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## Communion, Aside: Notes for a deconstruction of the idea of life as autarchy

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### **1. The meaning of life**

In his *Confessions*, Augustin of Hippo famously said that one knows what time is, but if someone asked oneself what is time, then one would not know what to answer. Something similar seems to happen with life: I know what it means to be alive, but as soon as someone demands for further explanations, I am out of words. What does it mean to be alive? The first difficulty concerning this question resides in the broadness of the word “life”. When speaking of life, one can find many kinds of discourses which give meaning to it. One could ask, for instance, why one considers a natural entity to be alive; or one could also ask what does it mean to live a good life; or one could also ask if the God to whom we pray is himself alive, listening and willing to respond. The differences between these questions are not to be discarded. It seems that the notion of life is not univocal: biological, ethical, political and theological discourses give different meanings to the word “life”. However, it would be too easy to say that there are just different meanings of life and study them separately, within each discourse. On the contrary, the interesting thing to do is to find a common ground where all these different discourses meet. But this is not just an arbitrary decision: we can find already how these different discourses are determining each other by semantical displacements. For instance, when the State is thought of as if it were an organism, political and biological discourses meet; when the life of God is thought of as an endless blissful life, theology and ethics come

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together; and so forth. Although the concept of “life” is not univocal, it is not equivocal either: we could say that life is an analogical term (that is, that it can be said in very different ways). In order to host the different discourses, the idea of life must not have a unique definition, but it must have a common characteristic to bring these discourses together. If the idea of life is hosting so many different discourses and meanings, it is because its notion is not defined in a conceptual and univocal way. I would claim that, instead of bearing a precise and single definition, what defines life in Western thought is the way to conceptualize it by the use of the Greek and Latin reflexive prefix αὐτός, *autos* (self). Every time we refer to the living, we refer to its *reflexive nature*, expressed by this prefix: *self*-reproduction, *self*-regulation, *self*-production, *auto*-nomy, *aut*-archy. And if the prefix *autos* do not appear, one could find the reflexive nature of the activity in the very concept that is being used, as in the idea of metabolism or happiness or government. From Greek philosophy onwards (at least), something is thought to be alive because it can produce changes *in itself by itself*: its activities are both *spontaneous* and *immanent*, that is, they start in itself and end in itself. This reflexive nature of living beings was called “immanent causality” in Classical philosophy. And because of this immanent (reflexive) causation, living things are not just some-*thing*, but some-*body*, or some-*one*. This reflexive dimension defines the living as such, and since it is in this prefix “autos” where this reflexivity is expressed, and since the *self* (*autos*) is the principle of its own living, I would like to call this understanding of life the *bio-theo-political paradigm of autarchy*: the principle (ἀρχή) of life is to be found in the living being itself (αὐτός). I call it a *paradigm*, since it is a historical and contingent way by which we understand what life is. I call it *bio-theo-political*, because these three words include the totality of the discourses on life: the word *bios* means in Greek both the “organic” life and the “ethical” life (biology, psychology, medicine, ethics, anthropology, are included by this word); *theos* aims at the principle that grounds the Universe and that has been usually considered to be a perfect living being (theology, metaphysics and cosmology are the main discourses here); *polis* is the Greek for city, and points at the life of living communities (politics, sociology, economics are considered under this term). Of course, all these discourses are not isolated from each other: much on the contrary, they feed each other conceptually and live from these exchanges within the market of this paradigm.

In this paper, I will point out some key concepts and discursive strategies that work together in the building of this paradigm of life as being self-sufficient, a paradigm that leaves community and relationality aside, as something that is not essential to life, or that must be *reduced* to the needs of unity and totalization.<sup>1</sup> In

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<sup>1</sup> For a more developed examination of this paradigm, see: Martín Grassi, *Una historia crítica de la idea de vida. El paradigma bio-teo-político de la autarquía* (Buenos Aires: SB Editores, 2022).

effect, the paradigm is built upon the reflexive dimension of living beings, and it is driven by a logic of unity, identity and sameness. Thus, the very identity and unity of the living is performed by the living itself, in spite of every otherness (both inner and from the outside) that can be found. This unity must be produced by the living entity in itself, for life is pierced by an essential duality: as *reflexive*, the living being refers to itself, that is, it is (not) it-self. There is a *hiatus*, a separation, between one and one-self. I am “my-self” entails I am not “my-self”. The living being lives under this dual condition of reflexivity, and the question is how to achieve unity in its duality, how to appropriate one-self, or how to belong to one-self. That is the main problem and the central question under which the whole paradigm works, a problem that will also articulate the questions regarding the others that the living entity meets and that must integrate into its own dynamism for its own survival. As I intend to show, this paradigm must be deconstructed from its very basis if we are to habilitate a philosophy of communality and relationality, if we want to take into account seriously that life never happens in solitude.

## 2. Own yourself: *oikeiosis* and *body proper*

If we start from the biological, we can understand that the living and organic body is a unity made of different parts which are *used* for the sake of survival. As a composite body, every part of it must play a certain role or function. As these parts are functional for the living, they are called *organs*, since the word *organ* means “instrument” in Greek, and the body that works as a totality by the interaction of its parts, is called an *organized body*, an *organism*. In Greek biology and medicine, both Aristotle and Galen had this functional-organic approach to the living, which shaped all our Western physiology. The parts of the body are functional because they can be used and are actually used to perform the vital activities. The idea of “using” seems to shape the whole of the Stoic tradition, an idea that is not only important in ethics and biology, but also in logic. As a doctrine of life, Stoicism engages every dimension of human existence from a practical point of view, providing a *theory of practice* that grounds all their arguments and ethical proposals.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, since the Stoic philosophy is concerned mainly in explaining how human practice serves life, they were particularly interested in bringing together the ethical discourse with the biological one. However, what brings together human life and animal life is not just the idea of “use”, but a special way of using. Since life is about owing oneself, about using what is proper to us in order to achieve unity, it is not surprising that the Stoic tradition coined the concept of *oikeiosis* (οἰκείωσις), which means to *get familiar*,

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Bénatouïl, *Faire usage: la pratique du stoïcisme* (Paris: Vrin, 2007), 9.

