

Lecture 17 – Deleuze and Freud, Part One

Introduction

For the final two weeks of this term, I want to look at with Deleuze's reaction to Freud's work, particularly *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Now, as I said last week, Deleuze's reaction to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is ambivalent, as on the one hand, Freud recognises both that we need a transcendental account of repetition, and that a transcendental account cannot be given in terms of representations. Repetition escapes from representation. In this regard, Freud sets out what we might call a transcendental empiricist account of repetition, much as Deleuze does. As we saw last week, however, the ground of this transcendental empiricist account is, in the final analysis, a principle of inertia, rather than an intensive field of difference, as we find in Deleuze's metaphysics. Today, I want to look at Deleuze's formulation of this criticism in regard to two sections of *Difference and Repetition*. First, I want to look at Deleuze's critique of Freud as it appears in the introduction. It is here that Deleuze highlights the fact that what Freud has produced is an account of the transcendental conditions of repetition. Second, I want to look at Deleuze's discussion of the two kinds of death to see how these differ from the death instinct itself.

Two Forms of Repetition

As we saw last term, the aim of the introduction was to show that the concept of repetition could not be adequately captured within a conceptual schema. Repetition is commonly seen as 'difference without concept' (DR 30), as in the case of Kant's incongruent counterparts, which can only be distinguished from one another by their reference to a spatial (and hence non-conceptual) milieu. As we saw last week, Freud presents a number of cases of repetition that fall outside of our conceptual understanding: war trauma, the fort-da game, the repeating of the past by the patient, and the case of fate that we find in our lives. Now, while (many of) these cases may be explicable in terms of the pleasure principle, Freud notes that at the very least, the compulsion to repeat seems to be underdetermined by it. Or this reason, Freud introduces the theory of the death drive in order to explain why we feel compelled to manifest this surface compulsion. Now, Deleuze's question in this regard is as follows:

Do the disguises found in the work of dreams or symptoms – condensation, displacement, dramatisation – rediscover while attenuating a bare, brute repetition (repetition of the Same)? (DR 18-19)

That is, given that we need to find a foundation for repetition, is this foundation going to be a kind of repetition which is different in kind from empirical repetition? A foundation for repetition that simply rests on another bare repetition will simply be inadequate, as rather than explaining repetition, it will presuppose it. I hinted last week that Deleuze's claim is going to be that underlying repetition for Freud is a material repetition, rather than a spiritual repetition, and indeed this is the case:

Even beyond the pleasure principle, the form of a bare repetition persists, since Freud interprets the death instinct as a tendency to return to the state of inanimate matter, one which upholds the model of a wholly physical or material repetition. (DR 19)

Now, what is interesting about this claim is that Deleuze is not here rejecting the death instinct, but rather claiming that the error is with Freud's interpretation of it. I want to come back to this next week, when we look at Deleuze's positive interpretation, but for now, we can note that Deleuze claims that there are two reasons why Freud's interpretation fails:

- (1) 'the persistence of a dualistic and conflictual model which inspired the whole theory of drives'
- (2) 'the material model which presided over the whole theory of repetition.' (DR 137)

I want to now go through these two problems before looking at Deleuze's own account of death.

First, the persistence of a dualistic model. In *the Ego and the Id*, Freud gives the following summary of the relation between the sexual drives and the death drive:

On this view, we need to distinguish two types of drives, one of which – the sexual drives, or Eros – is far more conspicuous, and far more accessible to our knowledge and understanding. It includes not only the uninhibited sexual drive itself and the goal-inhibited and hence sublimated drive-impulses deriving from it, but also the self-preservation drive that we perforce ascribe to the ego, and that at the very outset of our psychoanalytical work we had good reason to regard as contrasting sharply with the sexual object-drives. ... On the basis of theoretical considerations underpinned by biology, we posited a death drive charged with the task of causing animate organisms to revert to an inanimate state, whereas Eros pursues the goal of maximizing the complexity of life – and thereby of course preserving it – by an ever more catholic combination of the particles into which living matter had been fragmented...According to this view, the emergence of life is therefore the cause both of the urge to carry on living and, simultaneously, of the urge for death, while life itself is a battle and constant compromise between these two urges. Considered thus, the question as to the origin of life remains a cosmological one, while the question as to the purpose and intention of life is answered in dualistic terms. (BPP 130-1)

