

The Sense of Seeds, or Seminal Events

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In this text, I suggest that we approach the theme of “the event” through vegetal processes, concepts, and metaphors. Mediated through plant life, the event unfolds along three axes: 1) that of excrescence, or the out-growth, which is how plants appear in the world; 2) that of expectation, or the outlook, waiting for germination and ultimately for fruition; and 3) that of the exception, or the out-take, which extracts the seed from the closed circuit of potentiality and actuality, committing it to chance. The nascent model I propose sheds light on our animalist prejudices hidden in ostensibly abstract thought and offers a fresh starting point for postmetaphysical ontology.

Something is lost in the clamor surrounding the notion of the event in contemporary philosophy. Supposedly, it happens or fails to happen abruptly, surprisingly, unexpectedly, cutting through the drab routine of everyday life. In and of itself, it is a break, which, though it might not be recognized at the time of its occurrence, changes everything in its wake. Birth, death, and an encounter with the other are some of its avatars announcing a certain transcendence, an appearance severed from its non-apparent source, the emergence into or departure from the world, as well as the approaching of another world, namely that of the other, in excess of my own. All these are modes of transcendence, or, more literally, of “coming out”: for instance, out of the womb, out of the world or out of life, or, again, out of one’s isolated self to meet the other. Insofar as it allows something or someone to come out, an event is an out-come, a result, which can count as an occurrence, in keeping with its Latin etymology, derived by way the past participle of *ex-venire*, which means, precisely, the “out-coming.”

What remains unaccounted for in the discursive inflation of the event is that, virtually always, the scenario for coming out befits only non-sessile

animals, who, in being born, separate from the mother or from their source in general; who, in dying, leave the sphere of life all at once; and who, in roaming about, meet each other. At the same time, there is a tendency to conflate the event with the unannounced arrival (or non-arrival, as the case may be) of something or someone. In their fervent attempt to eschew teleology, thinkers of the event fall into the conceptual snares of the very thing they wish to avoid, when they ignore the out-coming in favor of the in-coming, however incomplete or abrupt its arrival may be. The coming out is finished, depleted and exhausted, in the happening of the arrival. The seductiveness of a purely temporal *a-venir* is potent enough to hide from view the quiet spatial unfolding of *de-venir*. The unexpected irruption of the future blinds us to the self-elaboration of the living past.

For their part, plants come out and are eventuated differently, because in germinating and growing they do not cut themselves loose from their source; do not die in an instant of transcendence; do not displace themselves in order to face the world; do not reach a destination. These differences are neither trivial nor merely biological; they carry a profound ontological significance. They should prompt us to reconsider the meaning of the event, commencing from vegetal processes and out-comes—notably, from seeds. More broadly yet, they should sensitize us to a crucial principle of ontological justice: to each kind of being, its own kind of event. There isn't one "event of being," applicable to every single entity and culminating in its self-presentation through a human language. Rather, a phenomenology of each life form in question must follow the outlines of the event appropriate to its mode of vitality.

To schematize my argument somewhat, I would suggest that "seminal events" unfold along three axes: 1) that of excrescence, or the out-growth, which is how plants appear in the world; 2) that of expectation, or the outlook, waiting for germination and ultimately for fruition; and 3) that of the exception, or the out-take, which extracts the seed from the closed circuit of potentiality and actuality, committing it to chance. The suffix *ex-* that recurs in the Latin designations of the three axes refers back to the coming out of the event, elaborating on its spatial articulation in excrescence, temporal articulation in expectation, and freedom from rigid determination in exception. But, lest I be misunderstood, my goal is not so much to "apply" the dynamics of the event to vegetal life (or vice versa), as it is to rethink the event, together with its conditions of possibility or impossibility and discourses revolving around it, on the basis of this life.