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but also to turn something to be *one's own*, that is, to *appropriate* something. Hence, living beings do not have the mere capacity of using *something*, but they are mainly capable of using *their-selves*. The starting point for this idea is the fact that animals have a certain innate knowledge of their own body before even experiencing it in their activities, and that the natural knowledge of their own body grounds their survival. The main goal of every animal activity is self-conservation, and that is only possible if the animal *uses* its body as if it were its *own property*, *knowing* how to use it even before learning from experience. The hypothesis behind this argument is that *the living body is an appropriated body*: as soon as we cannot *use* our body (to breathe, to pump blood, to feed), we lose it and, thus, we are dead. One of the greatest Stoic philosophers, Seneca, explains this idea in a famous passage:

Animals have consciousness (*sensus*) of their own constitution (*constitutio*). (...) Every animal have control over their parts (*nulli non partium suarum agilitas est*). [Like an artist, or a sailor in his ship], the animal is agile regarding the total use (*usus*) of his own body. (...) Firstly, the animal feels familiar (*conciliatur*) to itself (...). This care (*cura*) [for itself] is to be found in every animal, and it is not something added (*inseritur*) to it, but innate (*innascitur*). (...) There is no animal that comes to life without fearing death. (...) [When they grow, animals reach their adult state] not because of the practical experience they have, but because of a natural desire for self-preservance (*naturali amore salutis suae*). (...) What nature has given is the need to care for oneself and the technical ability (*peritia*) to do it. Thus, learning (*discere*) and living (*vivere*) begin at the same time.<sup>3</sup>

Nature provided animals both with the necessary equipment (organs) and with the knowledge of how to use it in order to survive. Facing its environment, animals must take what they need from it and avoid what is harmful for them, and in order to do so, the animal is firstly referred to itself. Animals, thus, are both “conscious” about the difference between themselves and what is not themselves, and they are also “aware” of the different parts of their body. The “care for oneself” that defines animal life, both in its organic structure and in its behavior, is grounded in the idea of “use of oneself”. The *use of oneself* does not entail an absolute transparency or self-control, but it does entail a relationship with oneself characterized by reflexivity and immanence: if animals could not make use of their own body, they would not be able to live at all. Hence, *self-perception* is needed for *self-preservation*, a task that can only be overtaken in its relation to the surrounding world, in the transaction of the self with what it is not itself. Human consciousness could be regarded as a higher

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<sup>3</sup> Seneca, *Epistola ad Lucilium*, n. 121.

degree of mastering oneself, but the continuity between animal behavior and human ethics is to be grounded in this reflexive use of oneself.

If we examine now the *phenomenological* approach to the “living body” (*Leib, corps sujet, chair*), the idea of an immediate relationship with our own body was also shaped by the idea of “use”. From early Greek philosophy, the “body proper”, or the *body-qua-mine* was thematized as the *sensitive body*, being *touch* the most important of the bodily senses. Although touch was already examined in Aristotle, its prominent position concerning the *body-subject* is to be found in Modern times, first in Descartes and later on in Condillac. In Descartes himself, the *body qua mine* was thought of from the *phenomenological* point of view, but also from a *physiological-mechanistic* perspective. Interestingly, both positions came across in his work, and the question was how to articulate both perspectives: the idea of a spiritual soul working in the body through the pineal glandule maintained, at the same time, both perspectives independently and interconnected. In a kind of Modern Stoicism, thus, the body is mine because I am able to use it, and I can use it as long as I can feel it my own. This Modern point of departure was later developed by Condillac,<sup>4</sup> who pictured the body with the Cartesian metaphor of the *statue*<sup>5</sup> and argued that the body proper was *mine* because it was felt as such because of *touch*: every other perception or sense had its ground in the sense of touching, and touching is also to “be touched”, for we feel other things as long as we feel them affecting ourselves. The body is mine because there is a “fundamental feeling of life”. The idea of movement was, therefore, absolutely central, for we can only feel ourselves and everything else as long as there is some kind of feeling of change in our body, some kind of bodily affection that is perceived as such. However, it was Maine de Biran who made the radical move and argued that we can know ourselves and our body because we act through it, because we use our body in acting, and by using it we appropriate it: there is an “intimate feeling of one’s own existence” that grounds the self-perception of our-selves through our body. The Modern corner-stone, in a Cartesian mode, was no longer thinking, but *acting*: the metaphysical axiom was no longer “I think”, but “I act”. Due to this willing and acting force, the body proper is acknowledged as mine because it is acknowledged as the first thing that resists my action. The ambiguous place of the body proper, as familiar and strange at the same time, shapes Maine de Biran’s whole philosophy of action: the question is, again, how to appropriate what is essentially strange, although it is the first “element” that is *subjected* to oneself.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Condillac, *Tratado de las sensaciones* (Buenos Aires: Editorial de la Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1963).

<sup>5</sup> René Descartes, “L’ Homme”, in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Adam and Tannery (Paris: Vrin, 1996), vol. XI, 120.

<sup>6</sup> Maine de Biran. “Introducción a nuevos ensayos de antropología (1823-1824)”, in: *Autobiografía y otros escritos* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1967).

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Through the work of Maine de Biran and his follower, Félix Ravaisson, the spiritualistic movement in France (Henri Bergson, Gabriel Marcel) found its ground not only in the idea of spirit, but in the idea of a “body proper”, a body at the service of the spiritual, a body that could bring the natural and the moral perspectives together.

