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WHEN THINKING HESITATES: PHILOSOPHY AS PROSTHESIS AND TRANSFORMATIVE VISION

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abstract: In this essay, I draw on Henri Bergson and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to interrogate what philosophy is and how it can continue to think. Though my answer is not reducible to the views of either philosopher, what joins them is an attempt to elaborate philosophy as a different way of seeing. In this light, I propose a view of philosophy as prosthesis—as a means and a way for seeing differently. Rather than a simple tool, philosophy as prosthesis is a transformative supplement, one that our bodily perception calls for and wherein that perception is recast. Rather than a fixed or assured view, this prosthesis holds open the interval in which thinking can take place. Philosophy, I argue, must wait. It sees and thinks hesitatingly, for the temporality it inscribes is not a foreseeable development but the unfolding of life as tendency, as that which creates its own possibility as it comes into existence.

The question "what is philosophy?" is best addressed in the mode of the *how*: how to create the place but also to open the time for thinking. This question implies a particular relation of philosophy to futurity. This relation is not that of predicting the forms that future philosophies will take, extrapolating a development and application from a present state. The place and time of thinking would be, in this case, opened up by philosophical experimentation only to be circumscribed as domains and doctrines, made into linear models of thought repeatable through time. The futurity at stake in philosophy poses the question not of use but of creation; this is the question of *how philosophy can continue to think*. Continental philosophy, in this perspective, is neither a school

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of thought nor a set of ideas, nor is it easily limited to a group of thinkers. It would name a tendency rather than a doctrine; it would be a way of enabling thinking, a style or dimension according to which one thinks, sees, and even lives.

In this essay, I draw on Henri Bergson and Maurice Merleau-Ponty to interrogate what philosophy is and how it can continue to live and think. Though my answer is not reducible to the views of either philosopher, what joins them is an attempt to elaborate philosophy as a different way of seeing (in more than a metaphorical sense). In what follows, I propose a view of philosophy as *prosthesis*, as a means and a way for seeing differently. Rather than a simple tool, philosophy as prosthesis is a transformative supplement, one that our bodily perception calls for and wherein that perception is recast. Rather than a fixed or assured view, this prosthesis holds open but does not fill the interval between affect and action, the interval in which thinking can take place. Philosophy, I argue, must wait. It sees and thinks hesitatingly, for the temporality it inscribes is not a foreseeable development but the unfolding of life as tendency, zigzag, and winding, as that which creates its own possibility as it comes into existence.

1. THE FUTURE OF PHILOSOPHY AND THE CREATION OF POSSIBILITY

When Bergson was asked to conceive what the great dramatic work of the future would be, he famously replied that had he been able to conceive it, he would have already written it. Not only did the work in question not yet exist, it was not yet possible.[1] This response underscores at once the unpredictability of the future and the positive force of time, while it calls into question the commonly held belief that creative works and ideas preexist their realization. What we learn from Bergson is that philosophy, no less than literature or art, is not prefigured as a possible idea before it is discovered or articulated. Philosophy is created, and in this creation, philosophy makes itself possible at the same time that it becomes real.

But philosophy, and indeed all creation, misunderstands itself and its relation to futurity—hence the retrospective illusion that infects the idea of the possible for Bergson. Possibility is taken to precede, to prefigure, and to be less than reality. More precisely, present possibilities are understood to delimit and contain future events. Two movements need to be distinguished

[1] Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1992), 100–01; *La pensée et le mouvant* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1938), 110–11. Henceforth cited as '*PM*' with English then French pagination.

within Bergson's "retrograde movement of the true" (*PM*, 22/14), movements that, though seemingly identical, hide an asymmetry that differentiates the temporality of truth from illusion.[2] First, there is the logic by which a truth, once posed, begins at that very moment to have always been possible (*PM*, 101/111). Though its possibility does not precede the event to come, it *will have preceded it* once the event takes place. This is the retrograde movement—the temporal ripples propagating through being—that events and truths effect once they come into existence; the past is constantly recast by the present, in a nonchronological and reversible time (*PM*, 104/114). On this reading, an event has ontological weight; its advent transforms not only the real but also the possible. In other words, events create and institute their own fields of possibility.

