

Life as Limit-drawing Event

Comments on Bergo's Discussion of Formalism vs. Vitalism

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In her paper Bettina Bergo wants to find a principle of life beyond formalism, a messianic principle of hope, body and life that does not run the risk of being locked up in interiority which she points out always haunts Christian faith. But she also asks herself whether there is a philosophy of life that does not imply all the dangers of fascism, as did the 1930s and 1940s reception of different kinds of vitalism and Nietzsche.

Bergo draws our attention to Granel's attempt to think beyond a binary division of parts and wholes, form and matter, etc. He understands that a first divide between sky and earth is at the root of such binary thinking: the earth of objects and the sky as a "way out," between beings and non-being. The sky is not a non-being in general but rather *the* sky and thus "rightly original, *for not being*," as Bergo cites him in the previous chapter. And this is, of course, also the division between earth and the divine. Granel argues against an understanding of limits as something that creates self-sufficient parts, and instead argues that limits imply relations and transitions. Limits thus do not create wholes that are what they are in themselves, they rather create the tension that separates through relating.

I think that a development of Granel's understanding of limits could also help us find a way between vitalism and formalism. Instead of understanding the limit as already established, we could focus on the limit-drawing event. An event where separation is created but not yet established. Such a limit-drawing event would be the separation between earth and sky, and between beings and non-being. It is an event beyond form, but where form is born. Maybe it could even be understood as the movement of life

itself. With a concept from a totally different context, namely the Indian, it could be called *Pratitya-samutpada*—“emergence in mutual dependence.” Such limit-drawing would not mean the birth of a self-sufficient transcendence or interiority, but would be truly intersubjective in the sense of “in need of another.”

But how do we access an event such as limit-drawing? If it is a phenomenological idea, it would need a place where it could be experienced and would be related to a willing and experiencing self. Bergo proposes the idea of “the other-in-same,” drawn from Levinas. And I agree that this denotes the place in phenomenology where these questions have to be discussed, i.e. the place where we experience our immanence passively (even though not necessarily with a starting point in Levinas). Where we are experiencing ourselves as receiving ourselves, and not in control of ourselves. A place that provides us with a radical passivity of sensation, i.e. not only that the “object” is out of our control and received, but also that the means and forms through which the “object” is given, are themselves given to us. There is thus a double-sidedness of passivity: both the stream of proto-impressions, and the receiving of intentionality. Already in the passive reception of oneself there is a split, and a limit is immediately drawn between what is received as proto-impression and what is received as the structure of intentionality. These two, however, also need one another and cannot be thought of in isolation. And beyond this, they also have in common that they cannot be fully thematized without losing something essential. The phenomenological analysis has shown that neither of them can be fully visible: A proto-impression loses its “now” and is formalized through passive synthesis. In a similar way intentionality always partly escapes its own thematizing eye, as was first shown in Husserl’s analysis of inner time consciousness.¹ The paradox of sensibility is thus also the paradox of intentionality and thematization. Intentionality is thus not pure form, but is, dare I say... alive.

I do not think we should understand unformed life and constitution as two separate moments in experience. What I find interesting is instead to think their interconnection, and maybe even their common birth *as* separated. That is, to think the *limit* between life and constitution, the place

¹ This analysis runs through several of Husserl’s works with start in *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins* (Hua X, ed. Rudolf Boehm, Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966).

where they are separated from each other. Or rather the event of limit-drawing in which they become two; two that are both received passively and creating the possibility of activity.

Levinas is aware of this double passivity, but does he use it fully? Thus, when Husserl privileges form—and formalism—of intentionality (as Bergo says), he also privileges one passivity and reception over another, i.e. the reception of intentionality above the reception of the world, one side of a movement at the cost of the other. And I do agree that *such* an emphasis exists in phenomenology. But there is a reason for this: phenomenological analysis has shown that there is a mutual interdependence between the reception of these two passivities, although there is above all an interdependence that is asymmetrical. The world is only given through the *means and forms* of intentionality, since intentionality is what gives. But even then, I would argue that this does not result in a pure interiority, but precisely in an asymmetrical interdependence. Only through abstraction can we separate them. Their relation is structured in the same way as the body that is both felt and feeling. Maybe we could even say that their relation *is* the body: as something that we passively receive in its double-sidedness, and through which our activity is possible.

The task to try to make these passivities (and not only what can be felt and seen) visible in language, and the will to discuss a *pure* passivity that loses every connection to activity, have been topics for discussion in phenomenology, especially in the so called turn to religion.² This is a problem connected to the problem of naming and of metaphors. Since Husserl's analysis of inner time consciousness, phenomenology has tried to make this double passivity visible. And thus it has also tried to make visible that which escapes objectifying intentionality, that which we cannot make into an object. For example, Aron Gurwitsch examines this in *Marginal Consciousness*, but maybe the philosopher who has pushed this the furthest is Michel Henry, who even claims that objectifying intentionality is unreal in relation to an immanent intentionality.³

² See Dominique Janicaud, *Phenomenology and the "Theological turn": the French debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000) and Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

³ Aron Gurwitsch, *Marginal Consciousness* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1985). Michel Henry explicitly argues for the unreality of the objectifying intentionality in *I am the Truth* (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 2003).

