

Life Death and Differance

Philosophies of Life between Hegel and Derrida

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The Man “appears” as a being that is always conscious of its death, often accepts it freely and, sometimes, gives it to himself voluntarily. Therefore, the “dialectical” or anthropological philosophy of Hegel is, ultimately, a philosophy of death.

—A. Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (1947, 537)

By associating it with sacrifice and, thereby, with the primary theme of representation (in art, in festivals, in performances), I have sought to demonstrate that Hegel’s reaction is fundamental human behavior . . . it is par excellence the expression endlessly repeated by tradition . . . it was essential for Hegel to gain consciousness of negativity as such, to capture its horror—here the horror of death—by upholding and by looking the work of death right in the face. Hegel, in this way, is less opposed to those who “recoil” than to those who say: “it is nothing.” He seems to distance himself most from those who react with gaiety.

—G. Bataille, *Hegel, Death and Sacrifice* (1990, 24)

The Idea, immediate and natural life, relieves, abolishes and preserves, itself, dies in raising itself to the spiritual life. So life develops itself in contradiction and negativity; the metaphor between the two lives is only this movement of relieving negativity. . . . The same movement in the Encyclopedia, at the end, concerning Sa [absolute Spirit]. The third term returning to immediacy, this return to simplicity being brought about by the relief [rélève: Aufhebung] of difference and mediation, natural life occupies both the end and the beginning. In their ontological sense, the metaphors are always of life; they put rhythm into the imperturbable equality of life, of being, of truth, of filiation: physis. Thus the Hegelian system commands that it be read as a book of life.

—J. Derrida, *Glas* (1986, 83)

THE EXERGUES OF MY ARTICLE ARE THREE “FRENCH” DEFINITIONS OF THE Hegelian philosophy, from Kojève, Bataille, and Derrida. To prevent myself and you from being tempted to recognize in those exergues the triadic movement of dialectics, let me remark that what follows is a fourth and longer exergue for a work in progress on Derrida and life, in between science and philosophy.

For Kojève, the Hegelian philosophy would be a philosophy of death; for Derrida, a philosophy of life—or rather, the difference is subtle but decisive—a book of life. Between the two stands Bataille, for whom it would be the philosophical translation of the fundamental attitude of man before death, that is, recoiling.

To grasp the implications of Derrida’s reading—with respect to the legacy of Kojève and Bataille from within the context of the French Hegelianism, and with respect to the Hegelian philosophy, but, above all, from within deconstruction itself—a long detour is required. I will not refer further to Kojève and Bataille, but, keeping in mind their definitions, I hope that, at the end of the detour, it will be clear that not only does Derrida propose a different interpretation of the logic at work in the Hegelian philosophy, but also he brings forth an interpretation that no longer appeals to logic itself or, at least, appeals to another logic. From this perspective, I will focus on the third stake, the one that interests me more, that is, the role that the deconstruction of the Hege-

lian philosophy of life plays within the development of deconstruction itself, with Hegel, but far beyond him.

I have been working on the question of life in Derrida's oeuvre for years tracing out a risky hypothesis. This question would be the red thread of deconstruction, more or less hidden, and the genesis and structure of difference should be thought on the basis of it. Furthermore, the very issues of the survival, the auto-immunity, the animal, and, more generally, the interpretation of literature, of psychoanalysis, and of the political would be inscribed in that question.¹

The point of departure of my work is the reading of the unpublished seminar *La vie la mort*, which Derrida gave in 1975, and whose final part, "To Speculate—on Freud," was published in *The Postcard*. The first part is devoted to the biology of the time and, in particular, to the reading of François Jacob's *The Logic of Life*, a book in which Derrida finds the resources to account for the genesis and structure of the living in terms of trace and text.² The seminar begins under the aegis of Hegel, whose authority would consist in giving the most accomplished formulation of the philosophical concept of life. It is with Hegel that one must engage to formulate a different concept of life, freed from the metaphysical presuppositions that, to begin with the opposition between life and death, could secretly influence, once again, the sciences of life. This is what is at stake in contemporary biology, which aims at emancipating itself from philosophy, as well as in the deconstruction of the concept of life.

