

Conatus or gift

On Agamben's 'Absolute Immanence' (Presentation After 1968 seminar, 5th of October 2012)

The key argument, why Agamben has a problem or a certain unease with Deleuze's idea of life that at the limit seems to become indistinguishable from bare life, is to be found in the paragraph entitled 'A life', on the pages 229 and 230 of Agamben's essay 'Absolute Immanence'. All hinges on the concept of separation that Agamben introduces into Deleuze's idea of impersonal life. Agamben points to the two figures of life that are used by Deleuze in his last text 'Immanence: a life...': on one hand Riderhood, a literary figure out of Dickens's last novel *Our mutual friend*, on the other hand the preindividual expressions to be found in the smallest infants. Riderhood is a dying man whom no one liked during his life-time, because he played a lot of dirty tricks on too many people. But the moment he dies there is a certain tender attention that isn't paid to Riderhood as person but, as Dickens has put it, to 'the spark of life within him' that is, as Dickens continues, 'curiously separable from himself now, and they have a deep interest in it, probably because it is life and they are living and must die' (p. 229). The second figure that Agamben mentions to be used by Deleuze to exemplify how immanence appears as life are very young children 'that all resemble each other and have no individuality, but they have singularities, a smile, a gesture, a grimace, events that are not subjective characters. The smallest infants are traversed by an immanent life that is pure potentiality, even beatitude through suffering and weaknesses' (p. 230).

With these two figures, the child and the dying man, Agamben criticises Deleuze to have produced two cyphers of bare biological life that are defined through their separability from the political life of the city and the person which thus can be excluded from its rules and laws. In other words, Agamben asks whether the limit-figures of the dying man and the child turn out to be Deleuze's *homines sacri*. Hinting at this direction, Agamben emphasises that Dickens uses the word 'abeyance' to define 'the spark of life' in Riderhood, a term originating in legal parlance indicating the suspension of rights that start to oscillate between validity and invalidity.

By introducing the category of separation into Deleuze's idea of the individuation of immanence, Agamben is able to relate Deleuze's philosophy of life to the three instances in the history of philosophy, science and politics, which to his view are decisive, in order to grasp the isolation of bare biological life in the West:

—firstly, Aristotle's definition of the category of the nutritive capacity as the principle that grounds life by presenting the very force through which life belongs to a thing;

—secondly, Bichat's distinction between animal life defined by its relation to an external world and organic life, which is nothing else than a 'habitual succession of assimilation and excretion', later called vegetative life;

—thirdly, Foucault’s definition of biopower the object and process of which is grasped by Agamben as the generalised making and administering of what has been categorised as nutritive and vegetative life in Aristotle and Bichat.

Though Agamben pinpoints the distances separating Deleuze from the Aristotelian discourse of nutritive life—he mentions the idea of desubjectification and the rejection of hierarchic divisions that partition life in series of oppositions like nutritive life and relational life, animal life and organic life, *zoe* and *bios*—the real distance between Deleuze’s idea of impersonal life and bare life is disguised by Agamben. This has to do with the fact that Agamben defines Deleuze’s impersonal life as a separated and separable biological bare instance. While Agamben takes this formulation from Dickens’s text—‘the spark of life curiously separable from himself now’—, Deleuze uses another formulation in ‘Immanence: a life...’: ‘Between his life and his death’, Deleuze writes about Riderhood, ‘there is a moment that is only that of a life playing with death.’ That what is in-between is defined by Deleuze as difference in itself; it presents the non-separable itself, the articulation of an interval between two or more terms of a series of relations.

We have to turn to Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza’s concepts of the individual and the *conatus* to understand this. The individual in Spinoza is an entirely transindividual category. Each individual body is a composite. In the rudimentary sketch of physics in the second book of the *Ethics*, Spinoza defines each body to be composed by an infinity of most simple bodies. An individual is nothing else than a provisional entity in which infinite multiplicities of most simple bodies are subsumed under a certain relation of movement. Drawing on Gueroult’s interpretation Deleuze emphasises that Spinoza rejects the notion of atoms in this context. The most simple bodies each individual is composed of aren’t atoms in the sense of indivisible last elements but infinite sets of bodies. These bodies are infinitely small or vanishing terms that occur in infinite sets. The category of the infinitely small is the tool used in the 17th century to think actual infinity, that is to say the existence of the infinite in the finite. There is not enough time to discuss this in detail, but important for our discussion today is to realise that in Spinoza individuals do constantly exchange elements among each other. They reproduce, change, increase or diminish their individuality by subsuming and resubsuming infinite sets of entities under a certain ratio. This mechanical causality of bodies encountering and displacing each other, building bigger entities or decomposing into smaller ones is supplemented by a causality that is defined as expression and explication of the potentiality of these composites conceived by Deleuze as the individuation not of extensive but intensive differences. To both types of causality—the de/composition of infinite multiplicities of bodies and the explication of intensive differences—the logic of separation is foreign. That is why for Deleuze and Spinoza, there is no separable ‘spark of life’ characterising the force of an individual. The *conatus* is nothing else than the potentiality to act immanent to each provisional individual through which it is capable of expressing and explicating the differential relations of which it is composed between a minimal and a maximal threshold.