However, this privilege given to the “Body proper” is also important in the German idealist tradition, where the question of the “Self” was at the center of their inquiries. German vitalism influenced the Montpellier School of “animal economy” (to which I will come back later) and Kant and Fichte’s theory of subjectivity played a large role in the construction of the notion of *organism*.<sup>7</sup> However, the idea of the “Body proper” was examined at large by the father of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl. The Body proper is mine because I can feel it my own, and every feeling in every part of my body (*ubiestesias*) is referred to a general feeling of the body as a whole, due to touch. The way to characterize the body proper (its essential features) is to relate it to the subject that constitutes it as being its own. Whereas every other body is constituted as strange to the subject (as *Körper*), the body proper is constituted as being one’s own, as being the living body (as *Leib*), by the idea of *use* and by the idea of *perspective*: the body proper is “the organ of the will” (*Willensorgan*) and the “point zero” (*Nullpunkt*) by which all my movements are oriented.<sup>8</sup> Phenomenologically, thus, the body proper is defined by its “use”, in a kind of Modern version of *oikeiosis*. Maurice Merleau-Ponty will bring together both traditions of French (Bergson, Marcel) and German (Husserl and Heidegger) philosophy in his “carnal phenomenology” (*chair*), understanding not only our own body, but also the body of the organism from this reflexive dimension and not from its physico-chemical interactions.<sup>9</sup> However, the radical turn in phenomenology towards the idea of life as *self-affection* is carried out by Michel Henry: my body can be considered mine because I use it and have the feeling of its being used. Henry’s *organic body* is not physiological but phenomenological, because my *physical body* (*corps*) is constituted by my *living body* (*chair*), a body that acts and reveals my potentialities, and that feels itself acting: the organic body is the instrument of my will or effort because it is itself a capable body before it is a “physical” body.<sup>10</sup> The

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<sup>7</sup> Tobias Cheung. “From the Organism of a Body to the Body of an Organism: Occurrence and Meaning of the Word ‘Organism’ from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Centuries”, *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 39/3 (2006): 319-339.

<sup>8</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Zweites Buch: Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution* (Haag: Martinus Nijhoff (Husserliana, Bd IV), 1952).

<sup>9</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La structure du comportement* (Paris : Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1967).

<sup>10</sup> Michel Henry, *Encarnación* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 2001).

physiological is now subsumed to the moral-spiritual-phenomenological dimension, only because the ambivalent notion of *organ* as part of the body and as an instrument (and even the whole body is pictured itself as an instrument) makes this passage possible.

### 3. Life facing death: *oeconomia animalis*, *homeostasis*, *autopoiesis*

The essential *hiatus* that pierces the living entails the possibility that living beings can lose their life by losing their-selves: biology and physiology are also concerned with the problem of life and death of the organism from this perspective of the *self*. The functional approach to the living body as an organic system, already present in ancient physiology and medicine, was further developed during the Middle ages and the Modern times. Some of these approaches were more “holistic”, while others were more “mechanistic”. The struggle between Vitalism and Mechanicism was a key discussion for some centuries. Nevertheless, their different approach meets in picturing the parts of the body as being functional, that is, in the idea that the living body is an *organic* or *organized* body, whose different parts have a role or function to play: the functional and technical logic between the whole and the part is present in both Mechanicism and Organicism, and they could be considered as two perspectives that belong to the “technological explanation of life”.<sup>11</sup> The concept of “animal economy” (*oeconomia animalis*) links Modern with Ancient physiology and offers a paradigmatic model for Modern life-sciences. Coined by French physiologists in the so-called *School of Montpellier*, the concept stems within a vitalist atmosphere, and becomes a key notion in XVIII and XIXth physiology. Ménuret defined “animal economy” in the *Encyclopédie* as follows: “the order, mechanism, and overall set of the functions and movements which sustain life (*qui entretiennent la vie des animaux*)”.<sup>12</sup> The verb “entre-tiennent”, translated in English as “to sustain” is quite illustrative of the logic of life as that which happens “in between” birth and death, being death the immediate and permanent danger that threatens the organism and which must constantly avoid. Physiology is the study of the dynamics of the living being, and it was necessary to give motion to anatomy in order to understand organisms. Within the influence of vitalism, which defined physiology as “*anatomia animata*” (Haller), Bordeu could say that the goal of physiology is to “animate the skeleton of anatomy”.<sup>13</sup> This dynamism was provided mainly by the idea of “use”: in

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<sup>11</sup> Georges Canguilhem, *Estudios de historia y de filosofía de las ciencias* (Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 2009), 346.

<sup>12</sup> Enc. XI, 362a; quoted in: Charles Wolfe and Motoichi Terada. “The Animal Economy as Object and Program in Montpellier Vitalism”, *Science in Context*, 21/4 (2008): 546.

<sup>13</sup> Wolfe and Terada. “The Animas Economy”, 545.

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the tradition of Hippocratic and Galenic medicine, the living body is a functional and organic body because it is able to *use* its parts in order to conserve life.

The concept of *animal economy* pictures the living body as a certain territory that must be *self-administrated*, in which its different parts play a central role to keep the whole working. As such, this concept could bring together the metaphysical Vitalism with the physical Mechanicism. However, shaped by Modern economic and political theories, the organic body was not seen just as “one living thing”, but as a set of many “different living beings”: as if it were a city or State, the living body must administrate its own “living elements” in order to preserve the life of the whole organism. And to administrate is to give each part of the body a certain function and articulate their working together. The basic notions here are the one of labor and function, but also of distribution and organization: each organ has a life of its own, and does not depend entirely on a single principle, such as the soul, to perform its tasks. Every organ of the body has a “sensitivity”, each of them has the property of “irritability”, and, thus, can act and function when needed. The whole body is not just “one” because the whole is animated, but it is “one” because every single organ is itself both animated and integrated into the organism as a whole. Bordeu, making use of a political metaphor, describes the body as a “federation of organs”. As Ménuret explains,

the body should only be considered as an infinite assemblage of small, identical bodies, similarly alive and animated, each possessing a life, an action, a sensibility – [that is] both a specific, particular interaction (*jeu*) and movement, and a common, overall life and sensibility. All parts contribute in their own way to the life of the entire body, and as such they reciprocally correspond to and influence one another.<sup>14</sup>

The bee-swarm was an important metaphor to describe this functional system as composed by many living beings, and it was used not only by Bordeu and Ménuret, but also by Maupertius in his *Système de la nature*, and then transposed from vitalist ‘medicine’ to materialist ‘philosophy’ by Diderot. The main idea behind this metaphor is that when all the bees “conspire to stick close, to mutually embrace, in the order of required proportions, they comprise a whole which shall endure until they disturb one another”. Therefore, the application of this metaphor to physiology is easy: “the organs of the body are connected to one another; they each have their district and their action; the relations between these actions, the resulting harmony, is what constitutes health”.<sup>15</sup> The living body is, thus, a dynamic structure which

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<sup>14</sup> Ménuret, *Encyclopedia XIII*, 240a; quoted in: Wolfe and Terada. “Animal Economy”, 549-550.

