

Lecture 18 – Freud and Deleuze, Part Two

Introduction

Last week, we looked at Deleuze's analysis of the death drive, and his attempts to reinterpret this drive in line with his own philosophy of intensive difference. In order to do this, Freud associated death not with the entropic return to a material state, as we found in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, but with the third synthesis of time (the pure and empty form of time), and consequently, with the Eternal Return. This week, I want to go through Deleuze's analysis of the structure of Freud's account more generally. As we shall see, Deleuze's analysis of Freud mirrors his own analysis of the structure of time, apart from the final synthesis, and there are parallels to both the notions of active and passive synthesis. In this way, we will find that we have two relations to the world that operate in parallel, the first in terms of actual and representational structures, but also a second, which is non-representational, and governed by 'virtual' objects, just as we had two presents in the first account of time, the actual present, and the virtual present of the past.

The Pleasure Principle

The first thing to note about Deleuze's characterisation of Freud's project is that he claims that the concern of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is not 'the exceptions to this principle, but rather to determine the conditions under which pleasure effectively becomes a principle.' (DR 120) I bring this up because this highlights an important point about Deleuze's own project. Deleuze is signalling that Freud's project, like his own, is a transcendental project, but also that such a project is not concerned with 'demolishing' the self, but rather with determining the conditions under which the self emerges. So what Deleuze is giving us is a critique of representation in the Kantian sense, that is, an attempt to determine the limits of representation, rather than to overturn it. As we saw a few weeks ago, Freud defined pleasure as the reduction in excitation of the psychic apparatus. Now, prior to the organising principle of the ego, Deleuze argues that we can see 'biopsychical life' as 'a field of individuation in which differences in intensity are distributed here and there [*Ça et là*] in the form of excitations.' (DR 119) Within such biopsychical life, we will, of course, have variations in the level of excitation of the system at various points and at various moments. In this sense, pleasure, as a process, will be operative within the system (the level of excitation will sometimes drop). In this context, Deleuze makes a rather swift (and problematic in English or German) linguistic argument to equate the 'here and there [*Ça et là*]' of biopsychical life with Freud's id [*Ça*]. Now, in spite of the problematic nature of the argument, it does seem like a reasonable equation, and it allows us to raise the key question of this section, which is, how does pleasure cease to be a process, in order to become a principle that organises the life of the unconscious? Now, an answer such as 'pleasure is pleasing' is tautologous, and misses the point. If we try, as Freud has, to give an account of pleasure that does not already presuppose the existence of a subject who values it, then we have to be able to account for how his value gets attached to this particular biological process in the first place. That is, how a (value neutral) process becomes a principle of organisation and action.

Deleuze points out that if pleasure is going to become a principle, there cannot simply be a free flow of excitations. There needs to be some process of binding or annexation of excitation so that excitations can have 'systematic resolution,' rather than arbitrarily traversing the life of the organism. So some kind of integration, or organisation is necessary for us to be able to relate pleasure to a principle. Freud himself makes this point in a passage that we have already looked at:

As the drive-impulses all act on our unconscious systems, it is scarcely a new departure to assert that they follow the primary process, and it is also no very great step to identify the primary psychic process with Breuer's 'free-flowing' cathexis, and the secondary one with his 'annexed' or 'tonic' cathexis. This would then mean that it was the task of the higher echelons of the psychic apparatus to annex excitations originating from the drives and reaching it via the primary process. Any failure of this annexion process would bring about a dysfunction analogous to traumatic neurosis. Only when the annexion has taken place would the pleasure principle (or, once the latter has been duly modified, the reality principle) be able to assert its dominion unhindered. In the meantime, however, the psychic apparatus's other task of controlling or annexing the excitation would be very much to the fore – not, it is true, in opposition to the pleasure principle, but independently of it, and to some extent quite heedless of it. (BPP 74-5)

The pleasure principle therefore rests on the integration of excitations that are originally unbound. It's helpful to here note that there are parallels with the first synthesis of time. There, we were dealing with a flux of experience that needed to be contracted into an organised flow of anticipations. In that case, we could not rely on the notion of the self, as the synthesis was precisely what constituted the self. Here, in a similar manner, we have a synthesis not performed by a subject, a passive synthesis, as we are dealing with processes of 'biopsychical life' before it has become a system capable of supporting a unified self. Furthermore, Deleuze claims that this process is actually constitutive of a subject:

'an animal forms an eye for itself by causing scattered and diffuse luminous excitations to be reproduced on a privileged surface of its body. The eye binds light, it is itself a bound light.'
(DR 120)

Deleuze's point, I think, is also that as the self that is constituted by the integration or contraction of excitations, it simply *is* these excitations. This gives us the reason why Deleuze calls these contracting egos 'narcissistic'. What they relate to is, in a sense, themselves, or an image of themselves, in the form of the excitations that they bind. The movement of binding therefore finds satisfaction in a narcissistic relation to its own image (this has some parallels, I think, with Lacan's 'mirror stage'). In this sense, the fact that the egos constituted by the binding process are narcissistic parallels the way in which the selves that were contracted habits in the first synthesis of time related not to objects, but to signs. So just as I said that a heartbeat appears as a sign in our world that doesn't resemble the movement of the heart itself, the binding of excitations constitutes egos that do not relate directly to objects, but to images of themselves.

Just as we found with the notion of habit, therefore, we have a series of reversals in our understanding of binding/habit and pleasure. It is not the case that pleasure gives rise to habit, therefore, in the sense that we might talk of repeating something enjoyable, but rather it is the existence of habits that lead to pleasure. In the discussion of habit, Deleuze claimed that habit was

only conceived of as reproduction when it was incorporated into a mathematicised ‘temporal space’ by the imagination. Similarly here, it is only by relating pleasure to the past and the future, and instituting the pleasure principle that we are able to see pleasure as operating prior to habit. That is, by talking about ‘pleasure in general’, we introduce the ‘idea of pleasure.’ Once pleasure is not related to a passive synthesis, but is seen as organised in relation to a principle, we have an active synthesis that relates to an ego. The result of this is that the pleasure principle will now be seen as primary, as without some kind of external organising principle, it is impossible to explain how indifferent processes can form a coherent system, and how individual excitations can be related to one another (how habits are formed). One final thing to note is that the objects that binding and the pleasure principle relate to are different. Binding operates on free excitations in order to enable the pleasure principle to relate them together into a system.

We can here return to the question of the compulsion to repeat. When we looked at the *fort-da* game, the attempt to master an excitation was an explanation that Freud looked at, but ultimately rejected. That is, Freud considered that the child may throw the spindle away and then recover it in order to master the trauma of being separated from its mother. As Deleuze writes, ‘binding syntheses cannot be explained by the intention or the effort to *master* and excitation, even though it may have that effect.’ (DR 121) Now such an explanation rests on a conflations of the two levels of analysis. To the extent that binding brings an excitation within the domain of the pleasure principle, the process of binding (the passive synthesis) *is* a form of mastery. But insofar as we remain on this level, we do not have anything like an intention, or an effort to master. These notions only come into play when we are dealing with active syntheses, and, I’m guessing, the mathematical conception of time.

The Second Synthesis

Is the model of the psyche as it stands adequate? At present, passive synthesis involves the binding of excitations that occur within the biopsychical system. Now, clearly pleasure does operate within this system, but it is also the case that ‘biopsychical systems’ have some kind of relation to an outside. As Deleuze puts it, ‘A child who begins to walk does not only bind excitations in a passive synthesis, even supposing these were endogenous excitations born of its own movements. No one has ever walked endogenously.’ (DR 123) That is, our actions have an object. Now, as we might expect, given the account of the three syntheses of time, this second stage, the relation of the biopsychical system to a world of objects, is going to involve two different syntheses, an active and a passive synthesis. As the active synthesis is the most straightforward, I will begin with that.

We can start by recalling one of the central axioms of Kant’s model of active synthesis, which was that the subject made the object possible, and *vice versa*. In Kant is right about the interdependence of subjects and objects (and Deleuze takes him to be right, at least at the level of representation), then a relation to an object is going to require a subject that relates to it. In this sense, Deleuze writes the following:

Active synthesis is defined by a test of reality in an ‘objectal’ relation, and it is precisely according to the reality principle that the ‘ego’ tends to ‘be activated’, to be actively unified, to unite all its small composing and contemplative passive egos, to be topologically distinguished from the Id. (DR 122)

If we recall that pleasure relates to individual bindings, or drives within the unconscious, then it becomes apparent that the organism cannot simply function according to the pleasure principle alone. Sometimes one drive may seek satisfaction in a way which threatens the integrity of the organism as a whole. As we saw a couple of weeks ago, Freud therefore supplements the pleasure principle with the reality principle, which overrides the interests of the particular satisfaction of drives in favour of the pleasure (and survival) of the organism as a whole:

We know that the pleasure principle belongs to a primary operational level of the psychic apparatus, and that so far as self-preservation is concerned it is never anything but useless, indeed highly dangerous, given the challenges posed by the external world. Thanks to the influence of the ego's self-preservation drive it is displaced by the *reality principle*, which, without abandoning the aim of ultimately achieving pleasure, none the less demands and procures the postponement of gratification, the rejection of sundry opportunities for such gratification, and the temporary toleration of displeasure on the long and circuitous road to pleasure. (BPP 48)

Once we have a unified ego, then it is straightforward to see that this ego can relate, intentionally, to an object outside of itself. In fact, Deleuze is here arguing, I think, that in the Freudian analysis, in much the same way that the object is constituted by the subject, the act of unification of the ego is what allows the organism to confront a unified field of objects that it can act on.

As well as the extension of active synthesis, we also have an extension of a passive synthesis. This revolves around the notion of a virtual object which is, I think, quite obscure:

The child constructs for itself another object, a quite different kind of object which is a *virtual* object or centre and which governs and compensates for the progresses and failures of its real activity: it puts several fingers in its mouth, and appraises the whole situation from the point of view of this virtual mother. (DR 123)

Why might we need a separate conception of an object to deal with passive syntheses? Well, the first point to note is that if the child is going to continue to be able to bind excitations, then clearly it needs to relate in some way to a source for those excitations. This implies some kind of relationship to the outside (it needs to relate to some kind of object that generates excitations). Now, as we noted, binding does not relate to objects, but rather to signs – binding is an integration of excitations rather than a relation to a representation. This means that the kind of external object that allows for the generation of excitations will be different in kind from the actual objects of representation.

Now, the notion of a virtual object as presented here is not particularly clear, but I think we can get somewhere with explaining it if we take up Keith Faulkner's definition of it as 'an image of an action that will satisfy a drive in an auto-erotic manner.' (Faulkner PhD, 57) Bearing this in mind, we can understand Deleuze's claim that 'sucking occurs only in order to provide a virtual object to contemplate in the context of extending the passive synthesis.' (DR 123) As I said when we looked at the first synthesis, the process of binding did not rely on the nature of an external object as such, but rather operated in terms of signs (just as the heartbeat doesn't resemble the motion of the heart). Similarly, in sucking its thumb, the child is not interested in the actual object it is related to (the thumb), but rather in providing signs for a passive synthesis. Thus, the thumb takes the place of the mother's breast as providing excitations for the organism. Now, given that passive syntheses do not

operate with representations, the child does not take the thumb to be the breast, but rather that aspect of the breast which satisfied the original binding process. This aspect is an action, or an image of an action. The thumb therefore provides a series of excitations that can be bound by a sub-representational passive synthesis.

Once we accept this account of the nature of the virtual object, we can start to piece together Deleuze's analysis of it. The fact that we have two types of objects, one of which is actual, and one of which is virtual, should put us in mind of the notion of the pure past that Deleuze introduced in his discussions of the syntheses of time, and in fact, Deleuze characterises virtual objects as 'shreds of pure past.' (DR 126) So how are they constituted? Deleuze gives the following description of the constitution of the virtual object:

We see both that the virtuals are deducted from the series of reals and that they are incorporated in the series of reals. This derivation implies, first, an isolation or suspension which freezes the real in order to extract a pose, an aspect or a part. This isolation, however, is qualitative: it does not consist simply in subtracting a part of the real object, since the subtracted part acquires a new nature in functioning as a virtual object. (DR 125)

When we are dealing with an object of representation that we intend towards, we cannot help but think of the object as a totality. When we think of a chair, for instance, we cannot help but think that if we walked around the object then we would continue to be presented with different perspectives on it. Now, the binding process isn't concerned with the totality of the object, but only with those aspects of the object which are capable of generating excitations. It is thus subtracts from the total object those aspects that are capable of creating excitations in it. It is only interested in a particular gesture, motion, or aspect, and not for instance, the object which actually moves to create the gesture. But as a representation has to be a coherent object separate from the particular perspective it is presented from, then the process of subtraction actually changes its nature (a gesture without a gesturer is incoherent as a representational object, for instance).

This, I think, explains why the virtual object is not to be understood in terms of actual objects, either as a full object, or as a partial object. Why does Deleuze refer to them as 'shreds of pure past'? Well, I think that this point is related to the further comment that virtual objects are incorporated in the series of reals. On the one hand, this is obvious, in that virtual objects have to in some sense motivate behaviour – they have to be found in the world somewhere. So when the child sucks his thumb, it is relating to a virtual object, but only on the basis that this is incorporated into an actual object.

