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Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari and the Rhuthmoi of Individuation - Part 1

- Recherches

- Le rythme dans les sciences et les arts contemporains

- Philosophie - Nouvel article

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After tackling methodology, cosmo-ontology, theory of language, cultural studies, sociology and political theory, it was time to face the burning question of ethics. In Chapter 6 and Chapter 10, Deleuze and Guattari developed the famous notion of "Body without Organs" or "BwO," which had only been introduced quickly in several of the previous chapters and which provided an ontological basis for their theory of becoming. Based on that, they described what might be the best kind of individual becoming possible. If the English expression was not so directly related to money, we could summarize it by saying: How to make a living? In a milder way : What's the best way to lead your life ?

The *Rhuthmic* Basis of Ethics: the Body without Organs

"The Body without Organs" denoted the metaphysical or virtual basis for a "set of practices," that is for an "experiment," explicitly aimed at reaching a good life.

It is not at all a notion or a concept but a practice, a set of practices. You never reach the Body without Organs, you can't reach it, you are forever attaining it, it is a limit. [...] Find your body without organs. Find out how to make it. It's a question of life and death, youth and old age, sadness and joy. It is where everything is played out. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, pp. 150-151)

According to Deleuze and Guattari, "prior to" any self and to any signifying encoding, humans are endowed with mobile "intensities" brought about by the body, sheer "intense matter" or "matter equaling energy," which are the pristine source, from which their life flows.

A BwO is made in such a way that it can be occupied, populated only by intensities. Only intensities pass and circulate. Still, the BwO is not a scene, a place, or even a support upon which something comes to pass. It has nothing to do with phantasy, there is nothing to interpret. The BwO causes intensities to pass; it produces and distributes them in a *spatium* that is itself intensive, lacking extension. It is not space, nor is it in space; it is matter that occupies space to a given degree to the degree corresponding to the intensities produced. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 153)

This wild energy is the original "matrix," the zero of any development process. It is, metaphorically, a kind of egg "before the extension of the organism and the organization of the organs."

It is nonstratified, unformed, intense matter, the matrix of intensity, intensity = 0; but there is nothing negative about that zero, there are no negative or opposite intensities. Matter equals energy. Production of the real as an intensive magnitude starting at zero. That is why we treat the BwO as the full egg before the extension of the organism and the organization of the organs, before the formation of the strata. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 153)

It constitutes the "field of immanence of desire," that is to say the most fundamental level of the being considered as pure "process of production."

The BwO is *the field of immanence* of desire, the *plane of consistency* specific to desire (with desire defined as a process of production without reference to any exterior agency, whether it be a lack that hollows it out or a pleasure that fills it). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 154)

Naturally, the access to this field of immanence of desire has been regularly blocked by all kinds of "priests," whose most recent figure has been the "psychoanalyst," teaching the belief in castration or lack, but whose other figures were the "hedonistic, even orgiastic, priests" advocating the rule of masturbation and discharge, or the "philosopher" disseminating the inclination for phantasy and ideal.

Every time desire is betrayed, cursed, uprooted from its field of immanence, a priest is behind it. The priest cast the triple curse on desire: the negative law, the extrinsic rule, and the transcendent ideal. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 154)

Dismantling the Body, the Language and the Self with Caution

As in Chapter 5, the aim by contrast with psychoanalysis and psychology was consequently to "destratify" or in Derridean vocabulary "deconstruct" the subjective, linguistic and biological strata. In order to enable oneself to reach the living and rejuvenating source of desire itself, one needed, first, to "dismantle the self."

Where psychoanalysis says, "Stop, find your self again," we should say instead, "Let's go further still, we haven't found our BwO yet, we haven't sufficiently dismantled our self." Substitute forgetting for anamnesis, experimentation for interpretation. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 151)

Then, one had to overcome the biological organism itself. Since "the body," according to Deleuze and Guattari, "stands alone and in no needs of organs," it must be extracted from its mere biological existence.

We come to the gradual realization that the BwO is not at all the opposite of the organs. The organs are not its enemies. The enemy is the organism. The BwO is opposed not to the organs but to that organization of the organs called the organism. [...] *The body is the body. Alone it stands. And in no need of organs. Organism it never is. Organisms are the enemies of the body.* (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 158)

This double deconstruction was reached through an "experimentation" that could find its purest models in sheer

madness like schizophrenia, artificial madness brought about by drugs, so-called perversions as masochism, or limited loss of consciousness in sexual orgasm.