1. EXCRESCENCES, OR OUT-GROWTHS

Seeds hold the promise of growth. How to hear this word with a philosophical ear? I find the modern definition of vegetal growth as a purely quantitative

increase in extension to be utterly reductive. To grow is to extend oneself in different directions; to appear better, more fully; to keep giving something new to sight and to all the other senses; to become ampler, yet also to develop in concert with the environment . . . When a seed does germinate, it grows both up and down, sending roots and shoots, as it orients itself in lived space. It develops *in and as the middle*, in the absence of a clearly demarcated origin, a traumatic break, or separation from its other. The event of its germination is unlike that of animal birth, since the seedling does not leave its native element, the soil, altogether but grows in continuity and contiguity with this element, with moisture, and with the air or sunlight, toward which its upper portions emerge. The vegetal event is that which is ongoing (I do not wish to confine it to a process), the abiding in all its finitude, devoid of a fixed and final outcome, much like our own existence. It maintains fidelity to its source. In a word, it is the event of and as growth.

Henceforth, plant life unequivocally marks the difference between excess and surplus, between, on the one hand, growth that, commencing from the middle, forces the growing being to step outside itself and, on the other, augmentation that, adding on external layers, leaves the core relatively unchanged. As a rule, mineral sedimentation produces surpluses, while vegetal proliferation relies on the logic of excess. Perhaps the only trace of inorganic layering lingers in the fact that the plant deposits the byproducts of its nutritive process on its outer walls and, as in the case of a tree trunk, draws support from these woody sediments that function much like animal exoskeletons. The excessiveness of growth, then, has two distinct dimensions: both the actual going-outside-itself of a living being and what virtually overflows the strict confines of the concept. I propose to call the double effect of vegetal excess *excrecence*.

Excrecence is not just one among many examples of phenomenality, or of how beings show themselves. Rather, plant germination and growth prefigure other kinds of coming-to-appearance by means of self-exposure to the other or to others, be it sunlight, water, the sentience of insects, or human vision and sense of smell. Living *phenomena* are, above all, *ta phuomena*, the growing beings Aristotle invokes in *De anima* (413a, 24–26). Their—and our—appearing is never complete and, therefore, cannot be arrested in the form of an immutable truth. From the middle, the milieu where it is at any given moment, a growing being can only try to respond to the changing context, elements, and conditions of life better, without putting forth a universal organic shape or solution. More than that, if all of nature is an ensemble of growths or outgrowths, as the Greek word *phusis* indicates, then plants—the “growing beings” *per se*—have not only ontic but also ontological significance. To think the event starting from their life is thus to remain faithful to the ontological paradigm, while taking care not to lapse into facile biologism or naturalism.

On the one hand, for Western philosophers from Plato to Hannah Arendt, the meaning of achieving one's own appearance depended on the difference between the event of biological birth and a rebirth through philosophical or political action. The two events—and with them the realms of nature and culture—seemed to be discontinuous largely due to the animalist prejudice of the philosophers themselves who placed undue emphasis on absolute (physical, corporeal) separation in birth. On the other hand, the original philosophy of Luce Irigaray has provided us with the tools that are necessary to mend this artificial divide by establishing civic and other kinds of identity, not to mention the very humanity of the human, through the cultivation of sexuate differences. No longer do thought and action have to assert their right by setting themselves over and against the world into which we are born; rather, they can grow and mature by sharing this world.

With vegetal life in mind, we might ask: What if the *phenomenon* or the *phuomenon* of plant germination were behind both events of birth and rebirth? If that were so, then there wouldn't be a clear rupture with what or who gave us life but a continuous appearing, forever indebted to and drawing on its "soil." Although the umbilical cord is cut, we are rooted in the other as much as in ourselves. Only on this condition can we, too, keep growing.