Since the opening of the seminar, as it happens in the text from *Glas* that I quoted as exergue, Derrida draws attention on the double position of life in the Hegelian philosophy, at the beginning and at the end, that is, in the *Philosophy of Nature*, in the transition from nature to subjective spirit, and in the first moment of the last syllogism of the *Science of Logic*, in which life is the first determination of the absolute Idea. This is not by accident: we could easily suppose that, when referring elsewhere for a discussion of the problem, Derrida alludes precisely to *Glas*:

In saying "life death" I do not mean to identify life and death, to say that life is death, pro-position that, as you know, can be recalled in multiple forms, through several, well known ways. The white trait between life and death does

not come about to replace neither an *et* nor an *est*. In the dialectical logic of Hegel, the *est* of judgment comes here, as the place of the contradiction and of its *Aufhebung*, to enunciate that life is death, that it posits itself in its syllogism through the mediation of death, that, according to the dynamic and productive meaning of the word *est*, *est* is the process of death (the death of natural life *qua* the birth of spiritual life) through which the *est* becomes itself Life, the being of the *est* becomes again Life in a dissymmetry that I have attempted to analyze elsewhere and in which life is marked twice, as a moment of the process of the Idea and of being and, then, *without* death, which remains always natural, at the moment of the absolute Idea, at the end of the *great logic*, when Hegel writes “only the absolute idea is being, imperishable life, the truth that knows itself and is entirely truth.” At this moment, the last moment, life has no longer opposition, opposite, the opposition took place in it, for it to reappropriate itself, but life has no longer an other before itself. The *est* of life death is *of life, being is life*, death cannot be thought at all. Here it is where the oppositional logic leads us, when it gives the greatest attention to death (it is the case of Hegel): to the suppression of the opposition, to the relief in the elevation of one term and in the process of its reappropriation. Life is this *reappropriation* of being, it is being: only the absolute Idea is being, imperishable life (nondeath). Between the opposition (*et*) and the copulatory identification (*est*) there is no opposition, the opposition is the process of identification or reappropriation of being as life or of life as being. (Derrida 1975, s. 1, 3)

In this passage, which would deserve a long analysis, I must remark that, for Derrida, death appears in the Hegelian system only as opposed to life, as the other of life, to be relieved—*Aufgehbt*—in the infinite and imperishable life of the absolute spirit. Death, *qua* opposed to life, is only thought in view of life, it is a moment of life, that Hegel wishes as well determined at the level of natural life and that would allow for the transition to the imperishable life of the absolute spirit. From this perspective, if in the system death is always thought in view of life and of a determination of life as absolute life, a life without death, one could easily suspect that also the determination of natural and biological life is affected from that determination. Hence for Derrida—and this is what I intend to prove here—in the Hegelian system there is no death, death would

be, against the Kojévian evidence, the unthought-of, with the unavoidable consequence that there would be no thinking of life, of life as irreducibly affected by death, of natural and biological life, insofar as, in the system, that life is determined to render the thinking of the Idea, of the absolute spirit qua imperishable life, possible.

Therefore, the whole question depends on verifying which determination of natural and biological life authorizes Hegel to determine the absolute Idea, and thus the absolute spirit as life, but as life without death.

However, there is much more in the seminar. Derrida pushes himself to say that not only the Hegelian system but the entire philosophical tradition, of which the former would be the relieving accomplishment, would be constructed to protect itself from, or rather, through the removal of, the irreducible implication of life and death at the biological and natural level. Therefore, the syntagm *la vie la mort* would point to another thinking of life that, finally, would be able to account for that irreducible implication, but this must go through the deconstruction of the hierarchized opposition of life and death. Let me quote again a long passage from the seminar:

If you follow the great syllogism of life at the end of the great logic of Hegel, you will see how life, which is essentially a position (*Setzung*), the position of the Idea positing itself through its three oppositions, namely, “the living individual,” the process of the genus and species (*Gattung*), reappropriates itself as life, according to a movement that is marked thoroughly in Hegel and to which we will have to go back. Just to allude to it, I wanted to remark three points: on one hand, the *and* of the juxtaposition should not only be questioned and thus suspended, the time for asking if the relations between being and death fall within [*relève bien de*] what is called opposition or contradiction; but, more radically, if what we believe to understand under the concept of position, opposition or juxtaposition, that is, of contradiction, is not constructed by a logic of “life death” that would dissimulate itself—in view of which interest, this is the question—under a positional (oppositional, juxtapositional, dialectic) scheme, *as if* (I cannot recur here to the *as if*, since neither I want nor I can *oppose* a logic to a logic of opposition), as if the whole logic of opposition . . . were a ruse, a putting forward, through “life death,” in order to dissim-

ulate, preserve, shelter, accommodate or forget something. What? Something that is no longer posited nor *opposed* and that would no longer be something in the sense of position. (Derrida 1975, s. 1, 1)

