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Lecture 1: Introduction to the Course

Introduction

Today, I want to just introduce Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, and discuss what I take to be the central theme of the book. As it's a complex work, we will not be looking at the whole book. This term, we will look at chapter one, exploring the question of how we should characterise the concept of difference. I'm thinking that for the second term, we will skip chapter two of *Difference and Repetition*, and move straight to chapters three and four, where Deleuze sets out in detail his objections to the classical model of philosophy, and his alternative to conceptual thinking, based on the notion of the Idea. Deleuze is very much a French philosopher, and his approach to philosophy follows a long tradition of what we might call creative commentary, so for much of the time, we won't actually be reading *Difference and Repetition* itself, but looking at some of the sources Deleuze uses to develop his argument. These sources include Aristotle, Spinoza, Descartes, Nietzsche and Plato, and we will be reading them both for their own sake, and to illuminate Deleuze's own position (in this regard, you are welcome to concentrate on one of these ancillary figures when it comes to writing essays if you'd like, but check with me first).

As well as *Difference and Repetition* involving a complex dialogue between a number of interlocutors, it engages with several different philosophical problems simultaneously, and on this course, we are just going to be tracing some of these problems out. In this respect, Deleuze takes up from Descartes a useful distinction in chapter four between completeness and wholeness. As is well known, Descartes claims that the mind and the body are separate substances, as we can understand each without the other (it is within God's power to create a body without a soul, and vice versa). To this extent, for Descartes, mind and body are complete substances (comprehensible in terms of their nature alone). They are not, however, whole substances, because each in turn is only a part of another being, the human being (although the mind is complete, we cannot remove 'mind' from a human being without changing its nature). Even though they are both complete in themselves, they are not whole in themselves.

So the same could be said of the reading of *Difference and Repetition* that I am going to provide on this course. What I want to do is provide a complete reading of the text, that is, a reading that provides a logical and coherent view of what Deleuze is attempting to do in *Difference and Repetition*. It will not be a reading of the text as a whole, however, as there are simply too many issues to be addressed in a course of this length. In particular, we won't be looking in detail at many of the engagements with aesthetics (mainly literary) that Deleuze develops throughout the text (unfortunately). I'm hoping that by the end of the course you will be in a position to trace some of these connections yourself.

The Problem of Method

So what is the central problem we are going to be dealing with? Well, I think, as with most continental philosophy, the key question when it comes to understanding Deleuze is the question of what it is to think. Now, traditionally, the project of philosophical thinking has involved moving from

one proposition to another according to a set of formal rules. For instance, from a set of propositions that are absolutely certain to further propositions that tell us something about the world. Descartes describes this method as follows:

> The whole method consists entirely in the ordering and arranging of the objects on which we must concentrate our mind's eye if we are to discover some truth. We shall be following this method exactly if we first reduce complicated and obscure propositions step by step to simpler ones, and then, starting with the intuition of the simplest ones of all, try to ascend through the same steps to a knowledge of all the rest. (Descartes, Rules for the Direction of the Mind, Rule five)

Descartes' point is therefore that when we encounter a complex problem, we should break it down into its constituent elements (analysis), before reconstructing it by the application of simple but rigorous rules (synthesis). Descartes was a mathematician, and the approach that he is suggesting here is one that we might apply find in mathematics, most notably in geometry, but it is also an approach that we find in philosophy, in the work of, for instance, Spinoza or Aristotle (or, with some differences that we will see later in the course), in the work of Hegel. So if we approach philosophy in this way, then what kind of account of the world are we expecting to develop?

First, as Descartes shows, we are searching for certain, or apodictic principles. That's why, in geometry, for instance, a great deal of effort is expended on showing that the axioms of our theory are correct (Descartes' clear and distinct ideas – the *cogito*)

Second, and following from this, we are going to be interested ultimately, not in the method itself, or the process of learning, but rather in the knowledge that the method generates.

Third, on this basis, our account of the world is going to be propositional, that is, it is going to be a series of interrelated propositions made up of subjects and predicates. We are also going to be concerned fundamentally with whether these propositions are true or false. These will be the main axes by which we justify our account.

Finally, the truth or falsity of these propositions is going to be assessed by the adequacy of these propositions – how well they correspond with the way the world is. In turn, this implies that the structure of the world will in some way parallel the structure of our thinking. It will be made up of substances and properties.

There are lots of other implications of the standard model of philosophical enquiry, of course, but for today, I just want to stick with these. Now, the problem with this approach emerges when we look at how we formulate problems. Descartes puts forward his approach as follows:

> If we perfectly understand a problem we must abstract it from every superfluous conception, reduce it to its simplest terms, and, by means of an enumeration, divide it up into the smallest parts possible. (Rule 13)

The first thing we need to do is break down a given problem, and recognise those features of it that are important, and those that are not. The difficulty is that remaining on the level of propositions, on this simple model, does not give us any criteria about how to divide up the problem.

The difficulty is that we cannot use truth (which is what we have taken to be the essential property of propositions) to determine what is important, as both important and unimportant truths are just as true as each other.

We might want to say that we could use similarity to divide up the problem, but the difficulty is that everything is like everything else in some respect, and unlike it in another. What we need are the important similarities between things, events, states of affairs, etc. in order to organise things, but importance is precisely what we haven't determined.

As we will see next week, this problem of determining which are the singular points is not simply restricted to philosophy. Science, for instance, produces laws showing that there is a correlation between the variation in several quantities (the relation between mass, distance, and gravitational force, for instance). In order to do so, we need to determine sets of bodies and situations which are similar to one another. The difficulty is that everything is like everything else in some respect and unlike it in other respects. What is central to, for instance, Newton's discovery of the laws of gravitation, is not that he recognised gravity existed (it's of course obvious that bodies fall to the ground), but rather that he constituted a set of terms and properties that would explain this fact. That is, he *created* concepts by relating the singular likenesses to one another.

