and what passes along it. This is especially so if we are dealing with an immanent becoming of life. This passing of life is a determining beyond determination. It is not beyond all determination but beyond absolutely univocal determination which insists it is simply this and not that. For what is at issue is the transition *between* this and that—a transition that is not itself this or that. And so once again we are confronted with thresholds. These are not fixed boundaries, but moving thresholds, so to say. This is so, since the transitions here insinuate themselves into the determination of both this and that. And this means

once again the “this” and the “that” cannot be univocally fixed in an absolute way. They too are what they are in becoming, in transition.

In sum, to identify any structure of life there must be presupposed something other than structure. The question is whether a purely objective account of any structure of life can be adequate to the passing of life qua passing.<sup>3</sup> It is not that determinate objectivities are to be slighted. The becoming of an organism, say, reveals a highly complex structure and a true investigation of its being tries to do justice to the amazingly intricate determinacy of its unfolding. Still to identify life in terms of structure presupposes life as living and lived in a non-structural sense. Structures as such, like mathematical formulations, even of life, do not themselves live. The recognition of life passes beyond structure.

Take the case of something beautiful, important for my chosen theme, for instance, of the live song of a bird. Its music can be sometimes strikingly beautiful. It can also be measured, the determinacies of sounds studied, the connection with environment, and communication between mates explored, and so on. But none of this exhausts the living happening of the singing qua singing. What passes in and through the bird, what passes between this bird and other birds, what joy of being at all is sung out under the embracing sky, what is communicated in the song: to grant that all this is not so easy to objectively measure does not entail one derides objective measure. Suppose the music has something to do with the living subjectivity of the bird—the selving of its transient being? The singing is the living integrity of the being in communication with what is other to itself and with itself too as other. There is no derogation from determinacy but rather the granting of an *overdeterminacy* in the happening as such. There is something more in communication in the happening of song. While determinate it is more than determinate, it is overdeterminate.

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<sup>3</sup> A rose flowers out of the earth. The rose is beautiful though the earth is dirty. Something shimmers in the appearance of the rose though the earth from which it blooms is heavy and dull. The earth is a surface as well as a ground, and what shows itself on the surface is intimately related to what is in the ground, but it is more than its own enabling conditions. What passes from the earth and into the seed that shoots up into the earth as the blooming rose? It is not just the earth; not just the seed; but the fertile life that must be buried in the earth to rise to the surface of the earth and above the earth. The laws of material nature are not themselves material. The law of gravity is not heavy, for instance—it does not fall, for it cannot be dropped or thrown, or leap. Flowers are beautiful but we do not (tend to) eat them.

The making of music connects us with the long tradition stretching back to the Pythagoreans which connect mathematics with harmonies, and well expressed by Leibniz who highlights the connection with determinability when, for example, he says: “Music is a hidden arithmetic exercise of the soul, which does not know that it is counting” (*Musica est exercitium arithmeticae occultum nescientis se numerare animi*. Letter to Christian Goldbach, April 17, 1712).<sup>4</sup> Music is unknowing mathematics. Singing does not know that secretly it is arithmetical determination. From the view I am suggesting, one wonders if it is the opposite that is more truly the case: not that music is secretly mathematics, but that *mathematics is a music the intellect does not know it is singing*. It is worth asking if song is more in communication with the overdeterminate, in which structure determinately participates but which it does not and can never exhaust. If we were to use the terms of another great mathematician and scientist, and connect music with the *esprit de finesse* and arithmetic with the *esprit de géométrie*, Leibniz’s God comes across more as a God of geometry than a God of finesse.<sup>5</sup> The God of finesse is a God of music—a God of living beauty. One thinks of the justly famous jubilation of Augustine: *Sero te amavi ! pulchritudo tam antiqua, et tam nova, sero te amavi!...* Living beauty, older than all age and younger than all youth. The God of finesse is one who sings the world into being and continues to sing it in being, in and through and with the cooing coaxing dovebird spirit. This God is living not dead, this God is singing before calculating. For singing structuring is more than and before mathematical structure. The music of the spheres is not due to the geometry, the geometry of the heavens is due to the music.

## INTERLUDE I

### ON OBJECTIVISTIC NON-RECOGNITION OF THE LIVING

I offer two pictures of a revealing *disconnection* between the objectivistic reduction and the saturated surface of things. *First*: Descartes, it has been claimed, conducted vivisection experiments on animals. Animals are automata, they have

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<sup>4</sup> Schopenhauer cleverly reformulated this in the first book of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*: *Musica est exercitium metaphysicis occultum nescientis se philosophari animi*. Music is a hidden metaphysical exercise of the soul, which does not know that it is philosophizing.

<sup>5</sup> See Desmond, *God and the Between*, Chapter 3.

no souls. The automaton reveals a mechanical autonomy in the sense of being entirely determined by the soul-less self-law (*auto-nomos*) inscribed in it. We stick a knife in the animal and it seems to scream in pain but animals, who have no anima, feel no pain. They mimic our behaviour but they are soulless machines. So the pigs squeal when we cut into their living flesh. The squeal of the flesh is the surface of the thing. The reality is no pain. The pigs have no soul. Why then do we want to stop our ears to these screams? (Recall Galileo speaking of science and the "rape" of the senses.) The pigs have no pain, and if you say, listen they squeal, look they twist and kick, it is a mimicry, a counterfeit of a squeal or a shudder. The surface of things is not the thing.<sup>6</sup> We superior knowers scientifically do not hear the scream of non-human beings. The surface says life, the scientist says lifeless. The surface is nothing.