Before following the reference to *Glas* to search for an answer to this abyssal question, and, above all, to see how, within the Hegelian system, death is neutralized or removed by being posited in opposition to life and how this occurs in the transition from natural life to absolute spirit, it is necessary to step back and acknowledge that Derrida inherits from Bataille the idea, formulated against the Kojévian evidence, that death has never been present in the system and thus remains the unthought-of or the blind spot of the Hegelian philosophy.

In “From Restricted to General Economy,” his essay on Bataille written in 1965, when treating of the struggle for recognition—*Der Kampf um Anerkennung*—between the master and the slave, Derrida remarks that Bataille distances himself from Kojève by proposing a displacement of tone in the reading of the Hegelian expression *Daransetzen des Lebens*, putting life in play. Bataille would be the first to point out that putting life in play is a play, a show, a *mise-en-scène* also in the theatrical meaning of the expression (one plays death), while life is not effectively put in play, risked. One puts life at stake precisely to avoid risking it seriously. According to Bataille, to find the profound motivations of this play, we should address the experience of sacrifice and thus find in the representation of death the sleight of hand that allows for recoiling before death qua an absolute loss without reserve. I quote a long passage from Derrida’s reading, which discusses the implications that this perspective bears with itself for the interpretation of the struggle for recognition but also for the general economy of the system. Let me remark also that the first occurrence of the problem of the survival in Derrida’s work can be found here:

Hegel clearly had proclaimed the necessity of the master’s retaining the life that he exposes to risk. Without this economy of life, the “trial by death, however, cancels both the truth which was to result from it, and therewith the certainty of self altogether.” To rush headlong into death pure and simple is

thus to risk the absolute loss of meaning, in the extent to which meaning necessarily traverses the truth of the master and of self-consciousness. One risks losing the *effect* and profit of meaning which were the very stakes one hoped to win. Hegel called this mute and nonproductive death, this death pure and simple, abstract negativity, in opposition to “the negation characteristic of consciousness, which cancels in such a way that it preserves and maintains what is sublated (*Die Negation des Bewusstseins welches so aufhebt, dass es das Aufgehobene aufbewahrt and erhält*), and thereby survives its being sublated (*und hiemit sein Aufgehoben-werden überlebt*). In this experience self-consciousness becomes aware that life is as essential to it as pure self-consciousness.” Burst of laughter from Bataille. Through a ruse of life, that is, of reason, life has thus stayed alive. Another concept of life had been surreptitiously put in its place, to remain there, never to be exceeded, any more than reason is ever exceeded. This life is not natural life, the biological existence put at stake in lordship, but an essential life that is welded to the first one, holding it back, making it work for the constitution of self-consciousness, truth, and meaning. Such is the truth of life. Through this recourse to the *Aufhebung*, which conserves the stakes, remains in control of the play, limiting it and elaborating it by giving it form and meaning (*Die Arbeit . . . bildet*), this economy of life restricts itself to conservation, to circulation and self-reproduction as the reproduction of meaning; henceforth, everything covered by the name lordship collapses into comedy. The independence of self-consciousness becomes laughable at the moment when it liberates itself by enslaving itself, when it starts to *work*, that is, when it enters into dialectics. Laughter alone exceeds dialectics and the dialectician: it bursts out only on the basis of an absolute renunciation of meaning, an absolute risking of death, what Hegel calls abstract negativity. A negativity that never takes place, that never presents itself, because in doing so it would start to work again. (Derrida 2002, 32)

Here Derrida finds in the question of life the stakes of the removal of death at work in the Hegelian system, a removal of death that is at the same time a removal of life, of natural and biological life, which would take place through the surreptitious introduction of another concept of life replacing the former. The logic of this other life, which is not the natural and biological one, is the

reproduction and conservation of the self. It is the same law that the biologist Jacob enunciates as the principle of the logic of the living. Therefore, one can understand why the seminar *La vie la mort* begins with Hegel. Biology, whose decisive progresses are recognized by Derrida, must pay attention to its secret philosophical heritage that would bring it back to its metaphysical past.