We can make a related point when it comes to the contraction of habits. We contract a habit by experiencing the similar situations, but an event we experience will be similar to several moments in our past. To quote Bergson,

> A foreign word, from a foreign language, uttered in my hearing, may make me think of that language in general or of a voice which once pronounced it in a certain way...[these two associations] answer to two different mental *dispositions*, to two distinct degrees of tension in memory; in the latter case they are nearer to the pure image, in the former, they are more disposed toward immediate response, that is to say, to action. (MM 169)

Habit, in this instance, seems to rely on something other than the actual experiences themselves.

Deleuze's claim will be that Descartes' method only comes into play once we have determined what the structure and the organisation of the problem is, but that the real work of solving a problem is precisely this prior stage of determining what the connections are between ideas, and separating the superfluous from the essential. This latter part of learning, or solving problems is what is truly creative. Once we have determined that the important (or in Deleuze's terms, singular) points of a problem are, all we need to do, as Descartes suggests, is simply to rearrange the elements that compose it. Deleuze instead is interested in the genesis of these elements, or what lies behind our representation of a problem. If Descartes' model of the problem comes from geometry, we can see what might be an alternative model by looking at an example of learning that comes from Bergson (it's quite long):

> In vain, we shall be told, you claim to go beyond intelligence : how can you do that except by intelligence? All that is clear in your consciousness is intelligence. You are inside your own thought; you cannot get out of it. Say, if you like, that the intellect is capable of progress, that it will see more and more clearly into a greater and greater number of things ; but do not speak of engendering it, for it is with your intellect itself that you would have to do the work.

> The objection presents itself naturally to the mind. But the same reasoning would prove also the impossibility of acquiring any new habit. It is of the essence of reasoning to shut us up in the circle of the given. But action breaks the circle. If we had never seen a man swim, we might say that swimming is an impossible thing, in as much as, to learn to swim, we must begin by holding ourselves up in the water and, consequently, already know how to swim. Reasoning, in fact, always nails us down to the solid ground. But if, quite simply, I throw myself into the water without fear, I may keep myself up well enough at first by merely struggling, and gradually adapt myself to the new environment : I shall thus have learnt to swim. So, in theory, there is a kind of absurdity in trying to know otherwise than by intelligence; but if the risk be frankly accepted, action will perhaps cut the knot that reasoning has tied and will not unloose.
> …
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> Thousands and thousands of variations on the theme of walking will never yield a rule for swimming: come, enter the water, and when you know how to swim, you will understand how the mechanism of swimming is connected with that of walking. Swimming is an extension of walking, but walking would never have pushed you on to swimming. So you may speculate as intelligently as you will on the mechanism of intelligence; you will never, by this method, succeed in going beyond it. You may get something more complex, but not something higher nor even something different. You must take things by storm : you must thrust intelligence outside itself by an act of will. (Bergson, Creative Evolution)

So what is Bergson's point with this example? Well, his claim is that when we look at broader examples of problem solving, it becomes clear that what is important is not the elements that make up the problem (the different habits we already have before learning to swim, or the basic propositions that we use to characterize the problem), but rather the moment at which these elements are constituted, related to one another, and brought to bear on the problem. This moment isn't itself a habit, or a proposition (if it were, we would have an infinite regress), but is the creative moment that allows us to relate habits or to formulate our representation of the problem.

Essentially, therefore, Deleuze is interested in the non-propositional, and non-representational moment that precedes propositions and representations. In terms of analytic philosophy, this would be a move from 'knowing that' to 'knowing how'. Now, the claim that Deleuze wants to trace out is that this move cannot just be a surface change in our theory of knowledge. As I said earlier, for Descartes, his theory of knowledge implied a certain theory of metaphysics. That is, implicit in taking the proposition as the key to our understanding of the world was the parallel claim that the world had a similar structure to that of the proposition (substances and properties). Now, if we are to take seriously the claim that we do not relate to the world solely through propositions, we also have to take seriously the claim that this non-propositional form of knowing calls for a non substance based metaphysics that allows us to explain *how* our relation to the world is possible. This will involve four claims to parallel those of Descartes:

First, we won't be interested in absolutely certain principles or propositions. Rather, we are interested in what underlies those propositions. Deleuze will also claim that as we are interested in a creative moment, there will be different ways of formulating problems (although some will be better than others).

Second, and following from this, we are not going to be interested in propositions (or knowledge), but in the process of learning itself. That is, we will be interested in the process of developing representations that are adequate to problems.

Third, we are not going to be determining the success of solutions on the basis of truth and falsity, but on the basis of adequacy/inadequacy (how effectively one creatively applies prior experience to present situations).

Finally, rather than static truths, we are going to be interested in processes.

In terms of the course, we will (hopefully) be looking at three chapters of *Difference and Repetition*. In the first term, we'll go through the introduction and chapter one, which sets out the kind of conceptual moves we need to make in order to set out a metaphysics not based on propositions. In the second, we'll look at chapters three and four. Chapter three sets out Deleuze's detailed criticisms of traditional theories of knowledge, while chapter four sets out his alternative to the proposition: the Idea. By the end of the course, you should, therefore, have a good sense of how Deleuze believes we are able to characterise the non-representational moment of thinking, as well as a sense for how his philosophy fits in to the broader tradition of attempts to think beyond formalism.