Now, the difficulty with the notion of opposition, as we saw last term, is that it operates according to an overarching identity. This is problematic if we are going to explain the transcendental conditions of the operation of the pleasure principle, as if such a transcendental account is going to be of explanatory value, it cannot simply presuppose elements we find already within the pleasure principle, such as the notion of force. The fact that the death drive is seen as an active force in opposition to the sexual drives can be seen in statements such as the following:

...in certain lower animals death coincides with the act of procreation. Reproduction is the cause of these creatures' death in the sense that the death drive can effect its aims without let or hindrance once Eros has been removed from the picture through the act of gratification. (BPP 137)

Deleuze and Guattari in *The Anti-Oedipus* present the following alternative account, which is already at work in *Difference and Repetition*:

It is a question of different parts of the machine, different and coexisting, different in their very coexistence. Hence it is absurd to speak of a death desire that would presumably be in qualitative opposition to the life desires. Death is not desired, there is only death that desires, by virtue of the body without organs or the immobile motor, and there is also life that desires, by virtue of the working organs. There we do not have two desires but two parts, two kinds of desiring-machine parts, in the dispersion of the machine itself. (AO 329)

Now, this description is framed through terminology such as the body without organs, but we can still see the fundamental kind of structure that we found in the three syntheses of time. Just as habit and memory were not opposed to one another, but simply differed from one another (and indeed functioned together), the life drive and the death drive are moments of the same system that operate in fundamentally different manners. In both cases, it's also important to note that we do not have drives, or principles which operate on energy (desires), but rather the movement of desire itself is a manifestation of energy. A properly transcendental account of the death drive cannot oppose it to life drives, therefore, as such an opposition posits them as separate (or separable) from one another, and as structurally similar.

The second problem is the material model at the heart of Freud's theory. At base, Freud's explanation of the compulsion to repeat is in terms of a compulsion to return, which, due to the recapitulation theory of embryology, is a compulsion to return to the earliest stages of life, and beyond this, to the ground of life itself, the inorganic. What Freud is therefore proposing is something like an entropic principle for life. Life wants to return to the lowest possible energy state. Now, we have already looked at the influence of Bergson on Deleuze to some extent, and so I just want to give a brief indication of Bergson's conception of life:

Let us imagine a vessel full of steam at a high pressure, and here and there in its sides a crack through which the steam is escaping in a jet. The steam thrown into the air is nearly all condensed, and this fall represents a loss of something, an interruption, a deficit. But a small part of the jet of steam subsists, uncondensed, for some seconds; it is making an effort to raise drops which are falling; it succeeds at most in retarding their fall. (*Creative Evolution*, 247)

The Bergsonian conception is, therefore, one of life as a force which works against the tendency of the inorganic to fall back into a low energy state, even if this process can only delay the inevitable return. Deleuze will, in fact, push this point further, and argue that the notion of entropy emerges through a transcendental illusion – we tend to see the world in terms of extension, and this is a necessary condition for the formulation of the second law of thermodynamics.

So this brings us to the question of whether Freud's assumption of the death instinct as a 'material repetition' is correct. We can note three factors have to be combined in his explanation. First, it has to be the case that there is a distinct separation between the principles of the life drives and the death drive. Second, it is going to be the case that the death drive is the first of the drives

which are developed by the organism. Finally, it is going to be the case that the death drive, as it originates from the leap from inorganic to organic, will be present in all life.

Following Keith Ansell Pearson, I want to look at some of the final sections of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and their relation to biology. In part VI, Freud talks about the early stages of life, and introduces the biologist August Weismann into the discussion, claiming that 'what is truly fascinating here is the unexpected similarity to the view that we arrived at by such a very different route.' (BPP, 85) Simply put, Weismann's view of the organism divides it into two parts, soma cells and germ cells. Weismann's central claim arises from the fact that sperm and egg cells divided differently from cells in the rest of the body. Weismann's argument was that whereas the role of soma-cells was to perform one of many functions within the body (for which they contained only the information necessary for that function), the role of germ cells was solely to produce replacements of the organism itself. Thus, there is a division of labour between different cells within the organism. Now, this explains, for instance, why cutting the tail off a rat does not lead to a rat that in turn breeds tailless rats, as the germ cells and the soma cells develop in different directions too early for changes in the structure of the organism to affect the germ line (an experimental puzzle for other theories of inheritance, such as Lamarck's). As such, Weismann's model is roughly the same, structurally, as we find in modern genetics.