In the wake of Bataille, Derrida had already identified the blind spot of Hegelianism (and, thus, the distance between Bataille and Kojève):

The blind spot of Hegelianism, *around* which can be organized the representation of meaning, is the *point* at which destruction, suppression, death and sacrifice constitute so irreversible an expenditure, so radical a negativity—here we would have to say an expenditure and a negativity *without* reserve—that they can no longer be determined as negativity in a process or a system. In discourse (the unity of process and system), negativity is always the underside and accomplice of positivity. . . . For negativity is a resource. In naming the without-reserve of absolute expenditure “abstract negativity,” Hegel, through precipitation, blinded himself to that which he had laid bare under the rubric of negativity. And did so through precipitation toward the seriousness of meaning and the security of knowledge. (Derrida 2002, 327–28)

We can go back to *Glas*, in which Derrida simply develops Bataille’s insight—the removal of death qua absolute loss and its submission to *Aufhebung*—by finding it at work throughout the system. In particular, this is evident in those passages dedicated to the struggle for recognition in which Derrida brings the economical lexicon already adopted in Bataille’s essay at its limits:

This putting (in play, at pawn) must, as every investment, amortize itself and produce a profit; it works at my recognition by/through the other, at the posit(ion)ing of my living consciousness, my living freedom, my living mastery. Now death being in the program, since I must *actually* risk it. I can always lose the profit of the operation: if I die, but just as well if I live. Life cannot stay in the incessant imminence of death. So I lose every time, with every blow, with every throw [*à tous les coup*]. The supreme contradiction that Hegel marks with less circumspection than he will in the *Phenomenology*. (Derrida 1986, 139)

Derrida chose to treat of the struggle for recognition by recurring to the Jena *Philosophy of Spirit* since it is in this text that we can grasp the whole dialectical process the struggle belongs to: the two consciousnesses must accept that, to be recognized, they must renounce their being absolute, singular consciousnesses in favor of a third term, that is, of people, of the community that becomes the state, and, thus, they must avoid the struggle and death, not even risk it. Derrida never refers to Kojève in these passages from *Glas*, but a demystification of the latter's reading (as holding on the opposition between the master and the slave) is evidently at stake.

Let me quote from *Glas* the conclusion of Derrida's analysis:

From that moment on, death, suicide, loss, through the passage to the people-spirit as absolute spirit, amortize themselves every time, with every blow, with every *coup*, in the political: at the end of operation, the absolute spirit records a profit in any case, death included [*la mort comprise*]. (Derrida 1986, 141)

It is time to recall what for Derrida is at play in this determination of death qua opposed to life, that allows for the overcoming, *Aufhebung*, of death itself in the absolute life of the absolute spirit. Given that in the *Science of Logic* natural life is the first and immediate determination of the absolute Idea, which determination of natural and biological life permits the dialectical transition to the determination of the absolute Idea as life, life without death? Which hidden interest orients *Aufhebung* or the removal of the biological death, death as absolute loss?

We must start by recognizing the systematic necessity of what in the *Logic* would appear as a simply illustrative metaphor: the germ, the seed as a botanic metaphor that helps us conceive of the absolute Idea as a living form:

To this extent, it is the individuality of life itself, no longer *generated* out of its concept but out of the *actual* idea. At first, it is itself only the concept that still has to objectify itself, but a *concept which is actual*—the *germ of a living individual*. To *ordinary perception* what the concept is, and that the *subjective concept* has external actuality, are visibly present in it. For the germ of the living being is the complete concretion of individuality: it is where all the living

being's diverse sides, its properties and articulated differences, are contained in their *entire determinateness*; where the at first *immaterial*, subjective totality is present undeveloped, simple and non-sensuous. Thus the germ is the whole living being in the inner form of the concept. (Hegel 2010, 687)

Derrida remarks that, throughout his life and system, Hegel recurs to examples drawn from botanic to describe the genesis and structure of the spirit and to determine it as life: germ, seed, tree, plant, from "The Spirit of Christianity" to the *Science of Logic*, passing by the *Encyclopedia* and the *Philosophy of Nature*. This can be explained neither as an accident nor as an illustrative metaphor.