*Second:* the Dead Parrot sketch performed by Monty Python. There is a *comedy* of the surface and its denial. A customer buys a parrot, only to return to the shop to demand satisfaction, since the parrot is dead. The surface says "dead" but the seller says "alive." The surface screams a dead parrot, but no, the seller says obdurately, it is only sleeping. The seller pokes the parrot and, of course, it moves, and the seller pounces, there it is alive! He's not dead, he was only "stunned." A Norwegian Blue, he's "pinin' for the fjords." The cheated buyer explodes: "E's not pinin'! 'E's passed on! This parrot is no more! He has ceased to be! 'E's expired and gone to meet 'is maker! 'E's a stiff! Bereft of life, 'e rests in peace! If you hadn't nailed 'im to the perch 'e'd be pushing up the daisies! 'Is metabolic processes are now 'istory! 'E's off the twig! 'E's kicked the bucket, 'e's shuffled off 'is mortal coil, run down the curtain and joined the bleedin' choir invisible!! THIS IS AN EX-PARROT!!" The seller finally relents. The truth of the surface triumphs.<sup>7</sup>

What does our laughter tell us? That there is a living recognition of a living being, the denial of which generates the nonsense of cutting off our noses to spite

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<sup>6</sup> See Jonas, *Phenomenon of Life*, 55.

<sup>7</sup> One thinks here of the bird that brings forth the analytic anxiety of epistemological uncertainty: the goldfinch—real or stuffed or whatnot—at the end of the garden, in Stanley Cavell's discussion of J. L. Austin in Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, for instance, 50ff., 58, 73, 132-133, 160, 163, 194.

our faces. The laughter reveals the living recognition of the living, prior to all theories and more than our forced or false descriptions.

### ON THE SURFACE AND THE SUBJECTIVIZING REDUCTION

The above argument is that all approaches to life presuppose life as already able to relate to life, even if the preferred relation is one of reduction of the living to the non-living. This is more than a logical trick to critique the more objectivist orientation by invoking a necessary self-implication in the search for life itself, its intelligibility and truth. In fact, one of the major characteristics of the living being is some power of self-motion. It is already in passage, living itself is a passing, and in the passing the living being in some sense or other moves itself. Self-motion was one of the major characteristics that the ancients ascribed to *psyche* or *anima*, and hence to living beings. This moving is not just a matter of locomotion, the spatial displacement of an otherwise inert being from one location to another. There is the self-movement that is the becoming of the being—its self-becoming. There is an integrity at work but it is one in process. This integrity cannot be univocally fixed simply as this or that. In its becoming of itself, it is now this and now that but this and that cannot be frozen as too univocalized snapshots of instantaneity. It is both this and that, and moreover it is the transition between them. Its integrity in process is a *nisus* to be and become itself. It is an anticipation of a fuller realisation of itself, and as more fully realized, it is as *a spanning of its own timing*—a spanning that is its being gathered into a new living and more or less poised integrity of being.

The integrity in self-becoming of the living being is the basis of its ability to move itself in relation to other such integrities and through between spaces, all diversely qualified. There is a certain rootedness and spread of ontological power in the living being. Here it is as this, and in a sense rooted in itself, but what it entails a spread of itself to the space defining the parameters of its power to be. Some forms of life are more rooted—the plant. Some are more moving in this spread—witness the freer power of animals to range over their environment. All this is recognized by Aristotle in *De Anima*. But the living animated being resists reduction to more rudimentary matters in so far as the integrity in process answers to a unity that cannot be univocalized in a purely determinate way.

Something of the powers of its own self-determination is at work in its self-becoming, as well as its interplay with what is other than itself. This interplay is no less essential to defining the dynamic integrity that is itself in its process of becoming itself. The living being is transient in the double sense of being in self-becoming and in its passage between itself and other beings, living and non-living. Transience means a being's going from here to there, but its being there is itself again, so that while it moves from here, it does not just move from here, and thus comes to itself again there. Transience also means that it moves beyond itself in relation to what is other to itself. In some forms of transience, the point is not recuperation of itself—the living being is given over, or gives itself over to what is other. Transience means that the timing of the being in becoming is not only a growing and a maturing, it is also an ageing. Transience means that the interim of its time is temporary.

Here once again what shows itself on the surface is very important and it testifies there to the recognition of the living by the living. An objective science is not needed for this recognition. Rather there would be no science of life without this pre-scientific, extra-scientific recognition of life. A simple example: An animal sees an object lying there, seemingly inert. If it is willing to approach it, the important distinction for it concerns that between "living" or "dead." Is it alive or is it not? Is it friend or foe? It knows it is alive if it moves. To test it the thing is gingerly poked or prodded. If there is no reaction, no movement, a certain equivocity is settled in the direction of the diminution of danger. Recognition of the motion of life is communicated in the signs of an inward vitality on the part of the thing seen as alive, and the thing seeing what is alive, for self-motion and the animation of life are bound up with each other. There is some univocity to the outcome of recognition. Not moving, the thing is not dangerous. If it is alive, it might be either an enemy or it might be food. It might be a form of life one might eat or one which might eat one. Surfaces and the interaction of the animal with them will help it tell the difference. The testing animal is alive and in the lack or not of movement in the other thing, the recognition of life by the animal is elemental. Animals love life—even in killing—the killing that comes with eating. Humans alone are able to hate life, killing in hate, even for no purpose – though the hatred is a mutation of the love of life.

Of course, it happens that some animals in danger play at being dead—they do not move, they play possum, and the lack of movement either makes it invisible to the perceptual powers of the attacker, or its “deadness” deceives with the impression that there is nothing of interest there. Only the living can play at being dead. The dead animal does not play at being dead. An animal also could play at being dead to induce a prey to come closer, only then to pounce at the unexpected moment. There is a certain asymmetry here in that life can in a living way relate to death and the surface of death—but the dead cannot do this. Does this mean there is a certain priority of the living then also? It does mean that the recognition of life is something primitive. This is not to underestimate the way the recognition is entangled in many possibilities of equivocity. The surface is not a matter of univocal clarity. It is an equivocal showing which hides as much as shows: in showing it also hides, even as in hiding it also shows.

