The “Miniscule Hiatus”: Neo-vitalism in the Great French Philosophy of the 1960s


With his wonderful new book, *The Implications of Immanence*, Leonard Lawlor continues the most promising, rigorous, and fruitful ongoing research project among scholars of twentieth-century French philosophy. Lawlor’s recent work, particularly *Thinking through French Philosophy: The Being of the Question* (Indiana, 2003), investigates what he calls the “point of diffraction” in the “system of ‘French’ philosophy.” In the interview with German scholars appended to that book, Lawlor notes that “French” must be in scare quotes, since the system he examines—expressed in the work of Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze—was “strongly influenced” by Husserl and Heidegger. In addition to the “Frenchness” of the system, we could also attend to the word “system” itself, to the systematicity of the “great French philosophy of the 1960s,” as Lawlor sometimes calls it. While in *Thinking through French Philosophy* Lawlor attends to the point of diffraction, to what divides the French thinkers, to what provides breadth to the system, here in *The Implications of Immanence* he attends to what unites them, to what provides coherence to the system. For Lawlor, what unites the French—in this case (and this is a choice to which we will return), Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, and Foucault but not Deleuze, except at the margins—is the attention to the dispersion of death at the heart of life, the “miniscule hiatus” that divides the living present, that spaces out original temporality, that separates lived experience from the living body, to what, most crucially for the phenomenology of perception, inserts a blind spot into a visual field. In short, what unites Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, and Foucault, for Lawlor, is attention to the surpassing of classical phenomenology. French philosophy from 1960 to 1968, then, for Lawlor, is post-phenomenological.

But Lawlor is not content with a negative definition. Beyond phenomenology for Lawlor is “life-ism” or “neo-vitalism,” the positive working out of the effects of that “miniscule hiatus” that produces a “completion of immanence.” “Life-ism” or “neo-vitalism” means life and death have to be thought together, death dispersed throughout life in a multiplicity or dispersion of singularities, to use the Deleuzean terms Lawlor adopts. In *The Implications of Immanence*, Lawlor chases down the surpassing of phenomenology and the advent of life-ism as a necessary response to the “epoch of biopower,” picking up on...
Foucault’s term. In setting up the political context of his work, Lawlor notes how biopower produces paradoxes: the intense media focus on the singular case of Terri Schiavo is contrasted with the relative lack of attention to the use of rape as a tool for affecting populations in Sudan. The strangest figure of biopower, however, in Lawlor’s estimation, is the suicide bomber, whose auto-affection—the most traditional definition of life itself, Lawlor notes—is turned to ending the life of self and others.

In addition to these political signs, he discerns philosophical signs that call for a renewal of the concept of life in the epoch of biopower: the interest in life shown in late writings of Deleuze, Derrida, and Foucault. But it’s Heidegger’s reading of Nietzsche that forms the most important horizon for Lawlor’s investigation of biopower: the will-to-power as the will to the preservation and enhancement of life (2, 43, 124). Lawlor accepts the critiques of Deleuze and Derrida that Heidegger does not think the relation of multiplicity and singularity (2), concepts that guide Lawlor’s reading, along with Merleau-Ponty’s imperative that a “miniscule hiatus” (un écart infime) be thought that prevents the coincidence as well as the separation of traditional oppositions, among them, idealism and realism, teleology and mechanism, humanism and naturalism, and so on (3, 113). This “mixturism” brings death into life, defining a new concept, “life-ism” or “neo-vitalism,” which will help us deal with the paradoxes of biopower, if we can learn the way to the “completion of immanence,” a completion that is not a mere reversal of Platonic transcendence, but a twisting free of metaphysics (8). Thus the title, and the stakes, of the book: what are the implications of completing immanence via the concept of “life-ism” in the epoch of biopower?

In the series of carefully argued and extensively documented essays that make up The Implications of Immanence, Lawlor is able to find new meaning in well-known texts, such as Foucault’s Words and Things (which Lawlor rightfully notes is a better translation of Les mots et les choses than The Order of Things) or Derrida’s Voice and Phenomenon (in the same vein, but with even more justification, Lawlor rightly insists on using this more accurate translation of La voix et le phénomène instead of Speech and Phenomena), even those one thinks one knows well, an intimacy one feels in no small part thanks to Lawlor’s own previous work. He also provides an extensive reading of some new texts, such as Derrida’s Le toucher; to my knowledge, this is among the first works to pay attention to this soon to be important text. Other works that are sometimes overlooked such as Derrida’s Memoirs of the Blind or Foucault’s Birth of the Clinic receive careful attention; after Lawlor’s patient explications and careful revelations of important points in these texts, I am reminded of