<sup>15</sup> Bordeu; quoted in: Wolfe and Terada. “Animal Economy”, 551.



holds itself together due to its “circular causation” (or “circle of action”) between the different parts,<sup>16</sup> something that the mechanistic linear causality did not sufficiently explain. The idea of *animal economy* is pierced by the Hippocratic maxim, *everything concurs, consents and conspires together in the body*. Thus, “the forces and actions of the animal economy are too intimately intertwined to be quantified according to purely mechanical laws of force and motion”.<sup>17</sup> By this interaction, the parts of the body (themselves being alive, independent) work together in order to keep the whole living. Health is, then, a matter of economy, that is, a matter of how to dispose each part as different, and at the same time as working towards a common good or goal.

*Self-regulation* is at the core of the notion of *oeconomia animalis*, a model of the living body which seeks to articulate the interrelation of organs as parts of a “unified whole obeying principles of global regulation, by means of which the activity of each part is harmoniously adjusted with that of the others”.<sup>18</sup> Since physiology is not just a static description of the parts (as in anatomy, where the parts are defined by their spatial disposal), but it is a dynamic one, the temporal dimension is the most important one, for the functions of the organs are performed *in time*, and the *crisis* of the body are not a matter of spatiality but of temporality.<sup>19</sup> Influenced by the vitalism of his time, Georges Cuvier (1769-1832) founded for the first time the discipline of “comparative anatomy”, a discipline that would bring together in a new fashion both anatomy and physiology by a synchronic and a diachronic perspective of living organisms. This new approach brought history and paleontology to the study of actual living organisms by the notion of *organization*. This notion stressed the temporal dimension of the organism over the spatial one, turning Mechanicism an insufficient approach to understand life. Life was defined by Cuvier from an experiential perspective as a general and obscure idea produced by a certain group of phenomena in a body that seems to happen in a constant order and that relate to each other by mutual relationships. It is necessary, thus, to assume the existence of a “vital bond” (*lien vital*) that keeps all of these phenomena united.<sup>20</sup> Death is but the breaking of this bond, and one should picture this vital bond as the “actualization of a principle of harmonic totalization that is manifested through ‘the general and common movement of all the parts’ of the animal or the plant, and through ‘the working-together (*concourse*) towards a common goal’ of the activities of the organs”. This general and common movement is what constitutes the “essence of life”, and the nature and existence of each organ is determined by the movement of the whole

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<sup>16</sup> Wolfe and Terada. “Animal Economy”, 551.

<sup>17</sup> Wolfe and Terada. “Animal Economy”, 552.

<sup>18</sup> Dominique Guillo, quoted in: Wolfe and Terada. “Animal Economy”, 555.

<sup>19</sup> Wolfe and Terada. “Animal Economy”, 571.

<sup>20</sup> Cuvier, *Leçons d’anatomie comparée*, I, 1; quoted in: Dominique Guillo, *Les figures de l’organisation : Sciences de la vie et sciences sociales au XIXe siècle* (Paris : PUF, 2003), 38.

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organism as a coordinated activity of the entire body: whereas in the inert bodies the parts have their being in themselves, in organisms the being of their parts depends on the whole of the body. Thus, the *lien vital* is conceived by Cuvier as a *lien économique*, and life should be considered as if it were an economy: the object of physiology is, therefore, *the animal economy*.<sup>21</sup> Within this economical frame, “organization is not the material outcome of a composition, but, in a more abstract fashion, a system in dynamic equilibrium”.<sup>22</sup>

The need to overcome the inner essential division of living entities is motivated by the *ghost of death*. It is because death haunts the living by means of *expropriation*, that the living being must do whatever it is possible to sustain its empire over its body and appropriate its own body constantly. Although life and death have been thought dialectically from ancient times (and the medical science could be considered the grounding discipline of life sciences), the weight of death in determining the meaning of life was stressed in the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries: living bodies were themselves thought of as a *battle-field* between the principles of life and those of death. In the midst of the controversies between physiological theories, mainly centered in the polemic relationship between the organism and its surrounding, the idea of *survival* came forth and defined the dynamics of the living. More and more, life was defined as the need to rule and administrate oneself against the danger of losing oneself. In other words, life is defined by death, and living beings are alive as long as they can face the deathly forces and “keep themselves together”. Interestingly, Xavier Bichat, a capital figure of modern physiology in between the end of the vitalist movement and the birth of experimental physiology (with the work of Claude Bernard), defined life as “the group of functions that resists death” (*la vie est l'ensemble des fonctions qui résistent à la mort*).<sup>23</sup> The definition of life as *self-preservation* is only meaningful if the possibility of not preserving oneself is real. And this possibility of death is due to the possibility of disaggregation and disorganization, that is, the possibility of losing control over oneself. The living body, thus, must avoid *internal war* at any cost, by facing the dangers coming both from the outside and from the inside.

Such is the way of existence (*mode d'existence*) of the living bodies, that everything that surrounds it (*entoure*) tends to destroy it. The inorganic bodies act constantly upon them; they also act over one another; they would surely fall under these actions if they didn't have in themselves a permanent principle

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<sup>21</sup> Guillo, *Les figures de l'organisation*, 40.

<sup>22</sup> Guillo, *Les figures de l'organisation*, 44.

<sup>23</sup> Xavier Bichat, *Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort (première partie) et autres textes* (Paris : Flammarion, 1994), 57.

of reaction. This principle is that of life; unknown in its nature, it can only be appreciated through its phenomena; and the most general phenomenon is this constant exchange between the actions coming from external bodies and the reaction coming from the living body, an exchange (*alternative*) whose proportions change according to age.<sup>24</sup>

External and strange elements *will* impact on the proper functioning of the body, for the living body is necessarily *ex-posed* to what it is not itself: every living body is within a *medium*, a context, a situation, an environment. The dialectic between the *internal medium* and the *external medium* is about understanding how the living being can avoid surrendering to its surroundings. The physiological idea of *metabolism* and self-regulation as the capacity of the living being to maintain itself albeit the disturbances of its surroundings, was mainly theorized by Claude Bernard. His concept of *internal medium* (*milieu intérieure*) had a definite impact on the history of physiology and biology.