From this I would stress a sense of the living that is prior to objectivizing reason. In objective life living is beyond the fully objectifiable. One might speak of the energy of the “to be” which, in certain formations, flowers into dynamic integrities of being which appear as self-affirming. Life is affirming itself, and one of the notable things about life, and lost in the more objectifying account, is this entirely *intimate self-relation*. I think one could speak of a certain intimacy of life that cannot be entirely exhausted with determinable accounts that approach it from the outside. This intimacy of life is also known intimately from within in the form of a certain self-affection. When Schopenhauer, for one, talked about the will as beyond sufficient reason, he could be seen to point to this character of life that exceeds the more objective fixation by determinate reason, determining reason. This more primordial life is lived from within, and in fact all of us know something of it in our own bodies. In our being embodied, there is no absolute dualistic disjunction between awareness and being alive in a bodily sense. I speak of a certain idiocy of being. Life has this idiocy in the sense of never being entirely reducible to the more determinable generalities or universals of neutrally available reason. Reason itself participates in this idiocy which is not something absurd but something irreducible in the relation of the being to itself—a self-relation presupposed by reason itself, if reason is to know what it knows as known by me. I know—knowing as a neutral happening does not know. This is not to decry the universal, but to say that there is an intimacy that cannot be



rendered in the neutral language of abstract universals. There is a kind of *intimate universality to life* in that the living recognises the living, the living knows itself as living and recognizes other living being as living with a kind of overdeterminate innerness that exceeds both the determinacy and self-determination of any particular being. (The power of beauty is very much bound up with this intimate universality.)

This self-relation has often been the basis for emphasizing something more “subjective” about life – and this is not wrong. But just as objectification does not always do justice to the overdeterminacy of given otherness, subjectification does not always do justice to the overdeterminacy of this intimate life. Subjectification fastens on the self-relation and rightly but does not go rightly into this and rediscover the threshold spoken of above in relation to external otherness. There is the threshold of an inward otherness that marks a between, across which the transitions are between the given life and its more ultimate giving source. I will come to this next when I talk about a more metaxological understanding of living.

It is important to grant that there is a plurivocity possible to selving. I would speak of selving(s) rather than subjectivity, since again the integrity in process is evident in this. In idiotic selving it is not a matter of autistic particularity but of a living and affectionate relation to oneself. We feel ourselves prior to thinking ourselves, or even thinking as ourselves—the intimacy, the idiocy reveals a pre-objective and pre-subjective self-relation—and this is the living relation of the living being to itself. Example: We sense something of it in the morning; we have this taste of self—before the day’s determinations take over. We awake to ourselves and savour ourselves, brimming with new zest perhaps or dragging with weary disgust. This is not a determinate self-consciousness but a more floating indeterminate self-feeling—but it communicates of how we are in relation to ourselves in the world we are shortly about to engage again more determinately. This is intimate life in its transience returning to the day of its self-relation and its relation to what is beyond it. It happens at a threshold, and hence most often it is not objectified, or not yet channelled into a more determinate or self-determining subjectification.

All forms of life might be said to be marked by a more or less relatively undeveloped senses of inwardness—of selving. All things selve in that respect. To

selve is not the privilege of the human being alone. I think of Hopkins' great poem "As Kingfishers Catch Fire":<sup>8</sup> "Each mortal thing does one and the same:/ Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;/ Selves – goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,/ Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*" The surface of the thing as selving is the face of the thing. A face is the (micro)cosmos of facets that is the living surface of the selving being. Facets are surfaces and the higher integrities of being have faces that selve more and more intensively. In the sublunary world, the human being is the acme of this facing. We are a surface that faces the world, but we are our faces—the show of the intimate selving communicating itself. Is this why our faces are, in a sense, more intimate to us than even our intimate parts?

We can have many faces, and equivocity increases with surfaces like the human face. We have the ability to seem other than we are, to show half-truly and to lie, to smile and hide hate in the smile. The power of equivocal surfacing is not confined to us. In *Being and the Between*, I pointed out the equivocity of the beautiful orchid, or the being other than what one is by being what one is, in the power of camouflage that surfaces in the selvings of animals, like the chameleon. In this equivocity we find some of the reasons we often distrust surfaces. But the distrust of surfaces follows from what we learn from surfaces, not in isolation from what surfaces. The equivocity eludes complete univocal determinability, for showing is also always hiding, there are forms of showing which simultaneously are forms of keeping secret.

In any event, the self-relation of life to itself is very important and exceeds the terms of every objective determination of it. A living being is not subjective simply, has its own objectivities, but as a living integrity of being it holds itself in a self-relation that comes to feel and know itself as such. I think of this as a very elemental opening or porosity to the intimate universal—not as entailing a

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<sup>8</sup>The kingfisher is not the dead parrot of Monty Python, not the stuffed/real goldfinch of Austin/Cavell and has something of the spirit of the dovebird alive in it. There are other birds of life, for instance, the windhover of Hopkins. And birds pointing beyond death: Keats's Nightingale – "thou wast not born for death, immortal bird"; or beyond death, such as the golden birds of those great poems of Yeats's old age, "Byzantium" and "Sailing to Byzantium," birds that are "set upon a golden bough to sing/To lords and ladies of Byzantium/Of what is past, or passing, or to come." The bird may be beyond life and death, but beyond as living and not just imaged as the deathlessness of death. Only the golden sings. We do not want a base metallic metaphysics; we want a metaphysics of resurrected incarnation.

rejection of the universal as such. It demands a rethinking of the universal, in fact, not its repudiation. All living beings participate in this intimate universal, and each is the singular surfacing of the energies of its "to be" but none exhausts it. One of the signs of this participation is its generation of the intimacy of life beyond its own self-relation, beyond its own possession of its own life. (The erotics of being is the passion of life.) The being knows it does not possess its own life—but knows that in its flesh, not in its head. This is why an erotics of life surfaces—the singular participation in the intimate universal is in passage beyond itself, passage sensing itself but not possessed in the flesh. This is something beyond determination, beyond self-determination, given that the living being is a *nisus* to generate beyond itself. This is more explicitly metaxological and again I will come to this. (The example of equivocity I cited above, the orchid, is intimately related to the erotics of naturing, and indeed without equivocity, the happening of human erotics would hardly be possible at all. In the erotics of life the surfaces of flesh are flushed, even engorged, with ambiguous significance.)

