

DELEUZE'S TRANSCENDENTAL EMPIRICISM

There are a number of ways one could enter into Deleuze's philosophical project. One could approach it by way of its three great philosophical ancestors: Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Bergson, who together have inspired some of Deleuze's major philosophical themes. I have chosen as my topic "Transcendental Empiricism" for two reasons. First, I want to show how Deleuze's response to the Kantian philosophy shapes his own philosophy, and, second, I want to show the sense in which art plays a role in his philosophical project.

Deleuze's most significant comments on Kant can be found in three of his writings: *Nietzsche et la philosophie* (NPh.) (1962), *La philosophie critique de Kant* (PCK) (1963), and *Difference et repetition* (DR) (1968). In NPh.1 Deleuze suggests that Nietzsche's philosophy of forces in tension provides a more adequate conception of synthesis than Kant's synthesis of representations. Two major themes are already present in this work: a) in the final analysis, Kant resorts to common sense, thereby compromising the critical philosophy, and b) Kant fails to provide a true grounding principle because he stops short of providing the real conditions of experience, and gives, only, its conditions of possibility. PCK points to without explicitly developing Deleuze's conception of "transcendental empiricism". Kant is criticized in this work for assuming that there is a harmony of the faculties subsumed under the rule of the understanding. However, Deleuze sees in Kant's discussion of the sublime - as the "discordant harmony" of the faculties - an opening towards a "transcendental exercise" of the faculties.

Difference and Repetition brings all these elements of Deleuze's Kant critique into focus. At the centre of Deleuze's transcendental empiricism stands his revolutionary concept of Ideas. It is they that provide the true synthesis between sensing and thinking. They are: "far from having as their milieu good sense or common sense, Ideas determine only the communication between disjointed faculties" (DR, p.146; 190)2.

1 Throughout this essay I will quote from the English translations of Deleuze's writings. However, I cite the French editions here in order to indicate the earliest dates of publication of these writings.

2 When referring to Deleuze's texts the first page number will be to the English, the second to the original, French, version.

Kant was the first to provide the example of such a discordant harmony, the relation between imagination and thought which occurs in the case of the sublime. There is, therefore, something which is communicated from one faculty to another, but it is metamorphosed and does not form a common sense. We could just as well say that there are Ideas which traverse all the faculties, but are the object of none in particular. Perhaps in effect, as we shall see, it will be necessary to reserve the name of Idea not for a pure *cogitanda* but rather for those instances which go from sensibility to thought and from thought to sensibility, capable of engendering in each case, according to their own order, the limit - or transcendent - object of each faculty (*ibid.*).

Deleuze's main criticism of Kant is that he is not critical enough, that he is still too much of an empiricist, too much of a dogmatist. But, as it can already be seen from what I have said so far, Deleuze finds a number of valuable elements in Kant's philosophy. The most important among them are: 1) Kant's recognition of the role of temporality in the move from "I think" to "I am" - what Deleuze describes as the constitution of a "fractured I"; 2) the recognition of Ideas as "problems", and 3) the intimation in *The Critique of Judgement* that the harmony among the faculties might be discordant. However, Kant betrays, in all three cases, his original insights.

...of all philosophers, Kant is the one who discovers the prodigious domain of the transcendental. He is the analogue of a great explorer - not of another world, but of the upper and lower reaches of this one. However, what does he do? In the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* he describes in detail three syntheses which measure the respective contributions of the thinking faculties, all culminating in the third, that of recognition, which is expressed in the form of the unspecified object as correlate of the 'I think' to which all the faculties are related. It is clear that, in this manner, Kant traces the so-called transcendental structures from the empirical acts of a psychological consciousness. (DR, p.135; 176)

More than anyone, however, Kant wanted to apply the test of truth and falsehood to problems and questions: ... His profound theory of Ideas as problematising and problematic and problematic allowed him to discover the real source of the dialectic, ... However, because the Kantian critique remains dominated by common sense or the dogmatic image of, Kant still defines the truth of a problem in terms of the possibility of its finding a solution: ... What is missed is the internal character of the problem as such, the imperative internal element which decides in the first place its truth or falsity and measures its intrinsic genetic power. (DR, p.161; 209)