The organism is nothing but a living machine that is built in such a way as to allow a free communication between the external and internal environments and show some protective aptitude upon the organic elements, in order to stock materials necessary to life and to preserve incessantly humidity, heat and all the other essential conditions.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, the concept of “inner environment” (*milieu intérieure*) served to classify living beings in a hierarchical scale: Bernard categorizes life in three forms: the *vie latente*, which is a state of ‘indifference’ or lack of chemical transactions; the *vie oscillante*, a state in which living processes fall under the influence of the external environment (plants, invertebrates and cold-blooded vertebrates are included in this class); and the *vie constant ou libre*, in which the living beings succeed in maintaining constant inner conditions albeit the external environment conditions. Thus, “for Bernard, the stability (*la fixité*) of the internal environment allows the development of the most complex forms of organization in living beings, reaching a pinnacle in human beings”.<sup>26</sup> The more autonomous the living being is, the more perfect it is. Living being’s autonomy means here internal constancy and stability, which is performed, according to Bernard, mainly by the nervous system. The living

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<sup>24</sup> Bichat, *Recherches physiologiques*, 58.

<sup>25</sup> Claude Bernard, *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale* [1865]; quoted in: Sergio Pennazio. “Homeostasis: A History of Biology”. *Rivista di Biologia/Biology Forum*, 102 (2009): 263.

<sup>26</sup> Steven Cooper, “From Claude Bernard to Walter Cannon. Emergence of the concept of homeostasis”. *Appetite*, 51 (2008): 422.

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analogical scale depended, thus, upon the nervous system, characterized by the idea of centralized control and regulation.

Within this metabolic explanation of life, living beings are, therefore, pictured in political and economic terms as systems that maintain their own harmony by a central and overall conductor or orchestrator that administrates and regulates the changes within the organism and the impacts coming from the outside, in order to keep the whole together and avoid disaggregation. The dynamics of living beings lay on the tension between change and stability, in the quest for achieving harmony between the different parts within the organism, and autonomy in front of the strange forces of the outer environment. In this twofold tension, it is quite interesting to find the Greek concept of *stasis* revisited and used by physiology in the XXth century, just as if this concept was already at work implicitly. *Στάσις* is a Greek word that is at the core of our understanding of the living. It is a complex and ambiguous word that means two contradictory things: it means both *to be standing* and *to stand up*. This ambivalence is also defining the dialectics of life, for the changes within the living system are necessary for preservation, as far as these movements come into balance or rest. This is the heart of our Modern concept of *homeostasis*, coined by physiologist Walter Bradford Cannon, building upon Bernard's concept of *milieu intérieur*. Although all living beings are open systems, subjected to innumerable kinds of disturbances, they keep themselves in a steady state, achieving balance by inner physiological mechanisms. In keeping themselves in a "similar" or "likely" (*homeo*) state (*stasis*), they can achieve self-preservation. Cannon argued that "a fairly constant or steady state, maintained in many aspects of the bodily economy even when they are beset by conditions tending to disturb them, is a most remarkable characteristic of the living organism".<sup>27</sup> The term *homeostasis* coined by Cannon intend to distinguish physiological from physical systems by the idea of self-regulation in a constant exchange between the inner and the outer environments. This dynamic also enable the semantical displacements between politics and biology, between an organism and a society. *Homeostasis*, thus, could be defined as "the capacity of an organism to maintain an internal balance or stability".<sup>28</sup> Disease is, on the contrary, "a disturbance of the overall steady-state of the organism, dangerous to its survival".<sup>29</sup> Cannon himself characterized homeostasis in the following words: "*Homeostasis* designates stability of the organism; *homeostatic conditions* indicate details of stability; and *homeostatic reaction* signify means for maintaining stability".<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in: Cooper, "From Claude Bernard to Walter Cannon": 424.

<sup>28</sup> Byrnum, quoted in: Pennazio, "Homeostasis": 254.

<sup>29</sup> Azzone, quoted in: Pennazio, "Homeostasis": 254.

<sup>30</sup> Cannon, *Physiological regulation of normal states* [1926]; quoted in: Pennazio. "Homeostasis": 267.

In sum, the vitalist concept of *oeconomia animalis* and the physiological tradition focused on *metabolism* (as Bernard's and Cannon's works) define life as the power to avoid death by keeping together the elements that are destined to fall apart. Life is, thus, meaningful *because* of death. Hans Jonas -arguing against materialistic and mechanistic physiology- claimed that XXth century biology was under an "ontology of death" (*ontologie de la mort*), since it conceptualized the living from the non-living, and reduced the interiority of living beings to the external and physico-chemical elements. In Jonas' view, living beings are defined by metabolism, that is, their autonomy and self-regulation, and their search for self-preservation. However, Renaud Barbaras argues that this metabolic perspective of Jonas is not sufficient to understand life, for "life (*vie*) [in Jonas biological philosophy] is conceived essentially as survival (*sur-vie*), self-perpetuation (*perpétuation de soi*) by self-isolation (*auto-isolement*), conservation by the living being of its own identity and its own being: it is fundamentally preoccupation of itself (*préoccupation de soi*), necessity (*besoin*)".<sup>31</sup> The idea of life that stems from metabolism is correlative of a perspective that understands life from the point of view of its relationship with death, that is, under the shadow of its destruction. Thus, "life is that which is fundamentally exposed to the risk of its abolition: life is from the beginning its relation to its possible negation and cannot exist but as the negation of this negation (*ne peut donc exister que comme négation de cette négation*)".<sup>32</sup> In a way, the real "ontology of death" is not the one that understands the living from the inert, but that which understands life from death. And death is nothing but losing oneself, that is, the impossibility of a living being to appropriate, affirm, rule and administrate itself by itself.