It is especially evident in humans that we have life coming to know itself as living. This self-knowing is not objective reason—it is living participation. The knowing of life is also the knowing of the transience of life. This is again not the knowing of a structure but of the passage qua passage. It is the knowing of life as in the passing of life itself as passing, and knowing ourselves as participant in the passage as such. In connection with the equivocity of the erotics of life, I will here just briefly note how this self-relation can be taken in certain directions. The self-affirmation is evident in the Schopenhauerian will. What life reveals is the will to live—and this is a dark voracious energy in which we all participate and of which more often than not we find ourselves the victim. The matter at issue here is not only the nature of this "more" of life but the nature of love, and the love of this more primordial life. With Schopenhauer it has all the characteristics of a heedless *eros turannos*. The will is an erotic absolute but without anything of the *eros ouranios* (heavenly eros) of Plato. In Schopenhauer it is voraciously self-insistent without end. It victimizes us when we think we can be agents of its or our own self-determination. Its greedy self-insistence makes it something vile rather than good for Schopenhauer. We cannot truly love a life whose aimless aim is to controvert every claim to autonomous self-determination we essay. Life

is in an original guilt—it is not good to be—better not to be. We dip below the ground of the cave again.

We are still below the ground of the cave when Nietzsche tries to reverse the “yes” and “no” of Schopenhauer. The basic description of life persists. We live in foreboding of the Medusa below the surface—the horror that turns us to stone. Better to stay on the surface like the Greeks out of profundity. We are again dealing with the negotiation of thresholds but here the threshold into the darkness goes down into an abyss of horror. Elemental life is this horror. It is reminiscent of the alien into which Žižek and others like to rub our faces. Of course, *the face has gone at this depth of darkness*. But the question of the surface does not dissolve. Is the surface the mask of horror or the face of something overdeterminate with an ontological good in which we participate and can never master? And perhaps not being its master has more to do with the giftedness of its good than the ruse by which the horrifying energy makes use of us for its own self-persistence and self-perpetuation?

In our time we find in Michel Henry a notable stress on life just as self-affection. He offers a remarkable development of the self-affection. Henry seems very insistent in setting the world (objectifications) over again Life. This is too dualistic perhaps, but I see in what he is doing a certain rightness in drawing attention to something crucial about the incontrovertibility of the life at issue. He transforms the transcendental subject in the direction of a remarkable transcendental Trinitarianism, so it strikes me, and which for me is closer to Hegel than Henry might like.<sup>9</sup> I note Henry had lots of respect for Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and is right to remind us that they have seen something on the other side of objective representation, something in which we are and participate.<sup>10</sup> I think he does not see in both cases that the ontology of the “to be” is still defined by the modern evacuation of given being of all the traces of qualitative value. The “to be” is without the good of the “to be.” Better not to be, in fact. This is nihilism, even when it protests against nihilism, as in the case of

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<sup>9</sup> See Henry, *I am the Truth*.

<sup>10</sup> In the company of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Henry, one might think of *Lebensphilosophie* more generally as seeing the irreducibility of life qua lived to the objectifications of science. One thinks again of Bergson, and also of William James’s efforts to draw attention to “pure experience.”

Nietzsche. In them the resort to this other path, of the “subject” beyond the “subject” is in an ethos of devalued thereness. In Schopenhauer it leads to the evil of being, in Nietzsche to the dream of a creative self-imposing of value on the valueless flux, and eventually to the dissolving of “self” in the same flux.

These strategies are not fully true to the self-affirming of life to which Henry perhaps is more true. But this self-affection, this self-affirmation, what is it? It is life loving itself—but what is this love? It is beyond reduction and objectification, but is it also more than every subjectification. Does it require more metaxological terms, in which there is always an opening beyond the self-affirmation of life? The affirmation of life is always between self and other—always in passing in the between, the passing in which we participate. It is very difficult to give an account of it, either in determinate terms or in terms of our self-determination. For all that, it is not a mere indetermination. There is something overdeterminate at work in its life. The interim of living passage is metaxological.<sup>11</sup> On the threshold, the between is worded; the between is sung.

### **SURFACING ON THE METAXOLOGICAL THRESHOLD**

By contrast with the objectivizing and subjectivizing reductions, these are now the considerations on which we must reflect. First, there is more to life than the neutral objectivities whose otherness entails no participatory involvement, since there is an ineluctable self-affirming of life even in its denial. Second, this self-affirmation, while undeniable, points to something more than a subjective self-involvement primarily circling around itself alone. As the otherness passes to self-affirmation, self-affirmation passes to the affirmation of otherness. Life is in the passage between these, and to do justice to the passage a different view of the self-affirming and the otherness is required. Living is a between process and a metaxological passage in the between.

Life is self-affirming, but there is more at play in this affirmation than just self. Self-affirmation is not the full affirmation. One way to indicate this is to look at the way in modernity the self-insistence of the living being has been called its

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<sup>11</sup> This metaxological view is systematically developed in Desmond *Being and the Between*, Desmond *Ethics and the Between*, as well as Desmond *God and the Between*.

*conatus essendi*, its endeavor to be. We find this in Hobbes and Spinoza, for instance, and also in Levinas, though criticized there. I would say there is more to the *conatus* than self-insistence. *Self*-affirming endeavor, so described, does not pay attention to the weight of both the *natus* and the *co* of *conatus*: a being born, a being born with. There is always a relation to coming to be, a being born, from an other “with” which the being is from the beginning. This opens a doubleness in the *conatus* itself. The living being endeavoring to be is received into being itself before it comes to affirm itself as for itself. The self-affirmation of the living being risks hiding from “self” the fact that this self-affirming is always “with” what is other. It hides the truth that to be self-affirming, it must be received from an affirming that is more than itself alone, and in which it always participates. In other words, the living being as self-affirming is not the bedrock reality, since the self-affirming comes to itself as “yes” to itself because already it is “yessed” in a “being born with.” In the self-affirmation, life in a more full sense affirms itself. The overdeterminacy of life affirms itself in the self-affirmation, for self-affirmation is always more than self alone.