To understand the recourse to the botanic metaphors, we should take into account the role that the vegetal organism plays in the *Philosophy of Nature*, as the second moment of the last section, the "Organic Physics":

§ 337. The real totality of body as the infinite process in which individuality determines itself to particularity or finitude, and equally negates this and returns into itself, re-establishing itself at the end of the process as its beginning, is thus an elevation into the first ideality of Nature, but an ideality which is *fulfilled (erfüllt)*, and as self-related *negative* unity, has essentially developed the nature of *self* and become *subjective*. This accomplished, the Idea has entered into existence, at first an immediate existence, Life. This is: first, as Shape, the universal image of Life, the *geological* organism; second, as particular, formal subjectivity, the *vegetable* organism; third, as individual, concrete subjectivity, the *animal* organism. The Idea has truth and actuality only in so far as it is determined as *subjective* (§ 215); Life, as only the *immediate* Idea, is therefore external to itself, is nonlife, only the corpse of the life-process, the organism as totality of inanimately existing, mechanical and physical Nature. Distinguished from this stage is the beginning of subjective vitality, the living organism in the *vegetable* kingdom: the individual, but, as external to itself, still falling apart into its members which are themselves individuals. It is first in the animal organism that the differences of Shape are so developed as to exist essentially only as its members, thereby constituting it *subject*. (Hegel 1970, 273)

The first determination of life is nature itself, the geological organism, as the totality of the physical world, and, however, this is only an immediate and abstract determination, insofar as it encompasses nature as the whole in which there is no distinction yet between the living and the nonliving. Hence, the vegetal organism is the first determination of biological life as such and, thus, the first moment of natural life as well as the first moment of the Idea: the plant, indeed, as the living individual, is the first manifestation of the dialectical structure of subjectivity in nature. From this perspective, the absolute life of the spirit represents the accomplishment of a dialectical process that finds in the life of the vegetal organism its first moment and in the life of the animal organism, and, thus, of man, the middle term. Therefore, at the end of this process of sublation or *Aufhebung*, the absolute life of the spirit is accomplished according to the formal, subjective structure of the vegetal organism, developed in its dialectical content according to the determination of the life of the animal organism that the life of the spirit retains in itself as the middle term.

It is worth asking on what this distribution of life in the *Philosophy of Nature* is grounded: Why is the vegetal organism found in this privileged position from the point of view of the formal structure? Why does the animal organism only consist in a concrete development of the “differences of its formation”? And will it be sublated in the life of the spirit, which is achieved (in itself and for itself) according to the structure anticipated in the still immediate life of the vegetal organism (in itself) and through the mediation of the animal life (the being for an other)? Is the reason of this distribution wholly inherent in the dialectic of nature or does it respond to a more general speculative interest?

Derrida analyzes a text whose title would be *The determination of the spirit*, which, in truth, is included in the introduction to the lectures on *The Philosophy of History* and thus belongs to the so-called mature stage of the system. Hegel recurs again to the example of the seed to show that the spirit is the subject that engenders itself by itself and accomplishes itself by exteriorizing itself in view of self-return:

Spirit is essentially the result of its own activity: its activity is the transcending of immediate, simple, unreflected existence—the negation of that existence, and the returning into itself. We may compare it with the seed; for with this the

plant begins, yet it is also the result of the plant's entire life. But the weak side of life is exhibited in the fact that the commencement and the result are disjoined from each other. (Hegel 1991, 95)

Therefore, the seed and the plant describe a form of life that engenders and develops itself by itself, whose identity would be at the same time the beginning and the result, thus, an identity that does not need the other to produce itself and that is opposed to the other only from itself and in view of accomplishing itself as self-identity. If this form of natural life can only represent the life of the spirit without being it, that is precisely because of its natural limit: the plant produces a seed that is identical to the one that produced it but is another individual, there is no self-return here, whereas the spirit reproduces always itself and is the product of its production. This limit is properly the limit of nature; it affects also the natural life of the animal, and thus the human living as animal, and binds it to death. Later, it will be necessary to look at the transition that closes the *Philosophy of Nature*, and announces the *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*.

For now I remark that Derrida singles out the distinctive traits that regulate the recourse to the example of the seed in the Hegelian system as follows, and, at the same time, he sheds light on the trace that one should follow to grasp the more profound reason of that recourse:

The figure of the seed (let us call it thus provisionally) is immediately determined: (1) as the best representation of the spirit's relation to self, (2) as the circular path of a return to itself. And in the description of the spirit that returns to itself through its own proper product, after it lost itself there, there is more than a simple rhetorical convenience in giving to the spirit the name father. Likewise, the advent of the Christian Trinity is more than an empiric event in the spirit's history. (Derrida 1986, 28)

In *The Philosophy of History*, as well as throughout the system, Hegel conceives of the Christian Trinity as the highest accomplishment of the life of the spirit reached by man in the speculative dialectic: the infinite god—the father—posits himself in the finite—the son—and returns to himself without losing himself in the finitude—the death of the son.

