

Against Life

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Biopolitics

Biopolitics concerns the extension of powers not just over the living, but also over 'life'. The term has always carried with it a sense of the crossing of a boundary, even the breaking of a taboo. Thus, we mean, or mean to name, by biopolitics the actions and decisions we make with relation to things which had previously been beyond our capacity to control or influence directly. Biopolitics names the ways in which we, living beings, exercise control or jurisdiction over our own nature, our own most essential feature, namely the fact that we are alive, that we have life.

Actually, in practice, nearly all of these things have to do, not with processes of living and dying, over which we already exercise considerable jurisdiction (capital punishment is as biopolitical as one can get), but with processes of generation and reproduction. In practice, biopolitics is concerned with the making and manipulation of new life, of new lives. Again, it might seem as though we have a long history of such interventions, all the way onwards from the Biblical injunction to 'go forth and multiply' - through animal and human breeding, methods for influencing fertility, positively or negatively. Nor is this even restricted to human beings. Indeed, one might say that exerting influence on reproduction, through sexual competition and selection, is one of the most widely-spread characteristics of living beings. Zoe is biopolitical through and through and, when it comes to choosing a mate, all animals are political animals.

Nevertheless, it seems to us now that our new understanding of the processes of reproduction, and our capacity to intervene directly on the fundamental processes of life, open up new prospects and perils.

The concern with biopolitics attests to and in large part arises from a faultline that runs down the middle of those who are concerned with these issues. On one side of the line there are biologists and natural scientists who, since the beginning of the last century, for the most part have ceased to regard the

question 'what is life' as an interesting part of their province. On the other side of the line are philosophers, writers, artists, ethicists, theologians and others, who regard themselves as having a special kind of concern for the realm of the living. This line dividing the living from the lifeless runs through the whole field of human knowledge.

The Three Vitalisms

Vitalism comes into being reflexively and periodically, in a recoil against ways of thinking that suggested that life processes were completely explicable and expressible in terms of the physical (mechanical, biochemical) processes known to science. Vitalism appears to run on a hundred-year cycle, with the ends of centuries seeming particularly propitious for outbreaks. The first revival of vitalism occurred at the end of the eighteenth century and, taking the writings of Georg Stahl for its impetus, was centred in the Montpellier school of biologists - Barthez, Bourdieu and Bichat. As biological and physiological science developed during the nineteenth century, these vitalist doctrines became progressively less authoritative. With the discovery and investigation of the cell at the end of the nineteenth century, vitalism was once again widely declared to be dead or otiose. Once again, at the very moment that speculation on the nature of 'life' ceased to be of interest to biologists, there was another notable spasm of vitalist thinking in philosophy and cultural practices. This was nurtured by the current of philosophical speculation on the nature of life which had survived, largely without assistance from experimental science, through the nineteenth century. Originally broached in the work of Goethe and Hegel, the tradition of Lebensphilosophie was to be found embodied in now-obscure figures like Lorenz Oken, and less obscure figures such as Schopenhauer, who would also provide an important source for late nineteenth century vitalism. Where the upsurge of vitalist thinking at the end of the eighteenth century produced and sustained Romanticism, the vitalist recrudescence at the end of the nineteenth century, centred on the work of Nietzsche and Bergson, but simmering also in works like Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* found artistic and philosophical expression in modernism. Now, a century or so later, we find ourselves in a similar situation, with the physical sciences once again having an explanation of life processes - in terms of the information-transmitting function of DNA - which allows them to circumvent or set aside hypotheses of a specific life-force or life-essence, while throughout the rest of the culture, vitalism pulses and pullulates - in the neo-Bergsonism that runs through Derrida, Foucault and, most emphatically, Deleuze, in ecological

criticism and the 'Gaia hypothesis', in the many forms of 'alternative' spirituality, and healing practice and in the pseudo-scientific electro-utopianism which sees in the internet a new and generative kind of organism, heralding the migration of life from a carbon-based to a silicon-based form. It is hard to resist the judgement that vitalism tends to take hold in a culture just at the points when it appears to be least needed.

One may note a peculiar feature of these vitalisms, namely, their performative nature. Where (at least until the discovery of DNA), scientific enquiry and experiment remained primarily descriptive and referential, developing propositions about the nature of organic matter and processes, cultural and philosophical vitalism (not to say the political vitalism that they legitimated) gave itself the task of rescuing life from science, and made the active defence of the 'life-world' part of its disciplinary self-definitions. Science set itself the task of understanding the world: the vocation of vitalist culture was to save it. The doctrine of 'imagination' was only one of the methods devised, not just for making life apparent or available to thought, but of embodying a kind of thought that was life itself. Such a view is manifest in a remark such as the following, from Deleuze's Cinema 2:

[the body] forces us to think, and forces us to think what is concealed from thought, life. Life will no longer be made to appear before the categories of thought; thought will be thrown into the categories of life (Deleuze 1989, 189).