The need of the organism to preserve itself and have a defensive aptitude towards what is strange to it has been stressed by *immunological* theories. The immune system is responsible both to include and exclude what is strange into the body, and by familiarizing or appropriating what is strange, the body neutralizes the dangers of being overcome by what is not it-self. The military language of immunology is quite illustrative about these dialectical strategies of the body in order to preserve itself from what is not it-self: and sometimes the best way to preserve oneself from strangers is having the stranger at home, under watch and surveillance. The Italian philosopher, Roberto Esposito, argues that immunity is not just one more physiological theory amongst other, but the very paradigm of Modernity, that brings together under its scope different discourses, from biological to political. The notion of *immunitas* is semantically complex. It refers, basically, to the threats coming from a possible *intruder* to the health of the body (both a social or a physiological body, or any organized system that could be thought of as being a

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<sup>31</sup> Renaud Barbaras, *Introduction à une phénoménologie de la vie* (Paris : Vrin, 2018), 195.

<sup>32</sup> Barbaras, *Introduction à une phénoménologie de la vie*, 225.

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body). The danger zone where this intrusion can take place is the frontier between the outside and the inside, between what is familiar and what is foreign. The term that –in Esposito’s mind- best pictures this dissolutive process coming from the outside is the one of *contagion*, because what was a healthy and secured organism, is now exposed to a contamination that endangers its own survival.<sup>33</sup> Immunity refers to the situation of not being contaminated by another, of being self-preserved in one’s own dominion. As Esposito explains, *im-munitas* is a juridical Roman concept that refers to someone that does not owe anything to anyone (“*immunis dicitur qui nullo fungitor officio*”), and, thus, its counterpart would be *com-munitas*, for that concept refers to those who owe something to the others (“*immunis dicitur, qui civitatis, seu societatis official non praestat; qui vacat ab iis societatis officiis, quae omnibus communia sunt*”): immunity is, therefore, a condition of particularity, and it refers to what it is proper to some-one (being an individual or a collective or social body) and that it is “not common” (not shared).<sup>34</sup> Although in the bio-medical discourses the meaning of *immunitas* as the power of an organism to resist a contagious disease is already found in the Roman poet Lucano (that refers to the resistance of an African tribe against the venom of a snake), the concept of *immunity* is particularly interesting for Esposito in the XVIII and XIX centuries, within *medical bacteriology*, for, due to the invention of the vaccines, there is not only a natural immunity of the body, but also an acquired immunity. The interesting mechanism of immunity is that it works by introducing the dangerous element into the organism in order to cause the necessary reaction that could neutralize its threats: in short, it reproduces the evil from which it must protect itself in a controlled way. Therefore, there is between protection and negation of life a dialectic relationship that immunity reveals: “by the immunitarian protection life fights that which denies it, but not by a frontal confrontation, but by detours and neutralization”.<sup>35</sup> By introducing the evil elements within the system in order to exclude them, the logic of immunity reveals itself as a dialectics of “exclusive inclusion”, an exclusion performed by means of inclusion.<sup>36</sup> The logic of life cannot be understood without the logic of death, and life is such not only because it faces death and keeps it away, but because introduces death in itself: the living being is –as I am trying to show in this chapter- essentially divided, wounded in itself by the duality that its reflexive character entails, and this duality is pictured as the encounter between life and death, that is, unity and disaggregation. In this aporetic procedure of immunity, a body “can preserve life only by tasting death continuously”.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas. Protección y negación de la vida* (Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 2009), 10.

<sup>34</sup> Esposito, *Immunitas*, 15.

<sup>35</sup> Esposito, *Immunitas*, 17.

<sup>36</sup> Esposito, *Immunitas*, 18.

<sup>37</sup> Esposito, *Immunitas*, 19.

In short, the living organism must keep itself together, avoiding any threat of disaggregation or disorganization. Immunity showed that in order to do so, the living body should both exclude the threats coming from the outside by its defensive apparatus and include the threatening element into itself in order to neutralize it. In any case, if the living body is to survive, it must be always “in charge” of itself and of its vital processes. The living body must rule over it-self, without losing control and regulation over it-self: autarchy is the grounding concept defining the living, and autarchy is only performed within this hiatus between the living being and it-self. In other words, the living, in order to rule itself, must refer to itself and achieve an impossible unity with it-self. The importance given to this self-reference and to its capacity to rule and regulate the whole system can be found in *cellular biology*, for it is already in the basic living structures that this need of *autarchy* can be found. We have seen already the importance of self-regulation and self-preservation to explain life in biology and physiology; however, the radical importance of the “self” concerning living beings is ultimately expressed by Humberto Maturana’s and Rafael Varela’s theory of *autopoiesis*.<sup>38</sup> *Auto-poiesis* means, etymologically, *self-production*: for both biologists, living beings are machines that make and produce their own “selves” by means of organization. The theory of *autopoiesis* deepens the idea of self-regulation and makes a radical turn towards *production*: living beings are not only in control of their operations and dynamics (self-regulation), but they are also responsible of their own *constitution*. Living beings are not just administrating something given; they produce their own being. Living beings are not just autonomous, but *autocratic*: they answer only to themselves.

#### 4. Rule yourself: the Body politic and internal war in ethics

The need to rule oneself is as strong as the power that passions have over us: thus, the moral ideal of stoicism was *apatheia* (impassibility) and *ataraxia* (imperturbability). The good life is about ruling one-self, not letting the self away from us, driven by the winds of passions and inclinations. Within the Stoic tradition, one can find, thus, a continuity between the organic use of the body and its ethical dominion in the concept of *oikeiosis*. In a way, Stoicism continues with the ethics of Aristotle, whose main topic can be expressed in the contraposition between self-ruling (ἐνκράτεια) and powerlessness (ἀκρασία): the virtuous man is he who can rule over himself, whereas vice occurs when the rational part of human beings is unable to establish a proper use and order to the many passions and needs. The political

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<sup>38</sup> Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *De máquinas y seres vivos. Autopoiesis: la organización de lo vivo* (Buenos Aires: Lumen, 2003).