Kant's enterprise multiplies common senses, making as many of them as there are natural interests of rational thought. ... Thus, imagination, reason and the understanding collaborate in the case of knowledge and form a 'logical common

sense'. Here understanding is the legislative faculty ... In the case of the practical model of recognition, by contrast, reason legislates with regard to moral common sense. There remains a third model involving a properly aesthetic common sense in which the faculties attain a free accord. (DR, p.136-7; 178)

Rather than assuming common sense, a truly critical philosophy would have to provide a genetic principle of accord behind the production of common sense. And, this is precisely what Deleuze's "transcendental empiricism" is meant to do. He starts, as did other critics of Kant before him, by abandoning Kant's dualism of sensing and understanding. And to do this he invents a novel conception of Ideas which A... reunite the two parts of the aesthetic so unfortunately dissociated: the theory of forms of experience and that of the work of art as experimentation≡ (DR, p.285; 365). With this new conception we have arrived at the center of Deleuze's "transcendental empiricism", which he defines as follows:

Empiricism truly becomes transcendental, and aesthetic an apodictic discipline, only when we apprehend directly in the sensible that which can only be sensed, the very being of the sensible: difference, potential difference and difference in intensity as the reason behind qualitative diversity. It is in difference that movement is produced as an "effect", that phenomena flash their meanings like signs. The intense world of difference, in which we find reason behind qualities and the being of the sensible, is precisely the object of a superior empiricism. (DR, p.56-7; 79-80)

Besides its Kantian roots, Deleuze's concept of "Idea" owes its debt to Solomon Maimon (intuitive understanding); to Spinoza (common notions); and to Bergson (method of intuition). An Idea is a "multiplicity" - a discordant harmony of independent faculties, none of which legislates for the others. The divergence of the faculties of thinking, imagining, feeling, and sensing, in their transcendent exercise give rise to, not a "common" sense, but a "para" (as in paradoxical) sense. (DR, p.193-4; 250)

The elements of this para-sense are Ideas, precisely because Ideas are pure multiplicities which do not presuppose any form of identity in a common sense but, on the contrary, animate and describe the disjoint exercise of the faculties from a transcendental point of view. Ideas are thus multiplicities with differential glimmers, like will-o'-the-wisps, virtual trails of fire, from one faculty to another,

³ AThe Kantian schemata would take flight and point beyond themselves in the direction of differential ideas, if they were not unduly subordinated to the categories which reduce them to the status of simple mediations in the world of representation≡ (DR, p.285)

without ever having the homogeneity of that natural light which characterises common sense. (DR, p.194; 250)

Deleuze's Kant critique, his own conception of transcendental empiricism, - his theory of Ideas - would not be intelligible without his distinction between the **virtual** and the **actual**. The centrality of the distinction to "transcendental empiricism" is underscored by the following passage taken, also, from *Difference and Repetition*:

Ideas contain all the varieties of differential relations and all the distributions of singular points coexisting in diverse orders "perpllicated" in one another. When the virtual content of an Idea is actualised the varieties of relation are incarnated in distinct species while the singular points which correspond to the values of one variety are incarnated in the distinct parts characteristic of this or that species. The idea of colour, for example, is like a white light which perplicates in itself the genetic elements and relations of all the colours, but is actualised in the diverse colours with their respective spaces;...Thus with actualization a new type of specific and partitive distinction takes the place of the fluid ideal distinctions. We call the determination of the virtual content of an Idea differen(t)iation, we call the actualization of that virtuality into species and distinguished parts differen(c)iation. It is always in relation to a differen(t)iated problem or to a differen(t)iated condition of a problem that a differen(c)iation of species and parts is carried out as though it corresponded to the case of solution of the problem. (DR, p.206-207; 266-7)

Deleuze is not against concepts or conceptuality. He is against taking them as ready made, and cutting them off from their sources - from their genetic elements in experience. We are moved to think as a result of unexpected encounters - when events make their signs to us - he maintains. Ideas are responses to signs of "problems" conveyed to us by the intensities we encounter, within ourselves, or coming from outside. For this reason it is important to examine how Ideas, which are by definition in the realm of the **virtual**, play their transcendental (grounding) role.