One should follow Derrida's long analysis; I limit myself to quote just the conclusion that deduces the implications of the apparently metaphorical passage from the life of the plant to the one of the spirit:

The infinite father gives himself, by self-fellation, self-insemination, and self-conception, a finite son who, in order to posit himself there and incarnate himself as the son of God, becomes infinite, dies as the finite son, lets himself be buried, clasped in bandages he will soon undo for the infinite son to be reborn. (Derrida 1986, 31)

Therefore, a certain determination of the life of the plant permits us to think of the infinite life of the determination of the spirit, through the representation of the trinitarian relation in Christianity. This was already at work, as Derrida remarks, at the beginning of the system, in particular, in "The Spirit of Christianity," which, therefore, to follow the Hegelian logic at stake here, could be considered the germ of the system, even if it is not developed yet in all its parts.

Indeed, the botanic metaphor recurs three times and always to illustrate the relation of filiation between God the father and his son as infinite life. Let me quote the last occurrence:

It is true only of objects, of things lifeless, that the whole is other than the parts; in the living thing, on the other hand, the part of the whole is one and the same as the whole. . . . What is a contradiction in the realm of the dead is not one in the realm of life. A tree which has three branches makes up with them one tree; but every "son" of the tree, every branch (and also its other "children," leaves and blossoms) is itself a tree. The fibers bringing sap to the branch from the stem are of the same nature as the roots. If a [cutting from certain types of] tree is set in the ground upside down it will put forth leaves out of the roots in the air, and the boughs will root themselves in the ground. And it is just as true to say that there is only one tree here as to say that there are three. (Hegel 1971, 260)

It would be worth following the reading that brings to light the role played by John's evangel in the context of this interpretation of the Christian Trinity as infinite life. The values of life (*zoé*), light (*phos*), truth (*aletheia*), are regularly

associated there. But, at this point, we wonder where this determination of the life of the plant as reproducing itself by itself, as identical to itself in its other is. Determination that allows Hegel to define in those terms the immediate determination of natural and biological life in view of its speculative relief in the infinite life of the spirit; that allows him to posit the life of the animals, and, thus, of man as a middle term, necessary to the operation of that relief.

Here is the answer: from biology. In the *Philosophy of Nature*, Hegel analyzes and translates into speculative terms the biology of his time. His practice in this regard remains unchanged from the early writings to the later ones, where we find also a description that recalls the examples of the overturned tree:

But there is no more familiar fact than that each branch and twig is a complete plant which has its root in the plant as in the soil; if it is broken off from the plant and put as a slip into the ground, it puts out roots and is a complete plant. This also happens when branches are accidentally severed from the plant. (Hegel 1970, 313)

Therefore, we should recognize in the Hegelian conception of the germ the legacy of the naturalistic theories of preformationism, which were elaborated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and whose influence is still very strong in the age of Hegel:

The germ is the unexplicated being which is the entire Notion; the nature of the plant which, however, is not yet Idea because it is still without reality. In the grain of seed the plant appears as a simple, immediate unity of the self and the genus. . . . The development of the germ is at first mere growth, mere increase; it is already in itself the whole plant, the whole tree, etc., in miniature. The parts are already fully formed, receive only an enlargement, a formal repetition, a hardening, and so on. For what is to become, already is; or the becoming is this merely superficial movement. But it is no less also a qualitative articulation. (Hegel 1970, 323–24)