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dimension of Aristotle's ethics can be clearly seen in the use of the verb κρατεῖν, which means not just power or capacity, but domination. Thus, the ethical concepts in Aristotle pictures human life as if it were a city, in which the regent part of it must dominate and rule over the other parts. This political scheme of ethics is already found and explicitly developed in the works of Plato. One will find the idea of *stasis* once again both in ethics and politics, and not just in biological discourses. *Stasis* is also a very important concept in political theory, for it means "faction", "revolt" or "civil war". Somehow, if the city is thought of as if it were a living body, and if the living body is thought of as a city, then it is quite illustrating how this concept of *stasis* is allowing for semantical displacements between different discourses as biology and politics. In any case, the worst fear a city and a body face is the possibility of a "civil war", and the first duty of these self-organized systems is to keep balance and peace by regulation and control, and even by oppression and exclusion of the problematic and revolting elements within them. Unity will always be the ultimate end or goal of living beings, and one could expect death to come when barriers and fights are dividing what should be unified and organized. The arts of politics resemble, in this way, the art of medicine, both because each political situation (as each particular body) demands a particular treatment to stay healthy, and because every treatment will always fail to warrant absolute health: the history of the body and of the *polis* is a history of struggle to achieve the impossible perfection of unity, the impossible task of casting away forever the danger of disaggregation. As Plato himself claimed:

And what of him who brings the State into harmony (τὴν πόλιν ξυναρμόττον)? In ordering its life (τὸν βίον κοσμοῖ μᾶλλον) would he have regard to external warfare rather than to the internal war, whenever it occurs, which goes by the name of "civil" strife (στάσις)? For this is a war as to which it would be the desire of every man that, if possible, it should never occur in his own State, and that, if it did occur, it should come to as speedy an end as possible. (...) The highest good, however, is neither war nor civil strife –which things we should pray rather to be saved from- but peace (εἰρηνὴ) one with another and friendly feeling (φιλοφροσύνη). Moreover, it would seem that the victory we mentioned of a State over itself (τὸ νικᾶν αὐτὴν αὐτὴν πόλιν) is not one of the best things but one of those which are necessary. For imagine a man supposing that a human body (σῶμα ἰατρικῆς) was best off when it was sick and purged with physic, while never giving a thought to the case of the body that needs no physic at all! Similarly, with regard to the well-being (εὐδαιμονίαν) of a State or an individual, that man will never make a genuine statesman who pays attention primarily and solely to the needs of foreign warfare, nor will he make



a finished lawgiver unless he designs his war legislation for peace rather than his peace legislation for war.<sup>39</sup>

The need to watch over the body proper (or the Body politic within itself) entails the need to watch over its relationships with the others, with the external medium. However, the need to perform harmony within the body comes first than the need to overcome the difficulties coming from the outside. War is not the goal of legislation, but rather peace: and peace is achieved primarily with the victory of the State (body) over itself. In any case, victory over the other will be possible if victory over oneself is first accomplished (of course, this is not enough to warrant victory over the other). Parallels between physiology and politics are mirrored, again, in the dialectics between the *milieu intérieur* and the *milieu extérieur*, being health the equilibrium and balance within the body (*homeo-stasis*): although internal war (*stasis*) could be unleashed by external factors, the important war to fight is always *within* the city-body. The starting point of this whole paradigm is, thus, to acknowledge that war is the real and natural situation, and not an exception or anecdotic event in history. As Heraclitus once claimed, “war is the father of all things”. Plato condemned “the stupidity of the mass of men in failing to perceive that all are involved unceasingly in a lifelong war against all States (πόλεμος αἰεὶ πᾶσι διὰ βίου ξυνεχής ἐστὶ πρὸς ἀπάσας τὰς πόλεις)”; peace (εἰρήνην), he argues, “is nothing more than a name, the truth being that every State is, by a law of nature (κατὰ φύσιν), engaged perpetually in an informal war with every other State”.<sup>40</sup> But this natural situation of war is not just between States, but between villages and houses; moreover, this natural situation of war is within every man. “In the mass –Plato says– all men are both publicly and privately the enemies of all, and individually also each man is his own enemy (ἐκάστους αὐτοὺς σφίσιν αὐτοῖς)”.<sup>41</sup> Even more, “it is just in this war that the victory over self (τὸ νικᾶν αὐτὸν) is of all victories the first and best while self-defeat is of all defeats at once the worst and the most shameful”.<sup>42</sup> At this very point, semantical displacements take place between the political, the biological and the ethical discourses. Both the individual self and the State are at war with themselves, and one could only expect victory over oneself when there is a proper arrangement between the struggling parts within. There is war within the self, because the self is itself composed by different parts (or even factions).

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<sup>39</sup> Plato, *Laws*, I, 628b-e. Plato, *Laws* (Cambridge, Massachusetts/London, England: Harvard University Press, 1926). Loeb Classical Library. In two volumes. English-Greek version, translated by R. G. Bury.

<sup>40</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 625e-626a.

<sup>41</sup> Plato, *Laws*, I, 626d.

<sup>42</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 626e.

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The need of the individual and of the State to rule over one-self is reflected by Plato in ethical terms. In an analogical movement, the parallelism is thought from the city to the individual, and now from the individual to the singular, in a “reverse direction” (τὸν λόγον ἀναστρέψωμεν).<sup>43</sup> There is a superior-part (τὸ κρείττω) and an inferior-part (τὴν ἥττω) within each individual, and also within a house, a village and a State. In every case, the superior-part should be victorious over the inferior-part in order to pursue their well-being. In Plato, the highest good depends on reason (νοῦς), and that is the superior-part of the whole, for it is reason that which “bounds all into one single system” (πάντα ταῦτα ξυνδήσας ὁ νοῦς).<sup>44</sup> The rest of the parts of the whole must relate to each other in balance and within a logic of verticality. The three dimensions of the “ethical body” was mirrored in the “political body”, and the ethical question about Justice (the topic of the *Republic*) can be answered only by projecting the individual body to the body politic. The King is the head (Reason), the Guardians are the heart (courage, strength), the workers are the intestines (instincts, needs): a good life (for both the body politic and the individual body) entails that Reason governs everything, that the body strength stands for the body, defends it and pursues what it needs, and that the instincts meet their needs according to this ruling. Wisdom, courage and temperance: the three virtues. Justice (both for the political and the ethical) is but the proper distribution of the roles of each part of the body for the sake of maintaining the whole working as one.

