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Immanence

Leonard Lawlor

Since the time of Immanuel Kant, philosophers, and cultural theorists (like Friedrich Nietzsche) have always engaged in immanent critique. Most generally and negatively, immanent critique criticizes on the basis of no transcendent idea or value. Immanent critique therefore is undoubtedly a kind of relativism. We must not be afraid of relativism. Depending on no transcendent value, immanent critique depends on immanence itself. Immanent critique then looks to be paradoxical. It is. Immanent critique is a difficult idea. It means a critique that does not appeal to a transcendent or other worldly value or idea. It is a critique that remains *within* experience but is done in the name of a different kind of **experience** such as **responsibility** (Deleuze 1983, 91–93). In order to start to understand the immanence found in immanent critique, we must distinguish immanence from apparently related forms of thinking such as materialism and naturalism. And we must distinguish immanence from its opposite term, which is not just the transcendent but also transcendence.

Immanence seems to have two senses. As we can see already, the first sense of “immanence” must be opposed to the transcendent. Abandoning the transcendent (and therefore certain forms of religious belief), we are no longer concerned with a second, heavenly **world**; we no longer gaze at an idea that lies beyond

62 our world and our experience. Our gaze is now turned back to this world and to our ideas. We are now concerned with our experience or experience in general. Phenomenological investigations have shown that experience is necessarily structured by time. While our experience is ours and while it is of this world, the fact that experience is fundamentally temporal opens experience to something that goes beyond it. The fact that every present moment of experience is retained makes the retained image repeatable. And this repeatability provides the retained image with a **powerful** form of potentiality. In other words, due to the structure of temporalization, there is becoming in experience. Becoming is the second and more profound sense of immanence. It is this second sense of immanence that we find in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.

Before we turn to the second sense of immanence as becoming, we must stress the definition of immanence as experience. Deleuze and Guattari themselves define immanence as experience: immanence is a "field of experience" (1994, 46–48). When they speak of a field of experience, Deleuze and Guattari ask us, however, to reverse the traditional way we think of experience. Usually, we think of experience as a relation between a subject who senses and an object that is sensed. Usually, we think of experience as vision and something seen. In this case, the experience and the thing seen are related back to the seeing subject who synthesizes the views of the thing seen. The synthetic activity of the subject is therefore prior to the experience and makes it possible. By asking us to reverse the traditional view of experience, Deleuze and Guattari ask us to imagine experience itself as being prior to subjects and objects. Thanks again to phenomenology, we can imagine such a subjectless and objectless field of experience. Maurice Merleau-Ponty has shown that, in our usual, everyday experience, our vision is oriented by the objects and the world that surrounds them. The thing seen presents profiles that motivate the viewer's synthetic activity, and the profiles appear against the background of a world

that already makes sense. However, like Deleuze and Guattari, Merleau-Ponty also asks us to reverse this common understanding of experience. He asks us, for example, to think of night-time experience, experience during a very dark night. In such an experience, we lose the orientation of the object and the world as its background. In fact, the night “envelops me, it penetrates me through all of my senses, it suffocates my memories, and it all but effaces my personal identity” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 296). Merleau-Ponty himself compares the experience of the night to mystical experience, which implies that, when we follow the reversal of normal experience, we find ourselves in an unusual experience. Being in an almost mad experience is not something we should fear: only in such experience are we jarred out of our common sense opinions and beliefs. It opens our minds to other ideas and thought. Only through such a nearly mad experience are we able to enter into immanence. Only through such an experience are we able to engage in immanent critique. As Merleau-Ponty might have said, we enter into immanence only by trying to depersonalize experience. The required depersonalization explains why the idea of immanence is so difficult for us to understand.

With the transition through a nearly mad experience, we are now prepared to examine the second definition of immanence. In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari define immanence as a plane with two sides, with the two sides being thought and extension, or consciousness and matter (1994, 48–49). And to this list of sides, we could add subject and object. In the plane with two sides, we must note that the plane of immanence is neither matter nor consciousness. Therefore, immanence cannot be immanent to matter or to consciousness. If Deleuze and Guattari call the plane of immanence at times “nature,” they mean nature in a sense entirely distinguished from anything like a natural substance. As they say in *A Thousand Plateaus*,

[t]his plane [as opposed to the plane of transcendence] is necessarily a plane of immanence and univocity. We

therefore call it a plane of Nature, although nature has nothing to do with it, since on this plane there is no distinction between the natural and the artificial. However many dimensions it may have, it never has a supplementary dimension to that which happens upon it. That alone makes it natural and immanent. (1987, 266)

The plane of immanence “never has a supplementary dimension.” Therefore, the plane of immanence is based on nothing but itself, which gives it the status of being that which is prior to the two sides. Only in the sense of priority to the two sides is the plane of immanence “natural” (or better, “vital”). It is not natural in the sense of objective laws, chemical processes and causes, or neuro-chemical processes and causes, material forces; all of these scientific entities would be “supplementary dimensions.” To reduce the plane of immanence to these scientific entities (to reduce being to these beings, as Martin Heidegger would say) distorts the very concept of immanence. One misunderstands the conceptual core of Deleuze and Guattari’s plane of immanence if one identifies their thinking with naturalism or materialism.

Through the quotation above we just mentioned transcendence, which leads us back to the second and more profound sense of immanence. Immanence is a becoming. It becomes because it has “no supplementary dimension.” In other words, it is infinite, in the sense of having no absolute endpoint and no absolute starting point. It is based on no principle and on no purpose (no *arché* and no *telos*). In order to understand the infinite becoming of immanence, we must distinguish transcendence (which oriented so many phenomenological investigations) from the transcendent. As the literal meaning of the word indicates, with transcendence, we can say that the other (person) is beyond me, but in a sense that the other is still of this world or of this experience. The transcendence of the other indeed opens experience. Yet, it does not, according to Deleuze and Guattari, open it enough. In the transcendence of the other, we might conceive the other as another subject. In other words, we conceive

the other as an always hidden subjectivity, the form of his or her experiences being always hidden from my gaze by the face, but still there somewhere like a secret. If we conceive the transcendence of the other in this way, then we have set up a starting point and an endpoint to becoming. Instead of the face as the expression of a hidden subjectivity – a hiddenness that implies a transcend subject – we can conceive the face as the expression of a possible world, with the eyes as portals through which I can see the other world and through which I can become other. The difference between transcendence and immanence therefore is the difference between the other and becoming-other: not just “alter,” but alteration. Transcendence is a point at which we could imagine movement stopping (as if we were finally to reach the secret life of the other), while immanence is a vanishing point toward which one never stops moving (as if we always reach beyond ourselves). The unlimited movement of becoming is why we must really imagine immanence as a plane. On the vastness of this surface, it is possible to move and keep moving, especially if there are no objects or subjects at which to stop. On this surface, we are able to continue to fly. The image of incessant flight gives us an image of freedom. Perhaps to help others flee, escape, and be free is the highest form of **responsibility**.

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