The Impossible Completion of Immanence

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The Implications of Immanence: Toward a New Concept of Life by Leonard Lawlor. New York: Fordham University Press, 2006. 199 pages.

In the context of increasing attentiveness to notions of biopower, Lawlor's work provides a forceful intervention through Husserlian phenomenology and post-phenomenological thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Derrida, and Giles Deleuze. Given that one of phenomenology's key principles is the notion of *Erlebnis* ("lived experience," or *vécu*), a study of the kind that Lawlor offers has been urgently needed to renew the question of life through the specific idioms of continental philosophy, of which phenomenology is a dominant strand. Taking his point of departure from current "political signs" of paradoxical natures—where the preservation of a single life in the case of Terry Schiavo in the United States lies alongside the destruction of the multiple in the case of Arab suicide bombers and the Darfur crisis—Lawlor shows that attempts to overcome Western metaphysics have generated "philosophical signs" of no less paradoxical natures, which rethink life from the notion of a miniscule hiatus, *un écart infime*. Lawlor adapts this notion of *un écart infime* from Foucault's *Les Mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things,* 1966), where it operates as the leverage for dissociating the empirical and transcendental doubles in the well-known

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"end of man" section (149 fn. 19; 9). The notion is then more broadly extended to refer to the division of the living present, the blind spot in the visual field, as well as to the nonplace of death in Derrida and Merleau-Ponty's works.

Since his early text *Derrida and Husserl: The Basic Problem of Phenomenology* (2002), Lawlor has been guided by Jean Hyppolite's phrase that "immanence is complete" (4). The greatest challenge that the present work faces is how to continue pursuing a "completion" of immanence without thereby returning life to the metaphysical privilege; that is, to a thought of the transcendent. For if a philosophy of immanence situates death, powerlessness, or finitude in the conception of life, its so-called completion is not only impossible; such an impossibility is structurally necessary. Hence, the title of Lawlor's work, by highlighting the implications inherent in any project of immanence, bespeaks of its own risk. As the author admits from the outset, independent thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze "diffract" in the "completion of immanence," and therefore in "the overcoming of metaphysics as Platonism" (8). If, according to Lawlor, the "completion of immanence" can be sought only from the nonplace or the zone of *un écart infime,* which characterizes the "mixing" of what metaphysics determines as dualisms, then such a project ought to demonstrate *at the level of its own critical limits* another structure of the *écart infime* that permits the mixing of distinct post-phenomenological viewpoints. Hence, the ambitiousness of Lawlor's work lies in having to traverse a range of thinkers *without* reductively organizing each of their specific works around a mere thematics of life: what is at stake is not a simple matter of studying the term or workings of *un écart infime* as it appears variably in Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Merleau-Ponty. Yet, on the other hand, if what does lie at stake is a question of "immanent" methodology, of mixing *as* method in order to show the *concept* of this radical mixing, then the absence of such a method in the work unexpectedly bears its sobering achievement: the impossibility of a "completion" of immanence for a philosophy of life.

The first four chapters focus on Foucault and Derrida's employment of the term "miniscule hiatus" or *un écart infime* for the critique of phenomenological lived experience as hetero-affection whereby sensing is always contaminated by difference and alterity. Chapters 5–10 extend Foucault's critique of lived experience to Merleau-Ponty's notion of "mixturism" and in doing so present different views on the position of death in life. Lawlor concludes the first chapter by arguing that the dissociation of finitude between positivism and eschatology as discussed in Foucault's *Words and Things* (Lawlor's preferred translation for the text that appears in English as *The Order of Things*) now comes to stand for Foucault's positivism,

on the one hand, and Derrida's messianism, on the other. Despite the attempt to find an "association" between the two strands that is "not ambiguous" (14), the next three chapters rather demonstrate their irreducible differences. Namely, that even though Derrida and Foucault share the same critique of phenomenology based on a "miniscule hiatus," the former understands mediation or contamination as a promise of "unity, even though it cannot, of necessity, ever keep the promise," whereas the latter conceives of the miniscule hiatus as a "battle" where no unity is ever promised (53–54). The problem of reconciling Foucauldian positivism and Derridian eschatology is thus kept open—and this becomes the most challenging part of the book—as Lawlor proceeds to reconstruct Foucault's notion of immanence alongside Merleau-Ponty's later philosophies in the second half of the book.