The *co-natus*, as a being born with, refers to what I call a *passio essendi* more primal than this endeavor to be. This passion of being is more primal because life opens us before we open to life. We are given to be as living before we give ourselves to be as determined, or self-determining, in accord with the particular form of life we are. The patience of life—in this sense of its being received from sources beyond self-affirmation—is often hidden from sight when the *conatus essendi* is wrongly claimed to be the essence of life itself. We are then prevented from looking deeper into the ontological sources at work in the incontrovertible self-affirmation. Put differently, there is a love (of life) more original than self-love, in which self-love itself participates, and which self-love distorts when it thinks itself to be the true form of love of life as such. In so loving our own life we do not love as we are lived and do not love ourselves truly.

Thus self-affirmation, in coming to itself out of being received, opens to an otherness of life that is not this or that determinate affirmation, not our own self-determination, but communicates of an enabling power in which all living beings participate. The *passio essendi* points back to the ultimate endowing source(s) of life. Suppose we start with the surface of things, start with our being in the midst of things. But we find ourselves open to things. We are open because

we are already opened. Before we come to ourselves as more reflectively thoughtful, we already are in a porosity of being, and are ourselves as this porosity of being become mindful of itself. This is one reason I would speak of living in the between in terms of an *original porosity of being*, that is neither objective nor subjective, but that nevertheless is enabling of both, while being more than both, and indeed enabling passing between both. The porosity is a between space where there is no fixation of the difference of minding and things, where our mindfulness wakes to itself by being woken up by the communication of being in its emphatic otherness. Living as non-objectifiable and as exceeding subjectification reveals the transient flow of the “to be” in this porous between. More objective and self-reflective orientations come later. Already before we more reflectively come to ourselves, in the original porosity of being there is the more primal participation, and indeed we open mindfully to it in the mode of a certain astonishment.

To be is to be surprised by life—even if with later determinations and our claim to be self-determining we produce the dulling of the surprise of the overdeterminacy of being. In the living porosity, there is no fixed boundary between there and here, between outside and inside, between below and above. There is the coming to be of life; there is the becoming of determinate life in transient passage in the between; there is a relative self-determination with certain forms of self-becoming; but there is always the overdeterminacy, the “too muchness” of what gives itself to enable the coming to be and becoming of life. We find it again in our sometimes renewed astonishment at the surprise of life itself. There is a passage from what is into the awakening of mindfulness as, before its own self-determination, opened to what communicates to it from beyond itself. We do not open ourselves; being opened, we are as an opening. Living astonishment is not the neutral knowledge of objective structure, nor is it subjectivity simply in relation to itself. Rather it awakens the porosity of mindfulness to being, in the communication of being to mindfulness, before mind comes to itself in more determinate form(s). This living astonishment correlates with a more original “coming to be” prior to the formation of different processes of determinate becoming, and prior to the more settled arrival of relatively determinate beings and processes. Beauty is one of the happenings on the surface

of things which can take our breath away and arouse wonder, that is to say, renew astonishment at the marvellous gift of life itself.<sup>12</sup>

The *passio essendi* and *conatus essendi* are always twinned, nevertheless a certain priority to the *passio* means always that life gives us to be before we come to ourselves as living. The passion of life is not originally of our willing, though the endeavor becomes our willing of life. Because of its source in the porosity of being the willing of life is always mingled with the possibility of nulling. My general sense is that the endeavor is always tempted to take over the passion of being. The active self-assertion of life overtakes the receiving of being, and to a degree tries even to null the receiving. Nevertheless, the receiving is more primordial. Truth to life entails more than endeavor on the surface of life but openness to this patience of being. To live in the *metaxu* is to be charged with remaining true to the original porosity. The *conatus* is to be given its full significance as a being “born with”—“*co-natus*”—against its contraction into just self-affirming of life. The endeavor to be is self-affirming but self-affirming itself is witness to the double condition of twinned self-relation and relation to the other—in the *co-natus* itself. One is with oneself because one is “born with.” Selving is not just self, but is a being endowed by virtue of a constitutive relativity to an other enabling source that is not oneself alone. When our selving loses any porosity to the more primal patience, its seeming self-affirmation mutates really into a kind of self-hatred. For this endeavor to be is in flight from itself, from what it is, from the patience of being that gives it to be at all in the first instance. The conditions that make possible its being at all are refused.

The *metaxu* as immanence is a given porosity of being, already in relation to what it beyond itself in being in relation to itself. If the between is porous it means that it is impossible to fixate univocally a “this side” and a “that side.” What is most important is the happening of passage between—of passing. And this in an ontological sense—coming to be, passing into being, passing, passing out of being. All the pathos of life and death are contained in passing, passage in and through the between. Passing itself suggests a between since it cannot be

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<sup>12</sup>Important here are differences between wonder in the modalities of astonishment, perplexity and curiosity. Curiosity is more tied to objectifiable determinations of life; perplexity to an indeterminacy, especially bearing on the immanent life of selving; astonishment is ontological resurrection to the wonderful overdeterminacy of the *metaxu*, and beauty is its incarnational companion. On these three see Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness*, Chapter 10.



fixed to any one moment or phase. Passing is as passing—just as a between is nothing without the enabling milieu of relatedness that sustains and goes beyond the beings upheld as existents in the relatively stabilized middle.