When this retrograde movement is projected onto the future, however, a second logic appears, one that takes the possibility of the future to be contained in the actual present. This shift is significant, for it can be accomplished only by making the future into an anticipated present and the actual present into a past to come (*PM*, 101/111). The asymmetry that separates the future from the present is erased, eliding the difference, newness, and unpredictability of futurity. In other words, the reversibility that characterizes Bergson's retrograde movement relies on a structural irreversibility, a difference in kind, that precludes this reversibility from falling into mere equivalence and prevents the passage of duration from being flattened into fusion. Although there is some ambivalence in Bergson's presentation of the retrograde movement of the true, I would argue that this temporality becomes illusory only when it closes down the openness to futurity.[3] In the present–past context, in contrast, this retrograde temporality can be read to be generative, even liberatory (*PM*, 104/114); as Bergson notes, "in duration, considered as a creative evolution, there is perpetual creation of possibility and not only of reality" (*PM*, 21/13). Rather than seeing possibility as a limitation on and an anticipation of future ideas and events, ideas and events are seen to redefine, even to create, being both possible and real. Though Bergson does not define it as such, I would argue that this can be understood as a *virtualization* of the actual, for in this first retrograde movement the creation of the possible is part of the becoming of the real. More precisely, the real is being created—duration is making

[2] These two movements have not been sufficiently distinguished in the literature. A notable exception is John Mullarkey, *Bergson and Philosophy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 173.

[3] See Bergson's "The Possible and the Real," where he notes: "That is precisely the illusion," referring to the future–present relation in contrast to the present–past relation (*PM*, 101/111). See also *PM*, 26/19 where he recommends adapting this logic rather than renouncing it. But there are also places where Bergson does not distinguish the two movements as clearly (see *PM*, 22/15).

itself—as both actual (present) and virtual (past) simultaneously.[4] Philosophical ideas, like artistic works (*PM*, 103/113) and all vital creation, perform this generative and temporal ontological reworking.

When Merleau-Ponty critically engages with Bergson's "retrograde movement of the true"—as he does frequently in his later work—the relation to futurity receives another formulation. What is at stake for Merleau-Ponty is the way in which a present event makes itself *dimensional*, that is, it becomes that according to which the past is perceived.[5] This reconfiguration of the past is not, however, anachronistic. The past receives its meaning and date by means of this "envelopment" in the present; it becomes what it was, a process of institution that opens onto a particular present. More radically, this retrograde temporality also implies the envelopment of present and future for Merleau-Ponty. Rather than simply anticipating or delimiting a future, the present waits for its meaning to come from the future; it "has to become what it is."[6] There is an indetermination, openness, even virtuality, to the present on Merleau-Ponty's account; the present does not fully exist in itself; it requires an elaboration, a future. Only by means of this detour can it become itself; its meaning is hence deferred, created afterwards, given in the future anterior. It is in this sense that possibility is not external to the present for Merleau-Ponty.

What we learn from Bergson and Merleau-Ponty is that philosophical thinking is (or should be) creation. Following Bergson, philosophy, as intuition, can be understood to be inscribed in the movement of life as a need to create.[7] Or as Merleau-Ponty notes, "Being is *what requires creation of us* for us to experience it" (*VI*, 197/251). Philosophical interrogation makes a difference in the world; philosophical questions invent their own terms (*PM*, 51/52). Ideas do not preexist in an already formed other-worldly realm. Ideas have a duration that envelopes the past and calls for a future. As they arise in life, they create the very possibilities and dimensions by which life takes on

[4] This brings together two registers, more clearly distinguished by Gilles Deleuze than by Bergson. On my reading, the first retrograde movement involves a *virtualization* of present events, the ripples they send into the past. The second retrograde movement more accurately describes the retrospective illusion by which the future is reduced to present *possibility*.