I do think that the need to make the experience of a passive reception visible is one reason why human beings throughout history have formed different concepts of “Gods,” of the “Holy,” etc. But it is precisely this will to render apparent that withdraws from experience and visibility, at the same time that it makes them possible, is of course a paradox and places us in front of a dilemma: either we must name that which cannot properly have a name, *or* reduce experience to that which can show itself as an object. Through naming, concepts (for example “God,” “nunc stans,” or, as here, “Life”) are formed and endowed with power, they enter the human world of language as something of which some “chosen ones” have a more refined knowledge, with which they are in touch. And from here the whole power structure can grow forth. These authorities have different names in different contexts: “religious leaders,” “philosophers,” or “scientists.”

The alternative would be to avoid naming and bringing these issues to language. But this would mean that we became blind to a whole field of experiences, and phenomenology could even be understood as a rebellion against such blindness, in its constant attempts to formulate the passively received possibilities for experience. To deny the possibility of bringing this to language would mean that only what can be measured and objectified is understood as real.

These two alternative ways of dealing with this paradox also have political consequences. I would suggest that totalitarian societies, religious or non-religious, can be understood as radical consequences of the first alternative, of bringing the passivity of human activity to language and making it into a foundation for a world-view. Some words (“God,” “Race,” “Life” etc.) are capitalized and made absolute. On the other hand, liberal and scientific societies could be understood as a consequence of the second alternative. In avoiding a language for this passivity they take only that which can be measured as real into account. And measurements of different kinds are often transformed into financial and economical measurements.

If phenomenology could be seen as a protest against a scientific society, it is also true that a similar debate, and an equally problematic relation to this paradox have been present in phenomenology itself. Starting from Husserl’s concept of *nunc stans* (then developed by Klaus Held)⁴,

⁴ Klaus Held, *Lebendige Gegenwart—Die Frage nach der Seinsweise des transzendentalen Ich bei Edmund Husserl, entwickelt am Leitfaden der Zeitproblematik* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966).

phenomenology has repeatedly tried to object to the reduction of knowledge to object-knowledge, and emphasized passivity, affectivity, and the non-given in the given. But, and this is important, phenomenology has also time after time returned to a criticism of these concepts to the extent that they have grown too predominant—i.e. when they have been recognised as “Names.” This dilemma is one way of understanding “The Ambiguity of the Sacred,” within which the sacred is understood in terms of those passivities that escape naming.

As I have argued, limits do not necessarily have to be understood as borders between two fields, but rather as a place of birth: an event where form and matter are separated and where life comes forth. Life is thus not a “Something,” or a harmonious experience, one in itself and before reflection. Life could rather be understood as the separation between one and the other, between experiencing and experienced, a split that is inherent in all living. And this split does not have to leave one side behind, as thematized objectivity, as well as unformed life, has tended to be left behind in a phenomenology that has given priority to thematizing and transcendental intentionality. Focusing on the event of limit-drawing means that thematized and thematizing can never be isolated from each other, and that form and matter appear together as departing from each other and thus as both dependent upon each other and as separate parts. Their birth means that they are separated and move away from each other, becoming more and more independent, or seemingly independent; since they are forever bound together in their original emergence in mutual dependence.

“Life” would then not mean will to power, having, as Levinas says on one occasion, only one way to become universal: war. Instead, “life” would mean limit-drawing, and as such differentiation and conflict, it would mean eroticism (that demands separation in order to attract) as well as war, it would mean “world.” It would definitely not mean one harmonious Being, Will, or solution, and as soon as it becomes fixed as a concept of power or foundation it needs to be deconstructed, once again finding the place where it is born, and form and content are separated. As such, the concept of life has an advantage since it is connected to the proto-impression as well as to the movement of intentionality. In such a focus on the event of limit-drawing there is neither a transcendent world of forms or gods, nor any pure, unformed matter or a pure, non-constituted life. The forms could never leave the world or the body, but only over and over again formulate their birth. In my understanding faith is a name for such a movement, a will

to relate to the withdrawn that does not have to be connected only to a transcendent beyond, but rather to a movement of giving birth, maybe a movement of hope?

Bergo's question was whether we could approach messianism as a principle of hope in correlation to a world and a subjectivity of affectivity that are embodied but not explicitly alive. And furthermore, can we do this through a return to a philosophy of life that would be able to save phenomenology from formalism and idealism, but without falling into the dangers of fascism, as did the reception of Nietzsche?

Maybe the concept of limit-drawing could be helpful in such a task, as a fruitful "in-between," between the dangers of philosophy of life and phenomenology? Maybe it would mean a phenomenology of birth.