I suggest that this difference just indicated between *coming to be* and *becoming* has some relevance to the discussion of creation and evolution, though the relevance occurs on a level that is not customary in the reigning terms of the debate. Evolution is a becoming but every becoming presupposes a coming to be. This coming to be is not an item in a process of becoming, it is not even the process of becoming as a whole. It is more in the givenness of becoming as such—in the “that it is at all.” This is hiddenly presupposed in every becoming and in all of our approaches to becoming, the scientific theory of evolution included. To get some sense of the coming to be means being struck by the metaphysical astonishment that is amazed at the sheer being there of being. This metaphysical astonishment is not a matter of scientific curiosity and is closer to aesthetic marvelling and religious adoration.

Coming to be is a more original passage than becoming and the thought might be applied to life also. The question of the origin of life is often tied to the level of evolution as a becoming—and the effort is to articulate its scientifically warranted determination. But suppose there is an approach on the level of coming to be rather than becoming. Then there is no scientific explanation for the origin of life. It is always already presupposed by every explanation, and so in a certain sense the truer approach to life can never be the scientific one. Not only is this scientific approach a contraction of our participation in life but it can only see what is on the level of a determinate becoming. It does not metaphysically see surfaces as threshold of a coming to be—more truly a creation than a becoming. In that sense, creation is more primordial than becoming, but it is not another becoming. Hence it is more primordial than evolution also, and is not this either in terms of the big bang theory. We have to move in a different space of mindfulness. We have to see the surfaces of things differently. Rather than simply repudiate surfaces as superficial, the surfaces are the depths, if they are the thresholds of what is hyperbolic *in* immanent being, allowing and enabling passage of and to what is hyperbolic *to* immanent finite life.

This distinction of coming to be and becoming has applicability also to our tendency in modernity to put an emphasis on *self-becoming*. Recall that there is no

self-affection of life without living in relation with others. The *co-natus* is itself between self-relation and other-relation, pointing back to a more original passion of living, itself emergent in a more primal porosity which enables passing between one being and another in the plurivocal relativity of the *metaxu*. The self-affirming of life is second – out of more original porosity. If I am not mistaken the modern subjective view is witness to a certain contraction of the *conatus* to self-affirmation alone, though with this contraction there goes a kind of *expansion* of “selving,” as the self-contracted self-affirmation of the *conatus* essays to overtake the *passio essendi* entirely. And then there is no patience of being, no receptivity of life from an enigmatic endowing source. Self-generating life is misunderstood as simply for itself alone. Its self-becoming circles around itself in an entirely immanent enclosure—life is all between it and itself—there is no opening of the porous between to an endowing source of life beyond all enclosed immanence. The circle of life closes on itself, even though its life is endowed, and even though without the source it would not be, or be for itself, at all.

Oddly enough, the scientific objectivism is implicated in a related overtaking of the *passio*. For the project of objectification, while seeming to free from anthropomorphism, is another imposition on the givenness of life as such. There is no givenness, there is no received patience of being. The given conditions of life, on the surface of things, are to be reconfigured in terms of the secret *scientistic anthropomorphism*. Not surprisingly, this scientific objectivism passes from the self-affirmation of life to a kind of mutation of love of life into hatred of the given conditions of life as other to us. A tyrannical autonomy (*autonomia turannos*) would impose on the neutralized conditions of life what it takes to be worthy of affirmation, and what is worthy of affirmation must serve it and it alone.<sup>13</sup> The de-humanization strangely serves a different project of the human. There is no patience for any givenness of life as such, except the waiting game that is needed to allow the day to come when we will be its masters and possessors. The anti-anthropomorphic project secretly serves us once again, and there is no true between. Between us and the otherness of life, the entire project is, in the final reckoning, a matter between us and ourselves. Even the inhuman, the non-human, is a mirror in which we see only ourselves. We see horror but the horror is the mirror of our own hatred of life as given.

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<sup>13</sup> See Desmond, “Autonomia.” This is a recurrent theme in *Ethics and the Between*.

## INTERLUDE II

### LIFE GRANTED ON METAXOLOGICAL THRESHOLDS

I offer now four saturated surfaces which illuminate us about living on a metaxological threshold.

*First surface at the beginning of life:* The scream of the newly born infant on entry into life. Some will think of the scream in terms of horror at life. Lear: "When we are born, we cry that we are come to this great stage of fools." The scream is Munch's face before the horror of being. But is it quite so? For when the infant bawls there is relief and delight. The infant is alive and its scream communicates the self-affirmation of life. Were all quiet, we would worry something was wrong, something amiss. When there is no noise, we fear death. The infant affirms its own life, it communicates beyond its own life. This is being born as *co-natus*: from another, self-affirming, crying out, reaching out. We come to be from another, we are as reaching to another. What do we need to recognize the scream thus as the sign of life? Not science, certainly. And there is nothing neutrally objective about this recognition. Even in the self-affirming of the infant's life, there is also a communication beyond itself, though it knows it not, and thus there is more to the self-affirmation of life than self.

*Second surface from the middle of life:* I cite an interesting observation of Wittgenstein:

Today I saw a poster saying: "‘Dead’ Undergraduate speaks." The inverted commas mean: "He isn't really 'dead'." He isn't what people call dead. They call it 'dead' not quite correctly.... It suddenly struck me: "If someone said 'He isn't dead, although by the ordinary criteria he is dead – couldn't I say: "He is not only dead by the ordinary criteria; he is what we call 'dead'." "If you now call him, 'alive,' you're using language in a queer way, because you are almost deliberately preparing misunderstandings. Why don't you use some other word, and let 'dead' have the meaning it

already has?”<sup>14</sup> In general, if you say: “He is dead” and I say “He is not dead” no one would say: “Do they mean the same by ‘dead’? In the case where a man has visions I wouldn’t offhand say: “He means something different.”<sup>15</sup>