Let me summarize what I take Deleuze to mean by "Idea". They are unconscious, impersonal, incorporeal, and imperceptible differential multiplicities. They are thinkable as problems which generate their own solutions. They are incorporeal transcendentals, immanent in actual states of affairs, giving them their sense. The art of genealogy is not

⁴ AWe propose the term Aperplication≅ to designate this distinctive and coexistent state of Ideas....it is a question...of the manner in which problems are objectively determined by their conditions to participate in one another according to the circumstantial requirement of the synthesis of Ideas≅ (DR,p.187; 242)

some mystical art of getting behind, or below, what is actually given in experience. It is not the art of unveiling some hidden "Being" beneath beings, as the early Heidegger had suggested it. The virtual, and the actual, being equally real, are immanent in one another. The actual is a product of the virtual which is, in turn, the power of its production. In other words, the virtual is immanent in the actual, as the active but irreducible element in it.

... the genesis takes place in time not between one actual term, however small, and another actual term, but between the virtual and its actualization – in other words, it goes from the structure to its incarnation, from the conditions of a problem to the cases of solution, (DR, p.183; 237-8).

In commenting on the Transcendental Dialectic, Kant warns us against thinking that the Ideas of reason as nothing more than a mere "rhapsody" (*Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, 330). How do Deleuze's "Ideas" avoid a similar fate? By a remarkable reconstruction/revision of the Kantian dialectic he is able to show that it is possible to steer clear of the "extreme dangers" (*What is Philosophy*, p.199; 191-2) of both common sense and of chaos. Singularities, the genetic elements, as such, of Ideas, are **undetermined**, but they are **determinable** in their differential relation to one another. Finally, they are **determined** when they get actualized in a proposition or in a state of affairs. Consequently, the first movement is from some **actual** state of affairs towards the **virtual** event that animates it (**counter-actualization**). Then, in the (virtual) event differential relations of singularities - **tendencies** - are discerned (by the art of the **genealogist**). Finally, some **new** state of affairs is **created**, or a new way of sensing is invented (actualization). (DR, p.183; 237)

In *What is Philosophy?* (Wh.Ph.), Deleuze spells out another dimension of the act of philosophical creation:

Philosophy presents three elements, each of which fits with the other two but must be considered for itself: the philosophical plane it must lay out (immanence), the persona or personae it must invent and bring to life (insistence), and the philosophical concepts it must create (consistence). (Wh.P., p.76-7; 74)

Not all thinking is philosophical thinking, not all Ideas are philosophical Ideas. Thinking occurs when we encounter signs of problems. Most of our lives are spent in the actual world of objects-representations. Our awareness of these objects is through perceptions, which are, as Bergson tells us, contracted or dilated moments of duration. The art of the genealogist/symptomologist is to survey (**survol**) what takes place in the movement in-between one instance of actualization and another. Ordinary "empirical" thinking sees only more instances between instances. Transcendental empirical thinking "lays out" a plane of immanence running through the movement - not unlike a flying bird laying out its plan of

flight through the lines of turbulence in the sky. But, unlike birds, philosophers trace a mobile consistency within this line of turbulence.

So, how do philosophers and artists do this? How do they respond to encounters with signs? Signs are expressions of Ideas: of heterogeneous multiplicities. And, it is the task of philosophers and artists to "ascend" from the realm of actualities (individuals) to this realm of differential heterogeneous singularities. This is the moment of greatest danger facing both philosophers and artists - everything could get lost here. The artist could spoil everything, either by falling back on the clichés of representation, or by so overcharging its canvas (its composition) with intensities that the result would be just a mess of colours (of lines or of noise). The philosopher could spoil everything either by reproducing the clichés of common sense, or by falling back into the chaos it was meant to confront to begin with.

In his book on the painter Francis Bacon, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensations*, (FB) Deleuze describes with great clarity how the painter ascends from the actual figures of its lived experience by "making a diagram" on a canvas which already contains a number of more or less actual, more or less virtual, "figurative givens" (FB, p.99; 65). In *A Thousand Plateaus* he describes how a philosopher goes about making a "diagram". Diagrams are the philosopher's equivalent of the painters brush strokes mapping out a virtual line of Ideas from which are created, not "figures-affects", but "concepts". And, just as figures on a well made canvas must trace out an artistic plane of consistency, concepts of philosophy must also trace out a field of consistency. But, the resulting consistency is not to be confused with the strict logical consistency traditionally associated with conceptual schemes. If it is to serve as a continued source of thinking it must remain on the surface between the actual and the virtual.