This accounts for another striking fact about the theory of life, namely that it became crucial to division between the two kingdoms, of science and of culture, that arose during the twentieth century. The question of life was not just an abstract question, or topic within each of these specialisms: it was a faultline that produced and sustained them.

The successes of the natural and 'life' sciences through the nineteenth century encouraged a concern that the sphere of life was being more and more reduced, by a technoscientific rationality that allowed for less and less residue from its explications of the workings of material and mechanical process. Modernism is powered by this concern to protect and promote the pulse of life against the reductiveness of modern life. By the end of the twentieth century, an interesting convolution had appeared in this anxiety. Now, far from life having been diminished by modernity, it now seemed as though modernity was multiplying forms of life, producing a world in which machines had started to become more disconcertingly life-like than ever before. Where modernity

feared the petrification of life into matter or machinery, postmodernity fears the dissolution of the privilege of the living through an epidemic of viral lives, stand-in élangs vitals, surrogates and vice-existers. Being on the side of life means attempting to reassert border controls over these encroaching hordes. If it is possible to put up the shutters against the presumptuously alive, it is also possible to secure the dominion of life by enlarging its borders, in the kind of celebration of viral life to be found among contemporary Bergo-nietzscheans. But this seems always to be in order to secure the dominion of life against its fantasised enemy, against death.

Or to whatever it is that is not life. For, if it is true that there is no absolute condition of life or the living, no state that can be verified as 100% alive, then it is true that there is no fully-certifiable death either. It is only from the viewpoint of the fantastically, fanatically living that death can be said to exist. Is the ocean dead? Is a hurricane or a cataract dead? Is a cliff? A diamond? A virus?

The Two Lives

This is by no means to say that the 'life' assumed, affirmed, defended or promoted in these various instances, has always been the same. Because life is not a quality that is demonstrable in itself, it tends to be identified with secondary qualities and effects. Life has been defined by many different, though allegedly essential features. Animate nature is nature that has soul in it, by which Aristotle may have meant something like will, or purpose. Animate nature has tendency, direction, desire - if only the desire to stay in the condition of desire, the desire not to relapse from desire into the will-lessness of insentience. By the middle of the nineteenth century, will had become separated from sentience or consciousness. Arguably, a plant has will, but does not know its will. So then, life comes to be identified with intelligent life, those who know that they live, and know how to live, rather than those to whom life simply occurs.

The end of the eighteenth century saw an amazing array of different candidate forms for the principle of life - the tradition of the vital spirits, ether, the idea of a vital germ, electricity, 'energy'. Thereafter, two currents of thinking about the nature of life can be distinguished, which we may call the convergent and the divergent. The first identifies life with persistence in being. From Aristotle - the first substantial and programmatic vitalist - onwards, one of the central problems in biology has been that of explaining how living beings resist the

universal tendency of matter to decompose, to equalise the tensions or differences that living beings require. Aristotle identified the principle of persistence with the maintenance of vital heat, in association with a kind of binding moistness. Living beings are exceptions to the otherwise universal rule of flux, intermingling and mutability. Living beings bind and reserve energy. As Michel Serres has suggested, a universal feature of life might seem to be introversion of form: no life without barriers or exclusions. Life depends upon the cell, the scooping out within existence of a realm of interiority, reserve or retarded entropy. This tradition of identifying life with anomalous persistence in being tends to identify life with a stubborn will or force. Living things cannot simply be - they must will their continuation in being, and their life essentially consists in this willing-to-be. In such accounts of life, will is often associated with formal regularity, in a compound that may be designated a 'striving-for-form'. That which persists in being repeats itself. Into a universe of time, of formless, transient events, space (a kind of baked time) comes into being, always as a sort of binding, delay or arrest.

This explains the strong association of vitalism, at least since Coleridge, with psychology and the study of forms of consciousness. Though it is by no means the necessary adjunct of life, consciousness comes to be thought of as its inbuilt prospect, the evolutionary telos of its struggle to persist in being. Consciousness is the way in which life pulls itself together, most fully takes account of itself. The bearer and occasion of this consciousness is, of course, Man.

A second tradition identifies life not with to the emergence or persistence of form, but with the principle of change. For this tradition, life is thought of as endless mutation and movement, as a dissociative energy rather than a coalescing force. For this tradition, becoming more and more dominant in our time, nothing static can be more or other than a kind of statue, life-retarding, life-denying. The vitalisms which prospered, not primarily in the worlds of science but rather in the worlds of art, literature, religion and philosophy from the 1890s onwards, tend to emphasise process, change, differentiation.

