

CHAPTER ONE

Immanence: A Life

What is a transcendental field? It can be distinguished from experience in that it doesn't refer to an object or belong to a subject (empirical representation). It appears therefore as a pure stream of a-subjective consciousness, a pre-reflexive impersonal consciousness, a qualitative duration of consciousness without a self. It may seem curious that the transcendental be defined by such immediate givens: we will speak of a transcendental empiricism in contrast to everything that makes up the world of the subject and the object. There is something wild and powerful in this transcendental empiricism that is of course not the element of sensation (simple empiricism), for sensation is only a break within the flow of absolute consciousness. It is, rather, however close two sensations may be, the passage from one to the other as becoming, as increase or decrease in power (virtual quantity). Must

we then define the transcendental field by a pure immediate consciousness with neither object nor self, as a movement that neither begins nor ends? (Even Spinoza's conception of this passage or quantity of power still appeals to consciousness.)

But the relation of the transcendental field to consciousness is only a conceptual one. Consciousness becomes a fact only when a subject is produced at the same time as its object, both being outside the field and appearing as "transcendents." Conversely, as long as consciousness traverses the transcendental field at an infinite speed everywhere diffused, nothing is able to reveal it.¹ It is expressed, in fact, only when it is reflected on a subject that refers it to objects. That is why the transcendental field cannot be defined by the consciousness that is coextensive with it, but removed from any revelation.

The transcendent is not the transcendental. Were it not for consciousness, the transcendental field would be defined as a pure plane of immanence, because it eludes all transcendence of the subject and of the object.² Absolute immanence is in itself: it is not in something, *to* something; it does not depend on an object or belong to a subject. In Spinoza, immanence is not immanence *to* substance; rather, substance and modes are in immanence. When the subject or the

object falling outside the plane of immanence is taken as a universal subject or as any object *to which* immanence is attributed, the transcendental is entirely denatured, for it then simply redoubles the empirical (as with Kant), and immanence is distorted, for it then finds itself enclosed in the transcendent. Immanence is not related to Some Thing as a unity superior to all things or to a Subject as an act that brings about a synthesis of things: it is only when immanence is no longer immanence to anything other than itself that we can speak of a plane of immanence. No more than the transcendental field is defined by consciousness can the plane of immanence be defined by a subject or an object that is able to contain it.

We will say of pure immanence that it is A LIFE, and nothing else. It is not immanence to life, but the immanent that is in nothing is itself a life. A life is the immanence of immanence, absolute immanence: it is complete power, complete bliss. It is to the degree that he goes beyond the aporias of the subject and the object that Johann Fichte, in his last philosophy, presents the transcendental field as *a life*, no longer dependent on a Being or submitted to an Act — it is an absolute immediate consciousness whose very activity no longer refers to a being but is ceaselessly posed in a life.³ The transcendental field then becomes a gen-

uine plane of immanence that reintroduces Spinozism into the heart of the philosophical process. Did Maine de Biran not go through something similar in his “last philosophy” (the one he was too tired to bring to fruition) when he discovered, beneath the transcendence of effort, an absolute immanent life? The transcendental field is defined by a plane of immanence, and the plane of immanence by a life.

What is immanence? A life... No one has described what *a* life is better than Charles Dickens, if we take the indefinite article as an index of the transcendental. A disreputable man, a rogue, held in contempt by everyone, is found as he lies dying. Suddenly, those taking care of him manifest an eagerness, respect, even love, for his slightest sign of life. Everybody bustles about to save him, to the point where, in his deepest coma, this wicked man himself senses something soft and sweet penetrating him. But to the degree that he comes back to life, his saviors turn colder, and he becomes once again mean and crude. Between his life and his death, there is a moment that is only that of *a* life playing with death.⁴ The life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life, that is, from the subjectivity and objectivity of what happens: a “*Homo tantum*” with

whom everyone empathizes and who attains a sort of beatitude. It is a haecceity no longer of individuation but of singularization: a life of pure immanence, neutral, beyond good and evil, for it was only the subject that incarnated it in the midst of things that made it good or bad. The life of such individuality fades away in favor of the singular life immanent to a man who no longer has a name, though he can be mistaken for no other. A singular essence, a life...