According to preformationism, the adult animal, with organs and hereditary characters, is already present in miniature in the *germ*, that is, in the egg or the

spermatozoon. Against the theory of the preformationism there was the one of the epigenesis, according to which, conversely, the embryo is developed on the basis of an *undifferentiated germ*, through the progressive formation of the various parts of the organism. In 1694, Nicolas Hartsoecker advanced the hypothesis that the whole fetus, a “homunculus” that is the microscopic duplication of the being in gestation, is located in the spermatozoon, with its encephalic extremity in the head of the spermatozoon itself. Both preformationisms, *ovism* and *spermism*, are based on the relevance of reproduction for the study of the living beings and share the theory according to which the adult animal is found already preformed in the germinal cells. Preformationism was enunciated first by the Dutch Jan Swammerdam, who, in a volume with a quite meaningful title, *Miraculum naturae sive uteri muliebris fabrica* (1672), denied that there is a true metamorphosis in insects. For Swammerdam, for instance, the butterfly is entirely present, with its organs being already distinguished, in the egg of the worm. He argued that all germs have existed since the beginning of the world insofar as Creation is a unique act. Therefore, in the moment of Creation, in the ovaries of Eve, there were already in miniature the human beings that are bound to be born up to the end of the world. The development of these beings is nothing but an *explication* (in Latin *evolution*) of the parts packed in the germ, through successive, qualitative mutations (growing and enlarging).

Among the followers of preformationism, there are Leibniz, Bonnet, and Spallanzani, who are sources of the *Philosophy of Nature*. Moreover, *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d’Alembert deemed preformationism the most reliable hypothesis.³

A passage from “Force et signification” testifies Derrida’s knowledge of the preformationism, at least since 1963. Further, in the passage, Derrida already recognizes the theologico-metaphysical presupposition of preformationism, and, hence, the persistence of this presupposition in the “finalism” that represents the most refined theoretical development of that theory. “Finalism” and, thus, Kant and Hegel:

By preformationism we indeed mean preformationism: the well known biological doctrine, opposed to epigenesis, according to which the totality of hereditary characteristics is enveloped in the germ, and is already in action in reduced

dimensions that nevertheless respect the forms and proportions of the future adult. A theory of *encasement* was at the center of preformationism which today makes us smile. But what are we smiling at? At the adult in miniature, doubtless, but also at the attributing of something more than finality to natural life-providence in action and art conscious of its works. (Derrida 2002, 26)

Given that preformationism was invented to legitimate, within the sciences of life, the unity of Creation in line with the Christian dogma and that, ultimately, this theory rests on Aristotle's texts, it is possible to understand the complicated relations between Christian religion, philosophy, and biology that are at stake here and that are necessary to loosen here in view of a deconstruction of the notion of life.

In particular, in the context of the debate among naturalists, Hegel shares the position of Trevinarius, for whom the reproduction of the plant does not imply sexual difference, and, thus, consists in a pure self-reproduction, without difference or opposition to an other that is different from the self but of the same species as occurs in the animal, sexual reproduction:

This reproduction is not mediated by opposition therefore, it is not a unified emergence, although the plant can also rise to this. The emergence of true separation in the opposition of the sex relationship belongs to the power of the animal however. (Hegel 1970, 55)

Therefore, Hegel limits himself to speculate on what he receives from the sciences of life of his age, even if, it is worth remarking at this point, he takes a precise position while being aware of the botanic theories by which the reproduction of the vegetal organism is a sexual reproduction. Goethe, whose *Metamorphosis of the Plants* is an essential source for Hegel, perhaps, the most decisive for the section of the *Philosophy of Nature* dedicated to the vegetal organism, is a firm supporter of those theories. However, Hegel simply remains silent on this point.

This passage is decisive for Derrida: to determine the self-reproduction of the spirit as the form of life that contains in itself the determinations of the natural life as its sublated moments, Hegel must affirm, against empirical

evidence and scientific theories, that the reproduction of the vegetal organism does not go through sexual difference: “There would be no sexual difference in the plants” (Derrida 1986, 114).

However, when Hegel addresses the theories of sexual reproduction, to deny their legitimacy, the stakes of the position taken in the field of the botanic sciences appear evident:

(c) Now though this compels us to admit the occurrence of an actual fertilization, there still remains the third question, whether it is *necessary*. Since buds are complete individuals, and plants propagate themselves by stolons, and leaves and branches need only come into contact with the earth in order to be themselves fertile as distinct individuals (§ 345, Zus., p. 313), it follows that the production of a new individual through the union of the two sexes—generation—is a play, a luxury, a superfluity for propagation; for the preservation of the plant is itself only a multiplication of itself. Fertilization by sexual union is not necessary, since the plant organism, because it is the whole individuality is already fertilized on its own account even without being touched by another plant. (Hegel 1970, 345–46)

Hegel seems to fall into the logic of the cauldron with a hole in it, in which Freud recognized the symptoms of an unaccomplished removal. According to this logic, one supports contradictory arguments to affirm an unsustainable removal: 1) the reproduction of the vegetal organism does not imply a sexual difference, 2) the reproduction of the vegetal organism can imply a sexual difference, 3) sexual differentiation is in any case superfluous for the reproduction of the vegetal organism.