[5] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 244; *Le visible et l'invisible, suivi de notes de travail*, établi par Claude Lefort (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 297. Hereafter cited as '*VI*' with English then French pagination.

[6] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity: Course Notes from the Collège de France (1954–1955)*, trans. Leonard Lawlor and Heath Massey (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 80; *L'Institution, La Passivité, Notes de cours au Collège de France, 1954–1955* (Paris: Belin, 2003), 36.

[7] Henri Bergson, "[U]ne exigence de création," in *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1998), 251; *L'évolution créatrice* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1907), 252. Henceforth cited as '*EC*' with English then French pagination.

meaning and becomes what it is, by which it articulates and makes itself. This creation is not, however, a mere psychological reinterpretation of life; it is part of life's ontological becoming.[8] But the question remains how philosophy can engage in this movement of creation without misperceiving it and without misunderstanding its own role. How can philosophy accompany the retrograde movement without closing down the future of thinking by circumscribing a preexistent and determinate set of ideas?

2. PHILOSOPHY AS PROSTHESIS AND INDIRECT VISION

In order to explore this question, I propose to think of philosophy as a prosthesis of a special kind—taking seriously Merleau-Ponty's description of philosophical interrogation as an "ontological organ" (*VI*, 121/162) and drawing critically on Bergson's concept of prosthesis in *Creative Evolution*. To say that philosophy is prosthetic is not to reduce it to an instrumental or utilitarian function but to show how it can become a *dimension* according to which we see and think. Indeed, such a description can serve to destabilize the dichotomy between practice and theory, nature and artifice, body and thought. It renders thinking as bodily and material—a speaking, gesturing, seeing, and moving philosophy.[9] Not only does this mean that the lived body is a ground for thinking and hence for philosophy (*VI*, 259/313), it also means that ideas are bodily supplements or dimensions that dilate and structure the body as thinking body.

Although the term 'prosthesis' evokes artifice, both Merleau-Ponty and Bergson understand prosthesis to be called for by the movement of life, albeit in different ways. The structure of the lived body as twoness (two eyes, two hands) and separation (*écart*) opens the possibility for diacritical difference and meaning, according to Merleau-Ponty (*VI*, 217/ 270).[10] The lived body is not a thing, but a field of difference, a "dimensional sensible," within and according to which other (diacritical) dimensions can be instituted (*VI*, 260/313). In this vein, prostheses are not mere utilitarian extensions, things incorporated as habits into our flesh. Rather, prostheses rely on, augment and express the

[8] In other words, this ontological becoming should be understood to include both the virtualization and the actualization of life. See Merleau-Ponty's reading of Bergson in *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, comp. Dominique Séglard, trans. Robert Vallier (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 70; *La Nature: Notes, Cours du Collège de France*, établi et annoté par Dominique Séglard (Paris: Seuil, 1995), 101.

[9] See Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," trans. Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 189; *L'Œil et l'Esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 91. Henceforth cited as 'EM' with English then French pagination.

[10] Herein lies the import of Merleau-Ponty's well-known descriptions of the noncoincidence of touching and touched and of seeing and seen as exemplary of the ontological structure of *flesh*.

structure of the body as an interval or fold, its "*natural* negativity" (*VI*, 216/270). They create further dimensions according to which experiences and events come to be differentiated and can thereby be connected in new ways. Philosophy, I would claim, is a prosthesis in this sense.

How far can the understanding of philosophy as prosthetic extend? The Bergsonian concept of prosthesis would seem to present us with limitations. The Bergsonian prosthesis is, after all, a tool of the intelligence (set apart from both instinct and philosophical intuition). Though it arises within the movement of life as a need to create—inserting indetermination into matter by the insinuation of life into, and its working on, matter—the prosthesis represents an imperfect instrument. A fabricated and inorganic tool, it is distanced from life; without specific adaptation to needs, it requires effort in its use (*EC*, 140–41/141–42). More importantly, intuition, which Bergsonian philosophy takes as its method, is a direct vision without prosthetic mediation (*PM*, 29/22, 42/42). Describing philosophy as a prosthesis risks making it into *a thing*; indeed, it would be a thing become habit, a mediating optics employed unreflectively and providing a totalized picture of the world. A prosthetic philosophy would, in this sense, be an uncritical and skewed vision rather than a direct one. Two difficulties thus confront us in appropriating the Bergsonian concept of prosthesis for philosophy.