We can see that this model relates to Freud's in that the organism is governed by two separate principles, as is made explicit by Weismann's account of the necessity of death of the organism:

Let us imagine that one of the higher animals became immortal; it then becomes perfectly obvious it would cease to be of value to the species to which it belonged. Suppose that such an immortal individual could escape all fatal accidents, through infinite time – a supposition which is of course hardly conceivable. The individual would be nevertheless unable to avoid, from time to time, slight injuries to one or another part of its body. The injured parts could not retain their former integrity, and thus the longer the individual lived, and the less perfectly would it fulfil the purpose of its species. Individuals are injured by the operation of external forces, and for this reason alone it is necessary that new and perfect individuals should continually arise to take their place, and this necessity would remain even if the individual possessed the power of living eternally.

From this follows, on the one hand, the necessity of reproduction, and, on the other, the utility of death. (Weismann, *Essays upon Heredity*, 23-4)

In multicellular organisms, death is a necessary and natural part of the process of living, as is a drive to reproduce. In this sense, therefore, we can find in higher organisms both a death drive, and life drives. The important question is one of priority, however, which comes first, the drive to life, or that to death? Here we encounter the fundamental limitation of Freud's account, as it is simply not the case that simple life, such as the amoeba, has an inherent tendency to its own destruction. In fact, provided conditions are right, an amoeba would carry on living forever, and reproduce through division, whereby its own existence is multiplied, rather than replaced. In unicellular organisms, we do not have the division of labour between germ cells and soma cells, and so it is not the case that the organism can degenerate through the loss of some of its cells, but not others. The utility of death

is to allow the germ cells to perpetuate themselves at the expense of the soma cells, but if we return to a point prior to this division, then there simply is only one type of cell, and so death has no utility for the organism:

Although they are certainly destroyed by other animals, there is nothing comparable to that deterioration of the body which takes place in the higher organisms. Unicellular animals are too simply constructed for this to be possible. If an infusorian is injured by the loss of some part of its body, it may often recover its former integrity, but if the injury is too great, it dies. The alternative is always either perfect integrity or complete destruction.

We may now leave this part of the subject, for it is obvious that normal death, that is to say, death which arises from internal causes, is an impossibility among these lower organisms. (EH, 27)

This, therefore, presents a problem for Freud, in that it does not appear to be the case that the earliest forms of life do, in fact, exhibit the propensity to death that Freud has posited of them. Further, it is the case that for Weismann, even in higher organisms, the death of the soma-cells only exists to make possible the perpetuation of the germ cells. This perpetuation has to be, on Freud's reading, simply an infinite deferral of death, an infinite extension of the circuit of the organism's return to the inorganic. Returning to the first of these points, Freud's only response is to claim that the death drive is merely implicit in lower life:

The primitive structure of these organisms may conceal from us certain features which, though present in them too, are actually *observable* only in the higher animals, where they have found morphological expression. (BPP 88)

Given the nature of simple organic life, it seems difficult to align Freud's claim that life is entropic with the basic facts of biology. In fact, it appears to be the case that a drive to preservation precedes the death drive. If that is the case, then Freud's model becomes problematic.

Two notions of Death

How do we reconcile this claim with the fact that Deleuze maintains the principle of the death drive? Well, for Deleuze, the retention of the death drive will be premised on a reinterpretation of what death amounts to. For Freud, death is understood in terms of a material repetition. Deleuze is instead going to understand death in terms of the other category of repetition, spiritual repetition.