I take these remarks to be striking reminders of the strange ways we sometimes use words. Yet Wittgenstein’s remarks settle no issue, since what we mean by “dead” and “alive” still are shrouded in mystery. What are the meanings “death” and “life” we already have? Even though we know, in one sense, what we are talking about, in another sense, we do not know. Ordinary usage will only get us so far. As far as the threshold of mystery: the surplus surface of too much, or almost nothing. Wittgenstein’s dedication is to the “ordinary” meaning – but what is “ordinary”? It is on the surface of things, you might say, but what does it mean to take something at “face value”? It is not at all clear what “face value” is. And what if one were to think of resurrection? How ordinary can this be, or how extraordinary? How we use words will take us so far, but yet there will be something stunning about what surfaces – resurrects itself, from the grave of ordinariness, and faces us. Should we say that the Misfit in Flannery O’Connor’s, “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” is closer to the mystery of surfacing when he growls: Jesus was the only one that ever raised the dead...and he shouldn’t have done it? Or is the Misfit a kind of ordinary-language philosopher? He murders—though not to dissect.<sup>16</sup>

*Third surface from later in life:* The process of *ageing* as revealing, in the passing between of life, something neither objective nor subjective but both. Ageing is important for the time of our life, for the time of living. In the timed body, aging makes finiteness evident on the surface. True, often now we try to refigure that surface—with cosmetic surgery, for instance. We struggle to keep time at bay by means of the youth of the surface. The struggle is always finally lost. In this respect also ageing is very much connected with beauty. Beauty blooms but it is also fugitive and transient. It passes and it passes away. We more easily find

<sup>14</sup> Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations*, 65.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>16</sup> See also Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, with the statue of Hermione coming back to life at the end in the final scene. See Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*.

beauty in youth than in age. We console ourselves by saying that the former is a surface physical thing, while in the latter we may find beauty of spirit or soul, which is not tied to the beauty of the surface. All this may be quite true, and yet the importance of the surface of things is not to be denied. Ageing is a surfacing of time in our embodied being, and none can evade this surfacing, even if we can postpone it provisionally.

The between character of ageing is instructive. Ageing is not objective, is not subjective. It is both. It happens to us; but it is something sensed intimately. The time of the body is a living time, but it is transient and mortal. The loss of beauty on the surface goes with the time of our embodiment. Something is passing, neither subjective nor objective, and yet both. What is it that passes? It is life that passes, but as passing it still is life, and hence in another sense, it does not pass. It is what it is in passing, and yet still is life. And so the old do not always intimately know their own time as old. Lived from within, as lived, it still is young for itself, even if is for others it shows the signs of decrepitude.

When we think of ageing we think of old age, but why should not analogous considerations apply to youth, being young. I mean the between condition of being neither objective nor subjective, of being a threshold of passing life. For surely the sense of the passing as passing applies as much to the process of growing as to that of declining, to becoming as to undoing, to passing to blooming as to passing the zenith and falling away from it. What is passing is held in a more pleasing poise on the surface of things with a younger beauty. The surface poise of old age yields to slackness in the tuning of the surface of things. What passes in the slackness is as enigmatic in its passing away as what passes more vigorously in the younger bloom. It is not a structure, not a form. It is a forming, an animating, an enlivening—but it is also a deforming, an anaesthetizing, a deadening. The sere, the yellow leaf was once lush with green.

*Fourth surface close to the end:* I am thinking of a last illumination of life on the surface in *King Lear*, from almost beyond life and death, from life and its last breath. By comparison with the comic farce of Monty-Python, this last surface thresholds on a tragic extreme. The pig squeals, the dead parrot does not scream, the new born infant bawls, but Lear howls at the death of Cordelia: "Howl, howl,

howl, howl.”<sup>17</sup> King Lear is trying to ascertain if his beloved daughter is alive or dead. It is the surface that is attended to: Is there a breath in a mirror, does a feather stir with her breath? How delicate the images of life are: a breath that will mist a mirror—so fragile its being there is almost not there at all, even when life is thriving—an evanescent almost nothing that in death is indeed now nothing; a breath that will move a feather, but this is a mortal breath. It is an endowed breath that had its time. It is not quite the spirit of God that will be more than a feather floating, though it descend like a dove to brood on the earth, or ascend to the sky, also like a bird that for a while one can still follow and see, and then, almost instant-like, where before it was, it now no longer is, and it seems it has as if become nothing. A person has breathed their last. Why do we stand on the earth looking up? There is huge extremity in Lear’s outcry when he realizes that the life is irrevocably gone:

And my poor fool is hang’d! No, no, no life!  
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,  
And thou no breath at all? Thou’lt come no more,  
Never, never, never, never, never!  
Pray you, undo this button: thank you, sir.  
Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,  
Look there, look there!

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<sup>17</sup> KING LEAR (5, 3):

Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones:  
Had I your tongues and eyes, I’d use them so  
That heaven’s vault should crack. She’s gone for ever!  
I know when one is dead, and when one lives;  
She’s dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass;  
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,  
Why, then she lives.

KENT: Is this the promised end?

EDGAR: Or image of that horror?

ALBANY: Fall, and cease!

KING LEAR: This feather stirs; she lives! if it be so,  
It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows  
That ever I have felt.....

Perhaps never has this word “never” been uttered with such agony. Of course, “never” is the negative counterpart to the word “once.” The “once” of life—there in its mortal preciousness, its beloved beauty. Think how far we are from the neutralized thereness of the objectivizing reduction and how far too from the self-involvement of the subjectivizing reduction. The “once” is a gift of received beauty that gathers something ontologically good and unique to singular incarnation. The “never” is the return of the given to the enigma of the nothing from which it was given to be.

Cordelia is dead. Will there be more? Life beyond life...and death? If one were then to speak of saturated surfaces it would be so in a paradoxical sense. The surface is as much a place of surplus as an opening into emptiness. It is the threshold between the plenitude of life and the emptying of its gift into death. It is at once both the surplus and the emptying. The surface is a little like eros: a double creation of a poverty and resource. Is the resource a *poros*, a porosity, beyond all mortal *penia*, within whose between-space opens a threshold between humans and divinity, mortals and immortals—a threshold which can only be crossed in death?