Whether we are before a removal or a fidelity to a petition principle, one can find here the condition of natural life that is necessary to remove in order that the infinite life of the spirit is accomplished as an imperishable self-reproduction without death: sexual difference, that is, difference, the relation to the other that irreducibly conditions the life of the living, not only that of the animals and of man, the most evolved form that life rejoins within the boundaries of nature.

The final moment of the *Philosophy of Nature* unfolds the generic process in the animal life and ends with the death of the individual. To reproduce itself the animal individual needs to copulate with an individual of the other sex, and thus

the product of reproduction is another individual different from the two generating it: there is no self-return in the natural, sexual reproduction, no *Aufhebung*, no self-reproduction. Rather, there is dissemination, as Derrida himself suggests. Above all, it is worth remarking that the irreducible difference between the living individual and its concept, determined by sexual difference, also brings about the inborn death, as Hegel puts it, of the natural individual:

§ 375. Universality, in the face of which the animal as a singularity is a finite existence, shows itself in the animal as the abstract power in the passing out of that which, in its preceding process (§ 356), is itself abstract. The *original disease* of the animal, and the inborn *germ of death*, is its being inadequate to universality. The annulment of this inadequacy is in itself the full maturing of this germ, and it is by imagining the universality of its singularity, that the individual effects this annulment. By this however, and in so far as the universality is abstract and immediate, the individual only achieves an *abstract objectivity*. (Hegel 1970, 441)

I quote the final paragraphs of Derrida's commentary:

There is a natural death; it is inevitable for natural life, since it produces itself in finite individual totalities. These totalities are inadequate to the universal genus and they die from this. Death is this inadequation of the individual to generality . . . Inadequation—classification and abstraction—of the generic syllogism: it has been demonstrated that inadequation placed in motion sexual difference and copulation. So sexual difference and copulation inhabit the same space; they have the same possibility and the same limit as natural death. And if the “inadequation to universality” is the “*original disease* (ursprüngliche Krankheit)” of the individual, as much ought to be able to be said of sexual difference. And if the inadequation to universality is for the individual its “inborn *germ of death* (Keim des Todes),” this must also be understood of sexual difference, and not only by “metaphor,” by some figure whose sense would be completed by the word “death.” *Germ of death* is almost tautological. At the bottom of the germ, such as it circulates in the gap [*écart*] of the sexual difference, that is, as the finite germ, death is prescribed, as germ in the germ. An infinite germ, spirit or God engendering or inseminating itself naturally,

does not tolerate sexual difference. Spirit-germ disseminates itself only by feint. *In this feint*, it is immortal. (Derrida 1986, 116)

We understand now why the dialectical relief of the life of the animal organism is at the same time a recoiling, a removal of natural life, that is the irreducible condition of a finite living; why this relief is *mise-en-scène*, a feint. Above all, we understand which interest produced that scene: removing the difference as the irreducible condition of the life of the living, not just of its death but also of its life, as Hegel demonstrated when treating of sexual difference as the condition of the animal reproduction, just before letting the curtain fall over natural life. Finally, to affirm that the life of the spirit is an infinite life, infinite self-reproduction, pure identity able to retain difference in itself, namely, death, as a simple moment, Hegel hides or removes the possibility of the thought of a natural life, our life, which would account for difference as its irreducible condition of possibility.

If we admit that difference is the irreducible, nonrelievable condition of the life and death of the living, then we also understand the choice of the syntagm *la vie la mort* to allude to this dynamic of difference. This syntagm stands for recognizing the difference at the heart of the life of the living. On its basis we should think of another philosophy of life as well as of another science of life, given that biology goes on to conceive of the logic of the living in terms of self-reproduction, as it is the case in Jacob and his book, which is finally given to reading and deconstruction.



NOTES

1. The first traces of this work in progress can be found in Vitale (2014).
2. I thank Mme Marguerite Derrida for allowing me to publish and translate parts of Derrida's seminar.
3. The entry "Génération" in Diderot and d'Alembert (1757, 563ff.).

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