

For a Philosophy of Infancy

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In the fresh waters of Mexico there lives a species of albinic salamander that has been attracting the attention of zoologists and scholars of animal evolution for a long time. Whoever has had the opportunity to observe a specimen in an aquarium, is struck by the infantile, almost foetal appearance of this amphibian: its relatively large head encased in its body, its opalescent skin, lightly veined in grey on the snout and lit up in silver and pink on the excrescences around its gills, its slender feet, lily-shaped with petal-like red fingers.

The axolotl (this is its name) was first classified as a discrete species, one that showed the peculiarity of maintaining throughout its lifetime, characteristics that are, for an amphibian, typical of the larva, such as branchial respiration and an exclusively aquatic habitation. That it *was* an autonomous species, however, was proved beyond every doubt by the fact that, despite its infantile appearance, the axolotl was perfectly capable of reproducing itself. Only later, a series of experiments confirmed that, following the administration of thyroid hormone, the small triton underwent the metamorphosis normal for amphibians: it would lose its gills and, developing pulmonary respiration, would abandon aquatic life to transform itself into an adult specimen of the speckled salamander (*ambistoma tygrinum*). This circumstance could lead to a classification of the axolotl as a case of evolutionary regression, a defeat in the battle for life that compels an amphibian to renounce the terrestrial part of its existence and to indefinitely prolong its larval state.

But this is not the case; and it is precisely this stubborn infantilism (paedomorphosis or neoteny) that has offered the key to a new way of understanding animal evolution.

What would follow, therefore, is that human beings did not initially evolve from individual adults, but from baby primates that, like the axolotl, had prematurely acquired the capacity to reproduce themselves.

This would explain a number of human morphological characteristics (from the position of the occipital foramen to the shape of the ear's auricle, from hairless skin to the structure of the hands and feet) that do not correspond to those of adult anthropoids but to those of their foetuses. Traits that are transitory in primates have in humans become definitive, somehow bringing to pass, in flesh and bone, the type of the eternal child. Above all, however, this hypothesis allows us to explain in a new way the language and the whole exosomatic tradition (culture) that, more than any genetic imprint, characterize *homo sapiens*.

Let us try to imagine an infant who, unlike the axolotl, does not simply settle into its larval environment, but who so adheres to its lack of specialization and totipotency that it refuses any destiny and specific environment as to solely follow its own indeterminacy and immaturity. While other animals (the mature ones!) merely obey the specific instructions written in their genetic code, the neotenic infant finds itself in the condition of also being able to pay attention to that which is not written, of paying attention to arbitrary and uncodified somatic possibilities. In its infantile totipotency, it would be thrown outside its self [*gettato fuori di sé*], not as other living beings are, into a specific adventure and environment, but, for the first time, into a *world*. In this sense, the infant would truly be listening to being and to possibility [*in ascolto dell'essere e del possibile*]. And, with its voice free of every genetic directive, with absolutely nothing to say and express, the child could, unlike any other animal, *name* things in its language and, in this way, open-up before itself an infinity of possible worlds.

As the specifically human vocation, infancy is, in this sense, the pre-eminent setting of the possible [*possibile*] and of the potential [*potenziale*]. It is not a question, however, of a simple logical possibility, of something not real. What characterizes the infant is that it is its own potentiality [*potenza*], it *lives* its own possibility [*possibilità*]. There is something akin to an experiment specific to infancy, one that no longer distinguishes between possibility and reality, but turns the possible into life itself. It is in vain that grown-ups attempt to check this immediate coincidence of the child's life and possibility, confining it to limited times and places: the nursery, codified games, playtime, and fairy-tales. They know very well that the question is not one of fantasizing, but that in this experiment the child risks its whole life, literally playing with it in every instant. The child's *experimentum potentiae*, in fact, does not even spare its physiological life: the child plays with its physiological function, or, rather, *plays it*, and in this way, takes pleasure in it.

Good teachers know this, those who understand that games are the high road to childhood experience. It is in this that they succeed in having the child acquire certain customs and habits. To have a child learn to wash, for example, it is essential to transform washing into a game; and it is by playing that the future adult acquires his form of life [*forma di vita*].

Heidegger described the disquiet and movement specific to being-in-the-world by way of the term *Dasein*, being-there, being in one's here-place. It is a question, so to speak, of a transcendence without an elsewhere, of a being outside itself and on its way toward its very own taking-place (Heidegger once expressed this condition as 'being inside an outside'). What is a child's *Dasein*? One could say that it is an immanence without place and subject, an adhering that adheres neither to an identity nor to some thing, but solely to its own possibility and potentiality. It is an absolute *immanence* that is immanent to nothing.

In this sense the child is a paradigm of a life that is absolutely inseparable from its form, an absolute *form-of-life* [*forma-di-vita*] without remainder. What does ‘form of life’ mean in this case?

It means that the child is never bare life [*nuda vita*], that it is never possible to isolate in a child something like bare life or biological life.

The politics that we are familiar with are characterized from their beginning by the differentiation of the sphere of bare life (*zoé*, the simple natural life, as opposed to *bios*, the life that is politically qualified by free men), which, in the classical *polis*, was confined to the precincts of the house (the place of women, children, and slaves) and, in the modern city, has increasingly and ever more profoundly come to enter the political sphere (which, in the end, turns into the incessant deciding on life as such: the concentration camp as the place of bare life).

If the child seems to escape this structure and never allows, in its self, the differentiation of mere life, it is not, as is maintained too often, because the child has an unreal and mysterious life, one made of fantasy and games.

It is the very opposite that characterizes the child: *it adheres so closely to its physiological life that it becomes indiscernible from it*. (This is the true sense of the experiment on the possible that we mentioned earlier.) Similar in this respect to a woman’s life, the life of a child is ungraspable, not because it transcends toward an other world, but because it adheres to this world and to its body in a way that adults find intolerable.

The Latins had a singular expression, *vivere vitam*, which was passed on to modern romance languages as *vivre sa vie*, *vivere la propria vita* [*live one’s own life*]. The full transitive force of the verb ‘vivere’ has to be restored here; a force, however, that does not take on an object (this is the paradox!), but, so to speak, has no object other than life itself. Life here is a possibility, a potentiality that never exhausts itself in biographical facts and events, since it has no object other than itself. It is an absolute immanence that nevertheless *moves* and *lives*.

Such, then, is the life of the child. And this is why the child is the only integrally historical being, if history is, precisely, that which is absolutely immanent, without ever being identified in a fact (the battle of Waterloo is not any of the single facts that constitute it, and even less their sum—and yet it is nothing other than these things). The life of the child, as a result, instead of seeming completely scattered into small facts and episodes lacking meaning and history (like the life of primitives), remains unforgettable, the cipher of a higher history.

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