But we shouldn’t enclose life in the single moment when individual life confronts universal death. *A* life is everywhere, in all the moments that a given living subject goes through and that are measured by given lived objects: an immanent life carrying with it the events or singularities that are merely actualized in subjects and objects. This indefinite life does not itself have moments, close as they may be one to another, but only between-times, between-moments; it doesn’t just come about or come after but offers the immensity of an empty time where one sees the event yet to come and already happened, in the absolute of an immediate consciousness. In his novels, Alexander Lernet-Holenia places the event in an in-between time that could engulf entire armies. The singularities and the events that constitute *a* life coexist with the accidents of *the* life that corresponds to it, but they

are neither grouped nor divided in the same way. They connect with one another in a manner entirely different from how individuals connect. It even seems that a singular life might do without any individuality, without any other concomitant that individualizes it. For example, very small children all resemble one another and have hardly any individuality, but they have singularities: a smile, a gesture, a funny face—not subjective qualities. Small children, through all their sufferings and weaknesses, are infused with an immanent life that is pure power and even bliss. The indefinite aspects in a life lose all indetermination to the degree that they fill out a plane of immanence or, what amounts to the same thing, to the degree that they constitute the elements of a transcendental field (individual life, on the other hand, remains inseparable from empirical determinations). The indefinite as such is the mark not of an empirical indetermination but of a determination by immanence or a transcendental determinability. The indefinite article is the indetermination of the person only because it is determination of the singular. The One is not the transcendent that might contain immanence but the immanent contained within a transcendental field. One is always the index of a multiplicity: an event, a singularity, a life... Although it is always possible to invoke a tran-

scendent that falls outside the plane of immanence, or that attributes immanence to itself, all transcendence is constituted solely in the flow of immanent consciousness that belongs to this plane.⁵ Transcendence is always a product of immanence.

A life contains only virtuals. It is made up of virtualities, events, singularities. What we call virtual is not something that lacks reality but something that is engaged in a process of actualization following the plane that gives it its particular reality. The immanent event is actualized in a state of things and of the lived that make it happen. The plane of immanence is itself actualized in an object and a subject to which it attributes itself. But however inseparable an object and a subject may be from their actualization, the plane of immanence is itself virtual, so long as the events that populate it are virtualities. Events or singularities give to the plane all their virtuality, just as the plane of immanence gives virtual events their full reality. The event considered as non-actualized (indefinite) is lacking in nothing. It suffices to put it in relation to its concomitants: a transcendental field, a plane of immanence, a life, singularities. A wound is incarnated or actualized in a state of things or of life; but it is itself a pure virtuality on the plane of immanence that leads us into a life. My wound existed before me: not

a transcendence of the wound as higher actuality, but its immanence as a virtuality always within a milieu (plane or field).⁶ There is a big difference between the virtuals that define the immanence of the transcendental field and the possible forms that actualize them and transform them into something transcendent.

NOTES

1. “As though we reflected back to surfaces the light which emanates from them, the light which, had it passed unopposed, would never have been revealed” (Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* [New York: Zone Books, 1988], p. 36).

2. Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, who posits a transcendental field without a subject that refers to a consciousness that is impersonal, absolute, immanent: with respect to it, the subject and the object are “transcendents” (*La transcendance de l’Ego* [Paris: Vrin, 1966], pp. 74–87). On James, see David Lapoujade’s analysis, “Le Flux intensif de la conscience chez William James,” *Philosophie* 46 (June 1995).

3. Already in the second introduction to *La Doctrine de la science*: “The intuition of pure activity which is nothing fixed, but progress, not a being, but a life” (*Oeuvres choisies de la philosophie première* [Paris: Vrin, 1964], p. 274). On the concept of life according to Fichte, see *Initiation à la vie bienheureuse* (Paris: Aubier, 1944), and Martial Guéroult’s commentary (p. 9).

4. Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 443.

5. Even Edmund Husserl admits this: “The being of the world is necessarily transcendent to consciousness, even within the originary evidence, and remains necessarily transcendent to it. But this doesn’t change the fact that all transcendence is constituted solely in the *life of consciousness*, as inseparably linked to that life...” (*Méditations cartésiennes* [Paris: Vrin, 1947], p. 52). This will be the starting point of Sartre’s text.

6. Cf. Joë Bousquet, *Les Capitales* (Paris: Le Cercle du Livre, 1955).