In fact, Deleuze here introduces the same distinction that has been running through chapter two between active synthesis and passive synthesis. Now, the parallel isn't perfect here, but death within the Freudian model is a principle that operates in relation to a synthesis of undifferentiated elements. It comes into play at the point at which these elements become organised as something separate from them and active in its own right (it is a principle over and above that which it is a principle of). The death drive in Freud's terms thus operates therefore according to an active

synthesis. As with Deleuze's discussions throughout this chapter, we will find that as well as the active synthesis, there is a passive synthesis that underlies it. Thus, Deleuze writes as follows:

Blanchot rightly suggests that death has two aspects. One is personal, concerning the I or the ego, something which I can encounter in a struggle or meet at a limit, or in any case, encounter in a present which causes everything to pass. The other is strangely impersonal, with no relation to "me", neither present nor past but always coming, the source of an incessant multiple adventure in a persistent question. (DR138)

Freud's model is clearly closer to the first of these forms of death, although I think it is somewhat broader than Freud's own case. This first model of death is not simply 'the model of an indifferent inanimate matter to which the living would return.' (DR 137), and there is an open question of whether Deleuze is here making a deeper point about 'this death [that] always comes from without, even at the moment when it constitutes the most personal possibility, from the past, even at the moment when it is most present.' (DR 138) Whereas the death drive appears to be an impersonal instinct that has merely an 'extrinsic, scientific and objective definition,' (DR 137) the personal nature of death seems to relate it more to something like Hegel's *Phenomenology*. In the Master-slave dialectic, Hegel claims that it is the experience of death that allows us to develop an understanding of ourselves freed from inessential determinations:

For this consciousness has been fearful, not of this or that particular thing or just at odd moments, but its whole being has been seized with dread; for it has experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord. In that experience, it has been quite unmanned, has trembled in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations. But this pure universal movement, the absolute melting away of everything stable, is the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, *pure being-for-self*, which consequently is *implicit* in this consciousness. (Hegel, *Phen Sp*, §194)

Deleuze would be claiming that this is once again a surface manifestation of the true nature of death. This might also be a criticism of Heidegger's notion of *being towards death*, although Deleuze's position on this point is rather ambiguous.

So what is the true nature of death? Well, we saw a couple of weeks ago, that the third synthesis of time in the case of *Zarathustra* was represented by Zarathustra's death. Deleuze's discussion of Freud also sees death as 'a pure form – the empty form of time.' (DR 137) Death therefore refers us to the field of intensities of chapter one, it is 'the state of free differences when they are no longer subject to the form imposed upon them by an I or an ego.' (DR 138) So, the real notion of death is in fact the collapse of a given structure in the face of a some kind of pure becoming. In this sense, death is a perpetual drive that destabilises identities, and makes transition possible:

The experience of death is the most common of occurrences in the unconscious, precisely because it occurs in life and for life, in every passage or becoming, in every intensity as passage or becoming. (AO 330)

In this sense, life is characterised by death, to the extent that it is run through with experiences which destabilise the structure of the organism, and the identity of the ego. There is, therefore, for Deleuze, something equivalent to the death drive, but this does not operate according to an entropic principle in the way that we find in Freud's model. Structures are not destabilised through a drive to return to a state where there is no energy in the system, but rather through the emergence of intensities into the field of representation. In this sense, the death drive does not operate according to a principle, but simply is the manifestation of intensive difference into the realm of the unconscious ('this energy does not serve Thanatos, it constitutes him' [DR 139]). This leads to a reversal of our understanding of death. Since intensive death is a part of life (the destabilising of identities), our 'death' in this sense is coextensive with life:

'it finally ceases to die since it ends up dying, in the reality of a last instant that fixes it in this way as an *I*, all the while undoing the intensity, carrying it back to the zero that envelops it.'
(AO 330-1)

Conclusion

Deleuze's interpretation of the death drive is therefore one that replaces the fundamentally entropic model that we find in Freud's interpretation with one that opens up onto the univocal ontology that we looked at last term. So the final question is, why do we repeat that which we cannot represent? Earlier, Deleuze has stated that 'the present is the repeater, the past is repetition itself, and the future is that which is repeated.' (DR 117) It is therefore the field of intensive difference which expresses itself in the present. Now, as this is different in kind from representation, it cannot occur within the field of representation as it is in itself. In this sense, the intensities which constitute us express themselves throughout our lives in a variety of contexts 'in disguise.' In this sense, when we are dealing with intensive difference, 'the path it traces is invisible and becomes visible only in reverse, to the extent that it is travelled over and covered by the phenomena it induces in the system.' (DR 146)

This brings us on to the theme of the dark precursor, which hopefully we will talk about next week. I also want to talk about how this understanding of the death drive as intensive plays through Deleuze's reinterpretation of Freud's essay, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in other words, how the third synthesis relates to the first two syntheses of habit and memory within Freud's model of the psychic apparatus.