The BwO: it is already under way the moment the body has had enough of organs and wants to slough them off, or loses them. A long procession. The *hypochondriac body*:[...] *The paranoid body*:[...] *The schizo body*,[...] *Then the drugged body, the experimental schizo*:[...] *The masochist body*: [...] (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 150)

Ethics, in other words the criterion of a good life, was based on "disarticulation" of the organism, "experimentation" with the language, and "nomadic" subjectivity. One must never rest in a particular body, in an unvarying discourse, and in a constant self; one must always be in motion, or better yet, merge with the cosmic movement itself.

To the strata as a whole, the BwO opposes disarticulation (or *n* articulations) as the property of the plane of consistency, experimentation as the operation on that plane (no signifier, never interpret!), and nomadism as the movement (keep moving, even in place, never stop moving, motionless voyage, desubjectification). (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 159)

Although Deleuze and Guattari did not take into account the epistemological problem raised by their suggestion, which will be discussed below, they were entirely aware of the existential dangers entailed by it. Instead of reaching the very source of life, one could indeed easily face depression, loss and death.

It is a very delicate experimentation since there must not be any stagnation of the modes or slippage in type: the masochist and the drug user court these ever-present dangers that empty their BwO's instead of filling them. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 152)

As a psychiatrist, knowledgeable about drug addiction, Guattari had ample proof of this. The danger was great of "wildly" deconstructing body, language and subjectivity. One could easily kill him- or herself or be "dragged toward catastrophe."

You don't reach the BwO, and its plane of consistency, by wildly destratifying. [...] If you free it with too violent an action, if you blow apart the strata without taking precautions, then instead of drawing the plane you will be killed, plunged into a black hole, or even dragged toward catastrophe. Staying stratified organized, signified, subjected is not the worst that can happen; the worst that can happen is if you throw the strata into demented or suicidal collapse, which brings them back down on us heavier than ever. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 161)

This is why Deleuze and Guattari, in the end, wisely advocated an "oscillation" or a "perpetual and violent combat" between two main principles of "desire" and "strata," "experimentation" and "stratification."

It swings between two poles, the surfaces of stratification into which it is recoiled, on which it submits to the judgment, and the plane of consistency in which it unfurls and opens to experimentation. [...] A perpetual and violent combat between the plane of consistency, which frees the BwO, cutting across and dismantling all of the strata, and the surfaces of stratification that block it or make it recoil. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 159)

The emancipating experimentation with body, language and subjectivity had to be conducted with "caution." After all, Deleuze and Guattari recognized, one had "to keep enough of the organism" and "small supply of signifiacance and subjectification." Otherwise, if one acted it could be utterly destructive and lead to "hallucination," "falsehood" and "death."

Caution is the art common to all three; if in dismantling the organism there are times one courts death, in slipping away from signifiacance and subjection one courts falsehood, illusion and hallucination and psychic death. [...] You have to keep enough of the organism for it to reform each dawn; and you have to keep small supplies of signifiacance and subjectification, if only to turn them against their own systems when the circumstances demand it, when things, persons, even situations, force you to; and you have to keep small rations of subjectivity in sufficient quantity to enable you to respond to the dominant reality. Mimic the strata. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 160)

One had to be very "meticulous" and "cautious" in experimenting with and out of the strata. One should first find "possible lines of flight," then "produce flow conjunctions" likely to "gently tip the assemblage, making it pass over to the side of the plane of consistency."

This is how it should be done: Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times. It is through a meticulous relation with the strata that one succeeds in freeing lines of flight, causing conjugated flows to pass and escape and bringing forth continuous intensities for a BwO. [...] We are in a social formation; first see how it is stratified for us and in us and at the place where we are; then descend from the strata to the deeper assemblage within which we are held; gently tip the assemblage, making it pass over to the side of the plane of consistency. (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 1980, trans. B. Massumi, 1987, p. 161)

By contrast with their sonorous introduction devoted to schizophrenia, drugs and masochism, Deleuze and Guattari finally suggested that the best to do existentially speaking was probably to "to use drugs without using drugs, to get soused on pure water" (p. 166).

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