It is also in this second half that Lawlor heightens the question of singularity as a renewed response to that of the Cartesian subject. In chapter 5, Lawlor argues that both Foucault and Merleau-Ponty's analyses of paintings emphasize the dispersion of the subject through the impersonal viewpoint and the infinitive verb (64–68). Nonetheless, Merleau-Ponty still defines life as a synthesis of forces whereas, for Foucault, "death dissociates the different powers of life" (69). While Merleau-Ponty still conceives the blind spot on the basis of coincidence, potency and vision, for Foucault "the invisible is never an imminent visible on the horizon" (92). The only place where Lawlor suggests how Merleau-Ponty might actually be amenable to thinking the singular experience of the other-than-human is in chapter 6, where the prohibition of touch and the potency to see preserves the distance that is "the condition of all alterity" (90).

Without fully returning to this aspect of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, the difference between Merleau-Ponty and Foucault is instead reinforced. It is once again unclear how the impossible possibility of a nonhuman experience in Foucault can be transposed to Merleau-Ponty, who, for Lawlor more so than the other thinkers, contributes to "a new concept of life" (108). Encapsulating Merleau-Ponty's "archaeology of nature" as a "memory of memory" whereby death is the "active becoming of sense" (119–20), Lawlor's call for "a slight change in emphasis in how we conceive the minuscule hiatus [that] is able to move us from Merleau-Ponty's tranquility to Foucault's bellicosity" is as telegraphic as the necessity of maintaining the difference between the two (119–20). Even if such an indecisiveness can be taken to be as symptomatic of what Lawlor calls the paradoxical "philosophical signs" of our times (2, 143), the miniscule but invincible hiatus between the various thinkers requires a more patient study before it can indeed become an effect *à la lettre* of the work as a whole. Hence, for instance, when

Lawlor does state, at the beginning of Chapter 10, that it is necessary to "disambiguate" the ambiguity of phenomenological lived experience "by means of a miniscule but invincible hiatus," it is assumed that the latter is itself nonambiguous (123). However, the rest of this chapter proves the contrary. By examining the similarities (if not identities) between Heidegger's conception of life as the will to power in Nietzsche and Foucault's conception of biopower, Lawlor risks foreclosing the openness of being in Heidegger within Foucault's discursive ordering of power, knowledge, and discourse. The confusion of objects of critique with critical tools is one of the main weaknesses of the book. If Lawlor faults Heidegger for failing to "overcome metaphysics" (123), it is misleading when he then associates Heidegger's discussion of "finization" (*Verendlichung*) as a combination of the life-and-death process (130–37) with the "*écart* of death" in Foucault (137–40).

In the end, Lawlor's aim to renew a philosophy of life independent of vitalism or biologism is imaginatively argued but lacks overall cohesiveness. Although the latter might be due to the fact that most of the chapters were previously published in separate journals and edited collections, the argument would have benefited from further organization and revision for the purpose of a book. As suggested earlier in this review, Lawlor's decision to condense the thoughts of Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Merleau-Ponty, as well as those of Heidegger and Husserl, has the incidental, nonetheless overwhelming, effect of the very hiatus that he is trying to make as the basis for thinking "life-ism." Except that, in this case, such a hiatus produced by reading is far from miniscule or infinitesimal: what is supposed to be a strategic theme in this work inexorably overburdens its central arguments. Furthermore, in wishing to "obey [Merleau-Ponty's] imperative to conceive an *arche,* an origin or principle, such as the principle of life" (3), it takes Lawlor too long to finally reinstate in the conclusion that the same imperative "tells us how not to conceive an *arche* or principle in the epoch of anti-Platonism" (145). With this rather impressionistic "anti-metaphysics," *The Implications of Immanence* is perhaps indicative of the main direction that Continental philosophy has taken over the last decades. Yet, if these last decades have taught us something, it is that there is no simple overturning of metaphysics as such, and that such an operation might well reinforce the very structure that it is opposing. One is then left to wonder what exactly constitutes the paradoxical, political, and philosophical "signs" that Lawlor adheres to throughout the book—are they not perhaps closer to the phenomenological essence of appearing sensuousness rather than to the "spectral" (1, 120, 127, 169)?