### COMING TO THE SATURATED SURFACE: HELL AND TRANSIENT BEAUTY

In these four saturated surfaces we have passed from birth into life, and through life to death, and perhaps beyond life and death to life. What then of philosophizing on the surface of things? In this last reflection I would like to return briefly to the connection between beauty and the porosity of being, with reference to transience on an extreme threshold, putting the accent on our being as suffering, as exposed to what is other to ourselves. Beauty opens and reopens the porosity of our being; but there is a vulnerability in being porous. Just as there can be a transcending upwards there can be transcending downward, and the latter can mean a descent into hell, though there are different ways of descending.

I recur to the theme with which I opened, that is, a kind of “transcending” downward, below the ground of the underground—into hell. I recount the story of the Bull of Phalaris. As a sacrifice to Apollo, Phalaris the tyrant sent to the

oracle at Delphi the statue of a magnificent bronze bull. In his communication with the priests at Delphi, Phalaris recounts how he was given the bull by Perilaus. Perilaus was an architect/sculptor and constructed the bull as a kind of torture machine. A person could be put into the bronze bull and a fire lit beneath it, and as the heat spread and was communicated the person imprisoned would “feel the heat” and scream. The fiendish part of the construction had to do with the fact that reed pipes could be placed in the nostrils of the bull and they would transform the screams of the tortured prisoners into sweet music. The screams of the tortured are turned into “the sweetest possible music by the auloi, piping dolefully and lowing piteously.”<sup>18</sup>

“A thing of beauty is a joy forever,” so sang John Keats, but qua contraption, this work of art transmogrifies the excruciating pain experienced by those being burned alive into exquisite music designed to delight the tyrant. The shrieks of mortal despair serve as the source of aesthetic pleasure but those who hear the music do not hear the shrieks. The art work can serve, on the one hand, to reveal hell, on the other hand, to conceal hell. The perplexity this story poses for us: Is this then what beauty is: music wrung from hell, concealing hell as it is, and making it look like a heaven? The pipes bring forth lovely sounds, but what surfaces disguises the shrieks of the tormented. Is this beauty: a delicate gloss on dis-mal darkness? The surface of the beautiful hides the working of hell.

Remember, however, the equivocity of saturated surfaces as thresholds of transition. Think doubly of the night: night can be the time of nightmares, of blindness, of crying out from abysses of desolation and sorrow, of being overcome by monsters, of helpless struggle to escape, of dreadful quasi-movement, when one moves and one cannot move, lives but does not live. If one can be devastated by night, the night is also the time of rest and refreshment. It brings sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care, the balm of the darkness, the tenderness of love, the softness of the shining moon and the healing nocturnal quiet when the longing for eternity wakes. In the dark divine dreams are given and messengers from beyond this life come to visit. Remember also that equivocity when, standing on the surface of the earth, an intrusive light so assaults us that we are victim of “light-pollution.” Too much of the garish light of

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<sup>18</sup>See Harmon, *Lucian*, 17-19. Some versions of the story downplay the cruel tyranny of Phalaris, in others it is foregrounded.



the metallic metaphysics, and we can no longer see. We lose the mystery of things. Life is night as well as day. We need the dreams of the night for the health of the day. These dreams might mingle horror and beauty, and yet without sleep and dreaming we go mad in the noonday glare. Beauty too is a seductive night of the soul that wakes its erotic porosity.

The equivocity surfaces here in relation to hell. For there might be a different sense in which the artist turns hell into song—there may be a redemptive sense. One is reminded of Orpheus, and his music in Hades. There are different ways of being in the underworld. His music could bring tears even in the underworld, and melt hard hearts. Enchanting song reopens even in hell the primal porosity. There is another way of being in hell, and communicating a power that is more than hell. Going below the surface can take us into chambers of horror, and we must spend our season in hell, but if this were the end of the matter, and there was no golden night of the agapeic heart, we would have no standing anew on the surface of the earth.

One of the most beautiful songs of the surface might be found in the final few lines of the *Inferno* of Dante. Virgil and Dante descend into the hell hole, but at a certain central point their descent turns into its opposite, namely, ascent out of hell, and upwards once again to the surface of the earth. They climb up over the fixed Lucifer and climb beyond hell. The frozen Lucifer is beyond all porosity, all permeability: fixed eternally in himself as himself—a parody of divine eternity. The centre of hell is the closure of the porosity onto itself, and instead of the opening of the soul to what is beyond it, like the frozen Lucifer it weeps eternally, as in its mouth it masticates the great traitors, Judas, Brutus and Cassius. Virgil and Dante ascend beyond the frozen Lucifer and into an opening upwards. The journey through the *Inferno* has been long and replete in many scenes of horror and depravity. But this ascent now, once having passed through the heart of darkness, takes places quickly. The brevity of these last lines is notable, by comparison with the previous sojourn in hell and journey through it. But one feels there is a new invigoration of life palpable in the lines as they come to the surface and they two behold again the stars. These lines, ending on the threshold of a fresh beginning, are beautiful and worth recall:

My guide and I entered that hidden road  
 To make our way back up to the bright world.  
 We never thought of resting while we climbed.  
 We climbed, he first and I behind, until,  
 Through a small round opening ahead of us  
 I saw the lovely things the heavens hold,  
 And we came out once more to see the stars.<sup>19</sup>

It is night over the world when the poets come to the surface. But there is a light that shines on things, and in the night it is the borrowed light of the stars. Still more, there is a source of light above the sublunary world, beyond the stars. In the beauty of the night we do not directly see the sun but we are not entirely cut off from its light. To come thus to the surface of things, after Hell, we begin again to open to the marvel of things. We even begin to wonder if the saturated surface of things is the place of consecration where God gives himself for praise.

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<sup>19</sup> Dante, *Divine Comedy*, 133-39. Lo duca e io per quel cammino ascoso/intrammo a retornar nel chiaro mondo;/e sanza cura aver d'alcun riposo, /salimmo sù, el primo e io secondo,/ tanto ch'i' vidi de le cose belle/che porta 'l ciel, per un pertugio tondo./E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle.

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