The vocation of representing 'life' explains the great and puzzling antinomy of artistic modernism, which is characterised both by a desire to affirm form - form precisely as firmness or continuance in being - and the desire to inhabit or identify with pure process - neither allowing it to escape, nor ever claiming to 'capture' it. Hence the struggle to generate images which can be both movement and change - like Virginia Woolf's wave. ecnUltimately the great modernist stand-off between time and space is a disagreement about whether

'life' is to be found in flux or form. Bergson does his best to reconcile the two traditions, though recent rereadings of Bergson, by Deleuze and Keith Ansell Pearson do their best to separate the disjunctive in Bergson from the conjunctive.

As For Life

What is objectionable about the politics of life? The first objection is that vitalism is a mysticism, if not a mystification, and that a politics based upon such willed mystery is irrational - or objectionable because of the limits it imposes to the exercise of reason. It is clear that there have been many forms of vitalism that have been wedded to a reactionary or authoritarian politics that imposes strict limits on the extent of reason and critique. It is also clear that there is no necessity for vitalism always to be wedded to religiosity, eugenics or fascism. G.S. Rousseau has usefully reminded us how difficult it is to read off the politics of different forms of vitalism, at the end of the eighteenth century, when some vitalists were revolutionaries and some were conservatives. More recently, while it is clear that vitalism has often been recruited to philosophies of the Right, of which Nazism is the most ghastly and sustained example, it does not necessarily lead in this direction. Of no vitalist writer is this more true than Henri Bergson. 'For every conservative who welcomed Bergson's vindication of the spirit there was another who rejected his naturalization of the divine; and for every progressive who applauded his idea of spontaneous development, there was another who dismissed the *élan vital* as a pseudomystical confection' (Schwartz 1992, 299). Indeed, what concerns me most of all is the recruitment of vitalism to the massive effort being undertaken across the Western world and beyond to limit and discredit what is said to be a merely 'scientific' rationality.

Although the idea, and ideal of 'life' causes me sadness and irritation, I have no bone to pick with life itself. It provides me with a living, after all. Rather my concern is with the idea that life is something that one ought to be, ought to be able to be, on the side of. This really does not seem to me to be intelligible. There are two principal reasons for this. First of all, you cannot be on the side of life because life remains in passage, a radically open question. We have no idea where life is going, nor where it is likely to end up. This makes it sound as though you could then line up with life by being on the side of openness and contingency. But this is a kind of openness with which one cannot make any kind of common cause. Secondly, you cannot take the side of life because it is

not clear what is on the other side of it - what is its opposite, antagonist or residue. If you take the side of life, who or what could you possibly be against? Is the eradication of smallpox performed in the service of life?

As Nietzsche realised, being on the side of Life in general nearly always in fact means promoting one's own life over that of others: 'for the ordinary, everyday man, the value of life rests solely on the fact that he regards himself more highly than he does the world' (Nietzsche 1986, 28-9). Unfortunately, but perhaps predictably, Nietzsche was not able to apply this lesson to his own promotion of life in the form of the will-to-power. We living, we morituri with still a lease on life, tell ourselves that we must stay on the right side of life, because it secures the self-evidence of the fact that we are indeed, as we feel ourselves to be, as we feel we must at all costs be, alive.

Wo es war, soll ich werden. Freud's much manhandled phrase from which we might wring out yet another change: where death was, there shall dwell the living I. Being on the side of life is not just a way of defying death, holding it at bay, it is a way of disavowing the suspicion that death is not on the other side of life but indeed in its very midst, if by death we mean less than full being.

We may draw an instructive parable from St Augustine's long-running battle to defend monotheism against the Manicheism of which he had in his youth been an adherent. (To my astonishment, I find myself thinking monotheism to be the beginning of the greatest and most devastatingly revolutionary idea that human beings have ever had.) Everything hinged for Augustine on insects, indeed on one insect in particular, the fly. Once admit the Manichean argument that flies might not be part of God's creation and that there could be some other creative principle in the universe than God, it will prove very hard, Augustine warns, to draw the line of division between evil and divine creatures. Eventually, the rot of doubt will run all the way up the scale until one may be brought to deny the divine origin even of man himself:

A certain person was being pestered by flies; a Manichean came upon him in his suffering; and when he said that he could not bear the flies and loathed them intensely, the Manichean immediately said: 'Who made them?' And since he was suffering from the vexation of the flies and hated them, he did not dare affirm that God made them, even though he was a Catholic. The Manichean continued straight away, asking 'If God did not make them, who did?' 'Truly,' said the other, 'I believe that the devil made flies.' To which the other immediately replied, 'If the devil

made the fly, as I see you concede, because you have clear understanding, who then made the bee, which is only a little larger than the fly?' He did not dare say that God made the bee, when he did not make the fly, since the two cases were so closely comparable. So from the bee, the Manichean drew him on to the locust, from the locust to the lizard, from the lizard to the bird; from the bird he led him on to the sheep, and thence to the cow, the elephant, and, finally, to man, and persuaded him, a man, that man was not made by God. Thus, assailed by flies, this wretched man was made into a fly, and the possession of the devil. (Augustine 1845a, col. 1386; my translation)

In his own arguments against the Manicheans, Augustine time and again construes, indeed celebrates the fly, not as the principle of troubling division within creation, but rather as the proof that divine care extends all the way through it. Conceived as a creation of God, the lowliest creature is greater than the divisive principle of 'light' valued by the Manicheans:

And here, if, in their perplexity, they had asked me whether I reckoned that the soul even of a fly excelled that light, I would have responded 'Indeed it does.' Nor would it have intimidated me that the fly is so small, for I would just have been convinced that it is alive. For, if one wonders what causes such diminutive members to grow, what pulls so tiny a body here and there according to its natural appetites, what moves its feet in order when it runs, what governs and vibrates its wings in flight - then, whatever that might be, when properly considered, there is such towering magnitude in this tininess [in tam parvo tam magnum eminet], that it outdoes any lightning that could strike upon the eye. (Augustine 1845b, col 96; my translation)

In his argument against Manichean dualism, Augustine intimates, without quite recognising it, the unsustainability of any dualism whatever. Creation, life, the world, the cosmos, must taken whole. However it is very hard to maintain any idea of wholeness or totality which is not in fact privative - which does not propose some demarcation, restriction or limiting of plurality, by referring it to some hidden, concentrating principle. The limiting principle for Augustine is God's creative will, which encompasses and finalises creation. But his refusal of fundamental discontinuities in nature, or between nature and the supernatural, points to a larger, less restricted monism, one in which nothing can be separated out from a totality of forms, events and energies which nevertheless

never adds up to a simple whole, since such wholeness would limit and divide it. It makes little difference whether this kind of open totality goes from God 'downward' or from quantum particles 'upward', since what matters is the absence either of universal essences or of absolute discontinuities.

There is no life not in the sense that everything is (mere!) matter, but in the sense that Wittgenstein maintains there is no 'language'. In all the untold things that have been and may yet be done in language, there is no essence of language - no way either of rounding up or boiling down these uses of language to isolate the specifically 'linguistic' component in it. There are certainly thresholds and saltations in the great chain of being, but there is no truly qualitative break that allows one to mark off the living from the nonliving. The hydrogen molecule behaves no differently in the eye of a da Vinci than in the kneecap of a gnat. Life-centred reflection on this, the most exceptionless monism, may produce spasms of nihilism, as in Joseph Conrad's appalled contemplation of a world without transcendence, in his letter to R B Cunninghame Graham of December 20th 1897, in which he sees life as 'a machine . . . [that] evolved itself . . . out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold! - it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider, - but it goes on knitting It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions, - and nothing matters. ' Three weeks later, in a letter of January 14th 1898 Conrad declares 'we, living; are out of life,- utterly out of it. Life knows us not and we do not know life, - we don't know even our own thoughts.' But this is to reconstitute the privative life-principle as a kind of transcendent loneliness, reconstituting man as the agonised, nameless anomaly. We could do with a thinking of the human that could cleave, more cheerfully, and less programmatically, to the principle that 'we, living, are out of life'. For 'life' will always be inaccessible to the living. We need to be able to construe the universe without breaks or exceptions neither from God downwards, as with Augustine, nor from the fly, or bacterium upwards, as in Conrad, but in its midst.

What are the implications for the field of what is called biopolitics, or its study? One can scarcely deny the interest or importance of an attention to the ways in which technological powers over certain processes raise questions of responsibility, ownership and control, though one must, I think, be sceptical about the idea, radiating from the few pregnant pages that Foucault devoted to it at the end of his Introduction to Sexuality, that life represents a distinctive new sphere of operations for power, as though it had never before dared to encroach upon the domain of the living. But this kind of critical biopolitics often inherits or is infected by a kind of virus of thought, which suggests that

one might be able to find in 'life' a principle of resistance, or point of reference against the colonisation or depredation of the Lebenswelt. It is not that the embrace or defence of life necessarily leads to fascism or wickedness or cruelty, any more than scepticism about the existence or determinability of life or the life force does. It is that, if such things are to be resisted, it would be imprudent to rely on an ethic of life to do the job for us. What, then, are we supposed to do without the principle, the value of life? Everything.

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