In the concluding chapter of DR, Deleuze suggests that Ideas originate in a Asolitary and divine game⁵, one which is to be distinguished from Acollective and human games⁵. Does this mean that philosophy is an essentially private enterprise? To answer this in the affirmative would suppose that Ideas have reality only in the minds of actual individual thinkers. But this runs completely against the way Deleuze understands subjectivity. According to him the virtual/actual distinction is first and foremost about individuation, and about the process of becomings-individuals. Actual individuals Aincorporate⁵ the **events** that they have always been (virtually). This, I think, is the sense of Joe Bousquet's beautiful remark -quoted several times by Deleuze - that "my wound existed before me, I was born to embody it"; or, of the Stoic saying: "Become worthy of what happens to you"; (LS p.148; 174) or, of Nietzsche's saying: "Affirm, joyfully, every 'It was'".

⁵ The turbulence is the analogue of Deleuze's "intensity", the bird's flight is the analogue of thinking as Deleuze understands it. Ideas would be the constitutive elements of this thinking "in-flight".

Human subjects, as acting, hoping and fearing individuals, inhabit the realm of actuality. Yet, they are constantly assailed by the turbulence of passions they encounter inside and outside themselves. And, consciously or unconsciously, they create, and re-create themselves: mostly, in order to ward off the chaos confronting them. So, for the most part, their "care of the soul" consists of diffusing, or of selecting out, those forces which threaten them the most. In this way they become more and more "actual", and in the process lose more and more of their freedom. In extreme cases they may even lose the sense of their own lives.

The true artist of the self, by contrast - the genealogist/symptomalogist - becomes attentive to the rhythm of intensities it experiences, especially in moments when the event makes a sign to it. It draws up a virtual diagram about the event in which it is happening, and, having drawn the diagram, it affirms it. To be free, Spinoza says, is not the capacity to choose this or that actual outcome that might follow the present moment. Rather, it is the capacity to affirm what is essential (virtual) in that moment. And, what is "essential", so Nietzsche and Deleuze tell us, is the mobile qualitatively differential forces (Will(s) to Power) which make us (and re-make us) - behind our backs - what we are. Consequently, the subjectivities are more or less fragile, more or less robust, individualities, swarming with (virtual) intensities.

In conclusion, transcendental empiricism is a logic of sense, a logic of sensations, and an ethics of the event. Its immediate, and "worthy", opponent is the Kantian transcendental philosophy. It is constructed on a plane of immanence which, if it can be thought at all, can be thought as a re-thinking of Kantianism with the help of Bergsonism, Spinozism, and Nietzscheanism. Its conceptual persona is the philosopher artist. And, its central concepts are: "immanence of the virtual in the actual", "event", "affirmation", "difference in itself", "multiplicity" "singularity", and "the fractured I". It is not superior either to art or to science. In fact, it constantly "intersects" (W.Ph. p.162; 153) with both. Its critique of Kantianism, and of its modern variants, cannot be absolute. But, with its distinction between the virtual - what goes on "in-between" - and the actual - what results - it does offer a workable alternative to the image of thought still dominant in philosophy. As a philosophy of pure immanence, it proposes a new alliance between ontology, aesthetics, and ethics.

⁶ In his *Nietzsche and Philosophy* Deleuze makes an explicit link between Nietzsche's Will to power and transcendental empiricism: The will to power is a good principle, if it reconciles empiricism with principles, if it constitutes a superior empiricism, this is because it is an essentially **plastic** principle that is no wider than what it conditions, that changes itself with the conditioned and determines itself in each along with what it determines (N.Ph., p.50; 57).

Works by Deleuze Cited

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- 3) *Difference et repetition*, PUF, 1968. *Difference and Repetition*: Columbia U. Press, 1994.
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- 5) [with F. Guattari] *Mille plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, Minuit, 1980. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, U.of Minnesota Press, 1986.
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