To the extent that it has let anything grow at all, our metaphysical tradition has sanctioned nothing other than inward growth and, therefore, a growth that is more temporal than spatial, already stunted and oblivious to the example of plants. It has shunned the outgrowths or excrescences that plants are and substituted for them a spiritual or cultural development predicated on "deepening" our inner resources. Even though this option is viable for other living beings as well, it maintains something of an exceptional, if not anomalous, character, particularly when it is presented as the sole path open before us. At the level of a living body, to grow inward is quite pathological (just think of the pain caused by ingrown nails) but it is this pathology that has come to constitute the norm of psychic life over millennia in the West. Whether one is ideally rooted solely in oneself as an autonomous subject or in another human to the exclusion of other modes of life, one develops, by and large, as an ingrown nail does, causing tension, inflammation, disruption and disease in one's milieu. Figuratively speaking, instead of living, one festers, and the sad results of this planet-wide trans-generational collective festering, which now goes under the name "the Anthropocene," are observable in the environmental crisis that has gripped our world.

Hegelian dialectics is, of course, wedded to the idea of Spirit's interior development, despite all its forays outside itself. Hegel ranks psychic interiority, which first announces itself in animal life, above the "bad infinity" of plant growth that, moving toward exteriority, fails to return to itself. Such a philosophical stance overlooks the event that is vegetal life. Conceiving of

the seed as a botanical embodiment of the geometrical point, the dialectician concludes that “[i]n the grain (*Samenkorn*) the plant appears as a simple, immediate unity of the self with the genus.” In turn, the elongation of the seed in growth is analogous to the negation (as well as the elevation and preservation) of the point in the line, which does not introduce anything new into what is already there: “The development of the germ is at first mere growth, mere increase; it is already in itself the whole plant, the whole tree, etc., in miniature. The parts are already fully formed, receive only an enlargement, a formal repetition, a hardening, and so on.”¹

Indeed, besides denying the possibility that anything new could appear through “mere growth” or excrescence, these sentences also erase the remaining axes of seminal event. Expectation becomes superfluous where all the “parts are fully formed” in the seed and “receive only an enlargement” in actual plant development; exceptionality is precluded where formal repetition reigns supreme and where the singularity of the place of growth is completely ignored. I will come back to these observations in a moment. For now, suffice it to say—*contra* Hegel—that growth is never “mere,” if only because the coming-outside-itself of a growing being, its exposure to the world, is an event, notably from the phenomenological point of view. Rather than a straightforward replay of what has been hidden in the essence of the seed all along, growth is the event of the plant’s phenomenal givenness or self-givenness.

2. EXPECTATIONS, OR OUT-LOOKS

Their resistance to growth notwithstanding, philosophers have converted the germination of a seed, quasi-miraculously emerging from the dense obscurity of the soil, into an allegory of human enlightenment. The Platonic Myth of the Cave contains unmistakable clues to the vegetal, rather than animal, ideal of rebirth experienced by a philosophical soul in the bright light of Ideas. But, having said that, the desire to limit exposure to exteriority and avoid phenomenal self-presentation unwittingly betrays the animal bias of Western metaphysics, precisely because animality has to do with the economization of outward bodily surface in the interest of more efficient locomotion. The entire philosophical and theological tendency toward interiorization, responsible for the production of the withdrawn noumenal realm, which includes the soul, may be grafted onto the difference between vegetal exposure and animal concealment.

Besides multiplying visible extensions seemingly *ad infinitum*, vegetal excrescences do not correspond to the organismic scheme of growth. Most

1. G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature: Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences, Part II*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 323.

animal organisms grow by developing and actualizing the potentialities already included in the fetus. There are no or few surprises in the course of their growth, and if some crop up, they are classified as abnormalities, excrescences, or tumors that disrupt the normal functioning of the organism. The concept, too, grows like an animal; its maturation only makes explicit what was abstractly anticipated in its first conception. Its excess (and, along with it, the future) belongs to it a priori, insofar as what is outside the concept is enveloped by it without qualitatively changing anything in its logic. Plants, in turn, grow outward in a manner that is unpredictable and eventful, well beyond our expectations. Their modular development, for instance, is responsible for the emergence of new branches and offshoots that are not “pre-programmed” in the seed but are contingent on environmental circumstances, such as the availability of sunlight, soil nutrients, or even the neighboring species that either impede or facilitate their growth. In other words, the excess, factored into excrescence, is not their own; rather, it emanates from and remains beholden to their organic and inorganic others. Vegetal excrescences are nothing abnormal, because there is no inflexibly set organismic scheme to disrupt in the first place—only a loose plan for development highly responsive to the environment. The event of plant growth stands in stark contrast to the conceptuality of animal development.