## 5. The autarchic living God

If we are talking about life and living beings, we will find that a certain *scale* is built between the different kinds of living beings according to the idea of autarchy or self-sufficiency. As we have seen, in the biological discourse, in Claude Bernard’s physiology for instance, the perfection of organisms is based in their autonomy and their freedom concerning the external medium, being human beings at the top of the scale.<sup>45</sup> The scale of the living was built, thus, upon the criteria of autonomy and reflexivity: vegetable life, animal life, rational life, are the three main stages on this analogical scale. Living beings participate in life the more they own themselves, the more they relate to themselves. The importance of the “self” is grounding every discourse we have on life. This is why I call our Western understanding of life the *Bio-Theo-Political paradigm of Autarchy*: because the self is the principle of life, and what defines all the living activities as such. The perfect living being will be,

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<sup>43</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 627a.

<sup>44</sup> Plato, *Laws*, 632c.

<sup>45</sup> Cooper, “From Claude Bernard to Walter Cannon”: 421-422.

therefore, the one whose reflexivity and autonomy are mostly achieved. In other words, the perfect living being would be the one that is both inalterable and impassible, for it does not change nor it is changed by anything else. In a way, the perfect living being achieves its own status without any danger of inner revolt or intrusion from the outside.

Of course, this perfect living being is nowhere to be found in our world, but it is certainly to be found within the Western theological discourse. The theological discourse shows how deep our understanding of life depends on the idea of “self” by characterizing God as the “perfect living being” and, thus, how life should look like in ideal terms. In theology, the definition of life in terms of reflexivity and autarchy shows its paradoxical situation, for, if there is a self, there is a division, a separation, a *hiatus*, within the living itself, and therefore unity is never really achieved. The only living activity that can perform unity is the intellectual act, for only intelligence performs the identity between the act of knowing and the object known. But this is the case only when the objects of thought are not really different from the act of thinking them. In Aristotle’s *theology* (that is, “first Philosophy” or “metaphysics”), to achieve this unity is only possible for God, since only God is purely *reflexive*: God’s acts coincide with its objects, achieving absolute identity with Him-self. God is identified by Aristotle with Intelligence (Νοῦς), that is, with the perfect operation of the perfect principle that starts and finishes in its own perfection. Even more, this identity of the intellect is stressed by Aristotle when he names God as “thought of thought” (ἡ νόησις νοήσεως νόησις).<sup>46</sup> God must be understood as an entity not having any composition, simple, without any commerce with matter (since, ultimately, every composition implies matter, and only that which is a *com-pound* can be dispersed). God is, thus, an “Eternal and Perfect Living Being” (τὸν θεὸν εἶναι ζῶον ἄϊδιον ἄριστον),<sup>47</sup> and this eternity and perfection are due to its simplicity, to its absolute autarchy, to its lack of dependence to any *other*, to its *impassibility* (ἀπαθὲς) and *inalterability* (ἀναλλοίωτον).<sup>48</sup> The unity of the Intellect is achieved due to its absolute reflexivity, to its sole relationship to itself.

This argument is also to be found in Christian Theology, for instance in a major figure of *Classic Theism* such as Thomas Aquinas. It is quite interesting that Thomas Aquinas deals with God’s Life in the first part of his *Summa Theologiae* (*De Deo uno*) almost in the middle of it, after analyzing God’s simplicity, perfection, goodness, infinity, omnipresence, immutability, eternity, unity and knowledge; and before the part consecrated to His will, His love, His justice, His providence and His

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<sup>46</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1074b 30. Aristotle, *Metaphysics: Book Lambda* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2019). Translated with an Introduction and Commentary by Lindsay Judson.

<sup>47</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072b 20-30.

<sup>48</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1073a 10.

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beatitude. We do not consider this organization to be random, for, ultimately, God's life is defined by His identification with intelligence, and every other aspect concerning His will is subordinated to the intellect. We must remember that in Thomas' philosophical system will is like a vicar of intelligence, since it is intelligence that sets and defines what shall be done. God's life is a rational or intellectual life, and Thomas Aquinas summarizes the Platonic and Aristotelian Tradition in his *Summa Theologiae*. Following Aristotle's conception of life, Thomas states that all living beings are characterized by their capacity to move by themselves,<sup>49</sup> and that Life is the substance of the living, and not merely an *accidental* property.<sup>50</sup> God, therefore, is not only alive, but it is the one that has the highest degree of life ("*vita maxime priore in Deo est*"), for if life is defined by the capacity to move itself with no need of an-other (*cum vivere dicantur aliqua secundum quod operantur ex seipsis, et non quasi ab aliis mota*), then the most perfect living being would be the one that is ultimately independent.<sup>51</sup> After considering all kinds of living beings, Thomas concludes that it is intellectual life the one that needs the least from other things besides oneself, since vegetative and sensitive living activities are bound to their objects. Certainly, even intellectual life, as found in humans, has a need for an object to realize its capacity. However, in God, this dependency on an object is rejected: God is the only living being whose capacity is neither oriented nor determined by any other, but only by Himself. This is why God has life in an eminent sense, in the highest degree, and, therefore, has perfect and eternal life, always in act, for his intellect is a perfect one, as Aristotle stated. Everything in God is alive, for his life is identified with his intellect, and, in God, his thinking and the object of his thinking are the same thing: all of his ideas, by which every being is created, are God himself. In other words, there is no Other with respect to God, for every other being lives in His life as the Platonic Ideas in which they *participate*. God's life, then, is absolute; it is not bound to anything but Himself: God is Autarchy.

How can we think and reflect on the notion of community, if the very idea that is grounding community (that is, the idea of life) relegates it to a mere accident, a sign of imperfection, or even the very place of death and sickness? If there is a deconstruction to be made in our western thought, is not so much that of the notion of Being, nor of the notion of the Same: it is the notion of life what should be deconstructed. Only if we are able to move from a *medical notion of life* (both ethical and physiological), moved by the need of preserving oneself and of achieving unity with oneself, we may think relationality and communality anew. But this

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 18, a. 1. Thomae Aquinatis, *Summa Theologiae* (Madrid: BAC, 1994). Latin version. English translation in: [www.summa-theologiae.org](http://www.summa-theologiae.org)

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 18, a. 2.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I. q. 18, a. 3.

deconstruction should also help to find new symbols, figures, metaphors, and concepts to understand life not as an essentially reflexive phenomenon, but as being essentially a matter of relationality. How could we meet this goal without sinking into the logic of unity and totality, that is something we are to achieve together, in this endless dialogue moved by the exigence of truth that is philosophy.