The first difficulty—the imperfection of the prosthesis as a tool—represents upon closer examination not lack but excess. Bergson's presentation underscores this: the imperfect fit of the artificial prosthesis is the other side of its flexibility and mobility—its ability to be used in different contexts for variable ends (as opposed to the perfect but invariable form of the instinctual organ) (*EC*, 141/142). Indeed, it is in its very lack of a precise fit, its inadequacy in immediately satisfying the needs of the organism, that the power of the prosthesis lies. This partial failure or "deficit" leaves an interval between need and action, between affect and response. Immediate action is deferred; instead we hesitate, becoming conscious of other possibilities for acting (*EC*, 144–45/145–46). In this way, the prosthesis can hold open the interval of duration; instead of seamless response, it carries within it hesitation and the potential for reflection.[11] This openness is part of the creative power of prostheses. Bergson notes that the fabricated prosthesis transforms the nature of the being who fabricated it (*EC*, 141/142); in becoming prosthetic, both object and subject poles are reworked.[12] This transformation occurs at the level of both bodily organization and desire. For prostheses offer the

[11] The prosthesis can even make self-reflection possible, as occurs in the case of that symbolic prosthesis which is language (*EC*, 158–59/159–60).

[12] See also Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 151.

means to fabricate other machines and other prostheses; in this proliferation, they open an indefinite field of activity wherein new, and unanticipated, needs may arise (*EC*, 141/142). In various ways, then, the Bergsonian prosthesis bears within itself the means to transcend itself (*EC*, 151/152). It is in this sense that the prosthesis can break with utility and become philosophy (although not without violent effort and not without the guidance of intuition [*EC*, 151/152]).

Second, although Bergsonian intuition is at times modeled on an ideal of direct vision, this immediacy should be questioned. Merleau-Ponty's reading of Bergson emphasizes the tension between the desire for direct vision and the destabilization of that vision by the very duration in which it takes place and of which it seeks to take hold. While Merleau-Ponty approvingly cites Bergson's critique of objectifying approaches to time, which seek to take hold of time "as between forceps," and while he endorses Bergson's attempt to see duration for its own sake, he notes the limits of the Bergsonian method in its desire for immediacy (*VI*, 128/170; *PM*, 13/4). More than the famous ideal of coincidence, it is the temporality and directionality of philosophical vision that I believe are at stake in Merleau-Ponty's critique of Bergson. There is no doubt that Bergson often presents intuition as a direct way of seeing or thinking being (*EC*, 298/298); as such, it could have been arrived at without the preparatory work and coexistence with being that his own philosophy shows to be necessary (*PM*, 75/80). Such a direct vision refuses to follow the winding sinuosities of durational becoming, the articulations and differentiations of being that are its joints. It is a *frontal* vision that short-circuits this becoming, and cuts across the joints, in order to grasp its object. What such direct philosophical vision forgets, however, is its *lateral* belonging to, and reliance on, a vision that makes itself in things, a vision that is itself a becoming—the vision that is imminent in life (on Bergson's account) and in being (on Merleau-Ponty's).[13] In this forgetting, philosophical vision takes itself to be instantaneous; it grasps becoming in synopsis rather than as moving reality, a synopsis wherein past virtuality and future possibility are contained in the present. As a frontal view rather than as a lateral living-with, this vision forgets that there is a constitutive delay in its relation to being and that it must *wait* for life to unfold.[14] This unfolding cannot be sped up; the future cannot be grasped as present, without flat-

[13] This *imminence* means that being is not a complete and fully constituted spectacle but becomes, or makes itself, visible (hence the ontological significance of art and philosophy in making visible).