Once they are sowed, seeds are integrated into the cycle of seasons that regulate their germination and becoming. The word “season” itself harkens back to the human engagement with plants, seeing that it issues from the Latin verb *serere*, “to sow.” Various seasons are the best times to sow, to care for, and to reap, for instance cereals or flowers. While seasonal changes (expressed in the fluctuations of temperature, humidity, and the amount of daylight) closely follow the rotation of the earth and its position vis-à-vis the sun, plants track these changes and take them as cues for blossoming or coming to fruition, remaining dormant as seeds in the cold dark of the soil or sprouting to the warmth of spring. In other words, the seasons connote an alteration and an alternation: the becoming-other of the summer in the fall and the winter and the cyclical nature of change, when winter, too, is followed by the spring and the summer. Of course, all this depends on the place where living beings are in relation to the equator: equatorial climates demonstrate little difference between the four seasons and, as a result, most plants growing there remain evergreen all year round.

To live out of season is to ignore the alterations and alternations of planetary time and to exist out of tune with the milestones of vegetal temporality: germination, growth, blossoming, and fruition. This is especially true for the age of nihilism, for which Nietzsche predicted the kind of culture that would

be a “fruit out of season.”² Nihilistic culture suppresses the origination of culture in the work of cultivation, for the most part exerted on vegetal nature, the work which demands patience, the capacity to wait for the crops or for the time the plants themselves require to mature, and attunement to the changes of seasons. Its “fruit out of season” is wholly inappropriate, improper to the times (or timing) and places of growth. So much so, that we have come to conflate the unseasonable course of late modern culture with the event that disrupts the orderly and predictable succession of the seasons and of tradition itself.

Worse yet, human technology has managed to regulate seasonal and diurnal changes in order to stimulate the growth of plants for consumption. A hothouse is a rudimentary instrument that interferes in the environmental conditions of plants to stimulate their “production” all year round. Often, commercial growers subject plants to supplemental artificial light in order to speed up their growth, extending photoperiods to 16, 20, and at times 24 hours a day. Like humans, plants can be violated by uninterrupted light that forces them to grow without nocturnal, as well as seasonal, breaks. The leaves of corn, for example, show signs of damage after the cyclical time of alteration and alternation—of light, heat, and so forth—is withheld from these plants. There is no more patience, with which crops used to be awaited; the eventful delay of seed germination and growth is reduced to a bare minimum at will. As Kierkegaard ironically writes in *Either/Or*: “I lack altogether patience to live. I cannot see the grass grow, but since I cannot I don’t feel at all inclined to.”³

At the origin of the seasons, then, planetary time is measured by the stages of vegetal life and of the human engagement with plants. There is an appropriate time for entrusting the seed to the earth—the season of sowing, which came to be a synecdoche for all the other seasons. Another season arrives when the young sprouts and blossoms reach toward the vast expanse of the sky, partly leaving the darkness of the soil. There is also a season for ripening, absorbing the light and the heat of the sun (fire), bearing fruit, and harvesting. And, finally, there is a season of rest, of being covered by snow or returning to the waters that fall from the sky. The reason why I am casting seasonal alteration and alternation in these terms is that each season demonstrates a specific relation to the elements, one of them becoming definitive and playing a more important formative role for plants and for vegetal time.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 115.

3. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, trans. Alistaire Hannay (London and New York: Penguin, 1992), 46.

The seasons, of course, convey the journey of our planet around the sun, as well as an elemental cycle, a procession of the elements over the year. Living at the rhythm of the seasons means respecting the time of plants, expecting their events, and, along with them, successively opening oneself to various elements.

