

### Abstract

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This essay considers excrescence as a unique form of vegetal excess that tinges the philosophical definitions of matter and the spirit. Upon discussing excessive plant growth as the model for matter in Plotinus and Leibniz, I analyze its psycho-ontological figuration in Avicenna. Here, the exuberance of vegetal life is converted into a sign of deficiency and lack. Finally, in the works of Derrida and Bataille, we find a positive re-evaluation of excrescence that resonates with the ecstatic character of human existence.

**Keywords:** life, excrescence, phusis, Derrida, Bataille.

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### 1. Excrescence Explained

From Plato and Aristotle to Hegel, Western philosophers treated vegetal growth with utmost suspicion. In the restlessness of plants extending their bodies toward the light of the sun and the mineral resources of the earth at the same time, they saw a synecdoche of becoming at the furthest remove from the immutability of being, the constitutive incompleteness of linear development, “bad infinity”, and the poverty of physical existence devoid of sensation or self-feeling. Vegetal growth, punctuated by the periods of sexual reproduction in higher plants, took on the air of monstrosity: besides frustrating the philosophical desire for circular closure, it bespoke total de-monstration in the exposure of a growing being to exteriority.

Unruly from the standpoint of philosophical conceptuality, the growth of plants is excessive, especially given the etymological overtones of *excess* as the movement of going-outside, letting-out, or de-parting (from the Latin *excedere*). Plants are some of the most extraverted creatures imaginable, and hyperbolically so. Their existence is contingent upon various tropisms, turning outward, attaining maximum exposure to the other, multiplying the extension of leaves, twigs, shoots, and branches. Not maintaining a sense of unity and self-identity, which may still linger in a dormant seed, they are the figures of untamable propagation.

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 remains in the fact that the plant deposits the byproducts of its nutritional 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 *excescence*. This latter word, also of a Latin origin, literally means “growing-out”, which is the prevalent direction of all growth. To grow inward is anomalous, if not pathological (just think of the pain caused by ingrown nails). And yet, excrescences have been traditionally synonymous with abnormal growths or even tumors. What could explain such a surprising contrast?

An inverted view of the world is symptomatic of Western metaphysics, with its perverse system of values. To those who accept Nietzsche’s hypothesis that metaphysics militates against everything “useful for life”, it is plain how physical growth (for Nietzsche, an immediate instantiation of the will-to-power) becomes philosophy’s number one enemy. Whereas the outward trajectory of growth in excrescence signals the primacy of visibility, phenomenality, and

self-demonstration, metaphysical philosophers have for millennia been longing to minimize our exposure to exteriority. Whether they have insisted on “true” exteriority (for instance, that of Plato’s eidetic sphere) situated beyond the visible extension of the world here-below or on the cultivation of psychic interiority, metaphysicians have been averse to the coming-to-visibility characteristic of plant growth.

Their conceptual allergy 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 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