[14] To recall Renaud Barbaras's reading of Merleau-Ponty's indirect ontology as one of "constitutive distance," see *Le tournant de l'expérience: Recherches sur la philosophie de Merleau-Ponty* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1998).

tening time and losing being from sight. Delay is the experiential trace of the difference that time makes for vision, the difference by which the future must be awaited, not projected. This is the difference that must be remembered if vision is to become philosophical.

Merleau-Ponty's response to Bergson is hence to think of philosophy as an "'indirect' method" (*VI*, 179/233)—as *indirect* or *lateral* vision (*VI*, 188/241). Philosophical vision must try to accompany the vision that is imminent in being. This means knowing being from within, in coexistence, but it does not mean knowing it in immediacy. What belies the directness of vision is the movement of dehiscence that characterizes duration. "[A] theory of the philosophical view or vision as a maximum of true proximity to a being in dehiscence" (*VI*, 128/170) could only offer a vision that was itself in dehiscence: a vision that is "proximity through distance" (*VI*, 128/170) or coexistence through delay. Such a vision must hesitate, I will argue below, and it is this hesitation that characterizes the work of philosophy as ontological organ or prosthesis.

3. WHEN PHILOSOPHY HESITATES

Though Bergson uses the image of direct vision to describe intuition, there are resources in his work to think of philosophical vision as indirect. Indeed, I find three ways in which Bergsonian intuition involves *indirection*. First, intuition can accompany the movement of life only by interrupting habitual and objectifying ways of seeing it. Although Bergson describes this interruption as a "detachment" from action and utility (*PM*, 138/153), which for him motivate objectification, such detachment should not be understood as a withdrawal from the creative movement of life. Rather, intuition enacts a return to life by means of a detour; its contact with life is mediated by the effort to work on and suspend objectifying habit. This forms the basis for what Merleau-Ponty has called the Bergsonian reduction, which in bracketing such habit allows us to see *sub specie durationis* (*PM*, 158/176).[15] Instead of taking life as an object of vision, this philosophical vision sees *with* life, or *according to* duration.[16] This points to a second sense of indirection, for to see *sub specie durationis* is not only to see the temporality of things, it is also to see in a manner that follows from, and enacts, the duration of which vision is a part. Since it goes against objectifying habits of seeing that have become natural to

[15] Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 184; *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 232.

[16] I paraphrase here Merleau-Ponty's description of lateral vision in "Eye and Mind." In the case of painting, he says: "It is more accurate to say that I see according to it, or with it, than that *I see it*" (EM, 164/23).

us (*PM*, 142/157), intuition is difficult according to Bergson (*PM*, 87/95). It requires a violent and "painful effort," one that begins to be undone as soon as it has taken place and that is intermittent and hesitant (*EC*, 237/238). But this hesitation is not simply the negative consequence of the resistance of habit; it is a positive expression of the duration to which intuition belongs and that it seeks to make visible.[17] This is because hesitation defines the structure of duration for Bergson; it opens the interval wherein time makes a difference, wherein it is felt in experience. For intuition to make this reality visible directly and with seamless assurance is to belie the hesitation and constitutive delay at the heart of being as duration. To say that intuition is a "revivification of our faculty of perceiving" (*PM*, 142/157) is thus not to make philosophical vision immediate but to reattach it to life in its creative differentiation, hesitation, and zigzag.

The hesitation of philosophical vision makes possible a third sense of indirection. Hesitation holds open the interval of the present, which had been contracted by the quasi-automaticity of habit. The past is no longer repeated but can be felt, imagined, and remembered. Hesitation, in other words, allows the weight of the past to be felt in the present without reducing that past to determination or presence; in this way, the present can be experienced as an interval of indetermination and the future, as open. It is in this vein that Bergson describes intuition as a dilated vision (*PM*, 134/148), a vision that sees more (*PM*, 135/149). This "more" should not be understood in a quantitative sense. To dilate the aperture of philosophical vision is not to see more of the present; it is to see the present differently—to see it beyond instantaneity. It is to reveal the adherence of the past to the present that structures the *passage* of the present (*PM*, 153/170)—an adherence irreducible to coincidence because of the difference in kind between past and present. That which philosophical vision sees is thus neither narrowly present nor immediate; the present appears as an interval rather than an instant, as tendency or becoming rather than as a thing (*PM*, 157/176). Philosophical vision relies on an infrastructure of pastness and memory.