In the book of *Ecclesiastes*, this rhythm has been already corrupted, as the heavenly element comes to prevail over the rest; the time and integrity of plants is disrespected; and murder, destruction, and violence enter the fray. The biblical nihilist is impatient, tired of waiting for what seems to be thoroughly predictable, and therefore already oblivious to the event of the plant. “To every thing there is a season,” he writes, “and a time to every purpose under the heaven [*shamaim*]” (*Eccl.* 3:1). Although the idea of the appropriate time is preserved in this programmatic statement about the seasons, every purpose and activity is gathered under the sky (*shamaim*) that presides over the other elements and, thus, skews the balanced rhythm of seasonal alteration and alternation. Everything is polarized here: there are only two options: the positive and the negative: “A time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot [*la’akor*] what has been planted; A time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build” (*Eccl.* 3:2–3). Should we be surprised with the melancholy, nihilistic conclusion of *Ecclesiastes*, “That which has been is that which shall be, and that which has been done is that which shall be done; and there is nothing new under the sun” (*Eccl.* 1:9)? After all, highly polarized binary actions have eliminated the manifold of nature, simplified the seasons, and subjected everything to the tyranny of that which presides over this monotonous routine, be it heaven or the sun. Vegetal seasons are reduced to planting or sowing and the excoriation of plants, without leaving any time for care or cultivation. In fact, much of the beginning of *Ecclesiastes* is devoted to denying any difference, or creative potential, to the elements: the sun and the wind—fire and air—travel around the earth in seemingly pointless circles, rivers run toward but do not saturate the sea, generations pass and the earth remains eternally the same (*Eccl.* 1:4–7). The delay that constitutes the time required for seasons to change, plants to grow, and humans to develop appears to be redundant.

When it comes to seeds, the suspension of their germination can be almost indefinite. In dry conditions, they can be preserved for hundreds of years, without affecting their viability. For example, the longevity of the *Canna compacta* seeds, found in a tomb in the high Andes, has been estimated at six hundred years.⁴ Seeds are the vehicles of the Derridian “messianic hope,” that

4. J. Derek Bewley, Kent J. Bradford, Henk W. M. Hilhorst, and Hiro Nonogaki, *Seeds: Physiology of Development, Germination and Dormancy*, 3rd Edition (New York and Heidelberg: Springer, 2013), 343.

of “awaiting without the horizon of the wait, awaiting what one does not expect yet or any longer.”⁵ The outlook for germination can be seasonal, *or* it can exceed human time constraints altogether. To be disseminated, spread perhaps for nothing, the seed does not need to be wasted: it disseminates itself, all by itself.

3. EXCEPTIONS, OR OUT-TAKES

At least since the time of Aristotle, the relation between the seed and a fully developed plant has been conceived as that between potential and actual being. It is this old metaphysical scheme that still performs much of the theoretical work behind the scenes of Hegel’s philosophy of nature. For Aristotle, disruptions in the normal process of actualization are possible but highly undesirable, since they introduce confusion into the order of being. For us, however, such occurrences may constitute events—those exceptions to the general course of development that introduce a fair degree of indeterminacy into the destiny of a developing subject.

One kind of eventual disruption is the seemingly negative non-fulfillment of the potential inherent to a given class of beings. A “‘seedless’ fruit is in a sense imperfect,” states Aristotle in *Metaphysics* (1023a), taking “perfection” to mean living up to one’s appropriate purpose or *telos*. Though it harbors a reproductive potentiality, the barren plant does not put this power into action, does not actualize it. Such non-actualization is dismissed as a mere accident, or a singular instance when things do not work, that is, are not all that they could be. Seen through a deconstructive lens, the same non-arrival of being at its intended destination is the *sine qua non* for the event, making room for possibility (and impossibility) within the otherwise closed circuit of potentiality.