At the end of ‘Absolute Immanence’ Agamben attempts at identifying nutritive life in Aristotle and impersonal life in Deleuze through the figure of self-preservation, particularly drawing on Benveniste’s definition of nutrition. He states that ‘[i]t is worth noting that when Aristotle defines the characteristic functions of the nutritive soul in *De anima*, he makes use of an expression that closely recalls Spinoza’s determination of *conatus*

sese conservandi. Aristotle writes: nutritivity preserves its substance. This principle of the soul is a potentiality capable of preserving whoever possesses it as such' (p. 236).

This analogy is significant for Agamben's displacements of Spinozian categories by Aristotelian ones. When Spinoza starts to formulate the idea of the *conatus*, he first articulates it in physical terms following Galilei's law of inertia according to which an entity remains in movement until it is encountered by another movement. This formulation rejects the model of causality that was to be found in Aristotelian physics in which each movement was caused by an unmoved mover. It equally rejects the teleology of natural places in Aristotle, to which each thing strives according to its own materiality, in order to come to a rest. While writing the *Ethics*, Spinoza changes the concept of *conatus* liberating it from the context of Galilean physics and turning it into an ontological notion of an immanent excess each provisional thing is capable of. The formulation of the principle of the *conatus* in the third book of the *Ethics*, proposition 6, reads: 'Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being.' It has been Matheron who emphasised in 'Le problème de l'évolution de Spinoza du *Traité Théologico-Politique* au *Traité Politique*' that in the *Ethics* Spinoza stops to use the formulation that each thing strives to persevere in its state and favors the formulation to persevere in its being. Replacing 'state' by 'being' indicates that Spinoza stops conceptualising *conatus* in conservative terms in the sense of a thing protecting its condition and instead defining it as practical affirmation of the thing's essence that is actualised in the course of this affirmation itself. To persevere in one's being does not mean to not die, to preserve oneself, to nourish, but to give oneself all affections one is possible of and thus explicating the singularity one is by becoming it. At stake in this process of creative determination is at the limit a partial teleology without telos that in no way is totalising the plane of immanence, but synthesising one singular relationality of it. As André Tosel has put it in *Du matérialisme de Spinoza*, '[l]'excentration et l'intériorité tout à la fois du mode à la substance désignent simplement l'objectivité d'un processus qui produit pour nous une fin immanente (la causalité par soi) mais qui n'a pas pour fin en soi cette causalité' (p. 34). Hence, we can conclude that neither the idea of *conservatio* nor the idea of gift proposed by Agamben at a later point in the text—a thing striving into its letting-be, its self-giving or taking-place—agree with Spinoza's definition of *conatus*.

That is why, the definition of nutritive life that Agamben finally finds in Benveniste in the figure of the curdling of milk—'the natural growth of milk to let it attain the state toward which it is tending' (p. 237)—misses the key operation of striving: the production of a difference that processually actualises the relation existing between at least two series of causes and has been described in *Difference and Repetition* by Deleuze as unilateral distinction: 'Instead of something distinguished from something else, imagine something which distinguishes itself—and yet that from which it distinguishes itself does not distinguish itself from it We must therefore say that difference is made, or makes itself, as in the expression "make the difference".' The curdling of milk is instead the expression used by Althusser in 'The underground current of the materialism of the encounter' to designate the fixation of structures happening after the event.

It is important in this context to recall that Spinoza and Hobbes use the notion of *conatus* to finally and absolutely break with the scholastic problem of contingency which stemmed from the antinomies immanent to the idea of the *creatio ex nihilo*. At the limit, some

scholastic philosophers arrived at the idea that this world can only be conserved in its regularity through God's continued activity, his *creatio continua*. If we turn to Agamben's article on Bartleby, we will see that in his discourse on potentiality he doesn't draw on Spinoza's thinking of necessity in which the the category of the im/possible is completely destroyed, but on kabbalist and neoplatonic ideas of the contingency of the world vis à vis a God of absolute potentiality, a God who incorporates the *nihil* and is capable of not being and not acting. Hence, Agamben's article on Bartleby culminates in the questioning of the principle of sufficient reason. For Deleuze, however Spinoza is singular in the history of philosophy, because in him he finds an idea of the ground that does not lead to a privative, emanationist or negative model of the determination of things. Let us put it this way: if to ground means to determine the indeterminate, Deleuze searches in Spinoza for a type of 'determination which is not opposed to the indeterminate and does not limit it'. Deleuze proposed that this type of determination can be found in Spinoza's idea of immanent causality.

K. Diefenbach