What is this temporality that philosophical vision both performs and makes visible, the temporality of philosophy as prosthesis? Merleau-Ponty notes that "[i]t is proper to intuition to call forth a development, to become what it is."[18] This is the temporality of being as institution, as "that which never fully *is*" (EM, 190/92). Borrowing a term from Bergson, I would call this temporality

[17] For an understanding of Bergsonian intuition as performative, see John Mullarkey, "Breaking the Circle: Élan vital as performative Metaphysics," *Annales bergsoniennes* 4: 596.

[18] Merleau-Ponty, *Éloge de la philosophie et autres essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), 27; *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. John Wild, James Edie, and John O'Neill (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1963), 19.

"tendency." Tendency connotes not simply movement, but "*nascent change of direction*" (*PM*, 188/211). Its course is structured at once by hesitation and delay and by elaboration as invention. To hesitate is to feel one's way tentatively and receptively. Tendency is "*tâtonnement*," to use Bergson's term; it is a search without finality, an experimentation and elaboration that does not dictate the future it will find (*PM*, 93/101). But neither is the past a self-same or congealed idea on this account. Though the past as a virtual whole pushes on each present, actualizing itself there, this past is dynamically reconfigured through the passage of events and through the creation of possibility that ripples back from these events (their virtualization). The past is not a container that accumulates events; it is the continuous immanent transformation of directionality and sense that is tendency (*EC*, 4/4). This implies, to recall Deleuze, that the whole is not given, that there is no completion or closure for an enduring reality—whether in terms of the future or at the level of the past.[19] Newness, in other words, arises not only from the openness to the future but from the way the past is remembered in the hesitation of philosophical vision.

As tendency, then, philosophy cannot simply repeat—it changes as it endures and through the ripple effects of what it does. Philosophical creation must be understood as at once an actual and a virtual creation. It is here that two ways of understanding philosophy, Bergson's intuitive idea and Merleau-Ponty's unthought, come together. In the introduction to *La pensée et le mouvant*, Bergson distinguishes intuitive ideas from ready-made concepts. Intuitive ideas, he notes, are radically new but obscure; they are unsaid, invisible, even initially incomprehensible (*PM*, 36/31). As such, they can be known only indirectly and in retrospect through the light they shed on the world, through the ways in which they recast or dissolve pregiven intellectual problems (*PM*, 36/32). To think intuitive ideas requires patience; they must be given the time to unfold, to create the terms according to which they will become articulate (*PM*, 36/32). Their evolution instantiates the first logic of the retrograde movement of the true. Philosophy, in other words, is not a static acquisition; not only does philosophy take time to develop, its temporality defines it. That philosophy hesitates and waits is not accidental. This negativity is the source of its excess, for hesitation not only destabilizes objectifying and totalizing habits that would freeze the movement of thought, it also installs within that movement the conditions for continual search and creative differentiation. Thus philosophical ideas are not the simple outcomes of thought; they produce thinking in their very hesitation.

[19] Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 104; *Le bergsonisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966), 108.

Following Merleau-Ponty, such philosophical ideas could be called the "unthought," an absence that counts in the world and that makes us think (*VI*, 221/275). Such an absence is not something of which we speak directly; rather, it is a dimension according to which we speak (*VI*, 118/158), a direction or a sense of thinking. To understand philosophy in this way is to understand it as a prosthesis that hesitates and waits; it opens the field for thinking without prejudging the terms by which the future will take form. Such a prosthesis has the structure of an interval rather than a thing. Since this interval is inscribed in the temporality of tendency, it does not constitute a determinate lack and cannot be completely filled; it transforms and is transformed by what we think. It is the always yet to be thought that makes us think, the force of futurity and time.