Another sort of disruption is due to the attribution of the potential (*dynamis*) of one type of being to another. Since animal capacities are superadded onto and presuppose those of plants, and those of humans are superadded onto and presuppose those of plants and animals, chances are that the non-fulfillment of “higher” capacities will leave animals and humans with those of the “lower” ones, belonging to plants. Failure to actualize our ownmost potentiality for thinking, in accordance with the principle of non-contradiction, demotes us, according to Aristotle, precisely to the level of plants: “If, however, all men alike are both right and wrong, no one can say anything meaningful; for one must then at the same time say these and also other things. And he who means nothing, but equally thinks and does not think, in what respect does his condition differ from that of a plant?” (*Metaphysics* 1008b) Just as,

5. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 81.

ontologically, the event happens when something becomes possible above and beyond the logic of potentiality, so, epistemologically, it comes to pass when one thinks outside the dictates of formal logic. Perhaps, only such eventual “out-takes” make us realize just how much we actually share with plants!

It would be a mistake, nonetheless, to regard Aristotle’s seeds as examples of pure potentiality. As he puts it quite sharply in *Physics*: “There is always something already there, out of which the resultant thing comes; for instance, the seed of a plant or animal” (190b). Potentiality is what transpires between two actualities separated from one another in linear time; in and of itself, it is only an incomplete actuality. For the event to occur—in other words, for temporalization to ensue—non-actualizable possibilities must intervene in the logic of potentiality. Regardless of how thoroughly we transcribe its DNA code, the seed is a *perhaps* open to chance. Its germination depends on the time when and the place where it falls, the kind of the soil, the availability of moisture and sunlight, and so forth. Thus, in dealing with seminal events, we will never be in a position to determine the objective sense of seeds, and, at best, will note their situational, embedded, contingent, unstable meanings.

As for semantic instability, even in Aristotle it is possible to detect an inversion in the sense of seeds. From the actualized and actualizing *telos* of plants, the philosopher transforms them into waste, a byproduct of vegetal nutrition. As he observes in *Parts of Animals*, plants seem to have no equivalent to the intestine and are “without any part for the discharge of waste residue.” “For the food which they absorb from the ground,” he continues, “is already concocted, and they give off as its equivalent their seeds and fruit” (655b). As is often the case with thinking about vegetal processes, the most essential turns out to be the most superfluous, and vice versa (think of the leaf and the key role in plant metamorphosis allotted to it by Goethe).

In the subsequent history of Western thought, the Aristotelian regularization of nature with the help of seeds has proceeded largely unabated. Lucretius, for one, deduces the growth of each thing “from a fixed seed” (*De rerum natura*, 1.190). The seed is his ontological argument against creation *ex nihilo*, the event *par excellence*, which with its totally random and exceptional character would wreak havoc in the order of life, making plants “suddenly spring up at unpredictable intervals and at unfavorable times of year” (1.181–82). Even Heidegger, with his assertion of the primacy of possibility over actuality in human existence, refuses to extend this exceptionality to non-human living beings. Blinded by its desire to see strict order in nature at any cost, Western metaphysics and science alike lose sight of the eventual dimension of seeds, plants, and life itself. Existence, being’s “stepping forth” or “standing out” of itself, becomes (at best) a purely human feature, forgetful of vegetal excrescences, expectations, and exceptions. The forgetting of being is, at its most concrete, a forgetting of the eventful being of plants.

The practical implications of denying plants access to the event are glaring, as this denial culminates in the techno-capitalist framing of vegetal life. Above all, seed patenting and the production of sterile seeds take away not only the plants' reproductive potential but also the time it takes for them to develop as well as their unexpected, open-ended possibilities and their exceptionality. Such harnessing of the seed converts plants into the out-growths—not of themselves but of the value they represent. In other words, the techno-capitalist framing of plants de-eventalizes them. In trying to determine completely the sense of seeds by transcribing and altering their DNA code, it betrays the sense of existence, be it vegetal or human. It is against this betrayal that I insist on the *anamnesis* or recollection of “seminal events” that are the out-comes of plant life.