There is a second reason, which is that once again, the positing of a non-actual series paralleling the actual world allows us to explain the notion of association. Deleuze puts the question as follows:

The difficulties in conceptualising repetition have often been emphasised. Consider the two presents, the two scenes or the two events (infantile and adult) in their reality, separated by time; how can the former present act at a distance upon the present one? How can it provide a model for it, when all its effectiveness is retrospectively received from the later present? (DR 129)

When we looked at the syntheses of time, the problem with understanding association as operating purely in terms of actual memory was that everything was like everything else in some way. That meant that it was impossible to explain why a particular experience conjured up *this* memory. We have the same kind of problem here with repetition. How is a present experience connected with a past experience? Freud argues that a trauma, for instance, means that we repeat a prior experience, instead of representing it. Similarly, character involves a repetition of our relations to new situations. So for Freud, what is repeated is a prior actual state of affairs. Ultimately this understanding of repetition makes it obscure therefore why the past still influences the present, and why this past rather than that is repeated. It is also the reason why we end up positing the death drive as a material process, as repetition is always repetition of an actual event.

For Deleuze, what ties together two series of events is that the same virtual object is at play (incorporated) in both series. This explains why a past event can still influence the present, not because of the actual events themselves, but because of the virtual object incorporated into them. This also explains why it is the case that we can see, for instance, in someone's character, a repetition of the same relationships, or the same actions, in different situations. The subject does not reason by analogy on the basis of their past responses, but is reacting to the same event incorporated into a different state of affairs.

In this sense, we can say that what is repeated is something that has never actually been present, but rather that the same virtual object is present in disguise in the various states of affairs that make up the repetition. There is no first term to the series itself, however, as repetition takes place in response to the drives rather than the ego and its object.

Third Synthesis

Once again, we find that Deleuze's discussion of the first two syntheses appears to him to be inadequate. Deleuze makes the claim that the virtual and actual objects 'inevitably become confused, the pure past thereby assuming the status of a former present, albeit mythical, and reconstituting the illusion it was supposed to denounce, resuscitating the illusion of an original and a derived, of an identity in the origin, and a resemblance in the derived.' (DR 135) The implication, I take it is that ultimately once again, we have a subordination of the virtual to the actual.

Deleuze's resolution to this problem is, I think, once again to posit a fracture within the self. The following is quite speculative, but I think gives the general account of what is happening in the third synthesis.

First, we can note that Deleuze criticised the death drive for instituting a fundamental dualism between life drives and death drives which, as we saw last week, Deleuze sought to overcome through the notion of intensive difference.

Now, the introduction of the narcissistic ego is supposed to show how this is possible by bringing in the notion of a single form of libido, which is present in the death drive, but also desexualised in the life drives. If Deleuze can show that there is one form of libido that is operative in both, he can show that both drives are simply different expressions of the same intensive force. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud presents the following account of narcissism:

Where an individual is required or compelled to give up a sexual object, there is not uncommonly a compensatory process in the form of that particular ego-alteration⁴³ that we can only describe as 'erecting the object within the ego', just as occurs in melancholia. We do not yet know the precise circumstances in which this surrogation process takes place. Perhaps the ego uses this introjection, which is a form of regression to the mechanism of the oral phase, in order to make it easier to give up the object, or even to make it possible in the first place. Perhaps this identification is the one and only condition under which the id will give up its objects.

...

When the ego adopts the features of the object, it so to speak presses itself on the id as a love-object; it seeks to make good the id's loss by saying 'There, you see, you can love me too – I look just like the object.' (BPP 120)

In this case, therefore, the ego gives up relations to the outside world in order to relate itself to the id. Now this process is essentially one of the individual abandoning its sexual goals, and its intentional relations to the outside world in order to relate directly to itself. As such, this involves a process of desexualisation of its libido:

By thus commandeering the libido of the various object-cathexes, setting itself up as sole love-object, and desexualizing or sublimating the libido of the id, it operates directly counter to the designs of Eros; it puts itself at the service of the opposing drive-impulses. (BPP 136)

Now, this movement presupposes the existence of what Deleuze calls 'a neutral, displaceable energy, essentially capable of serving thanatos' (DR 137), or in other words, of equally becoming expressed in the structures of the id or of the ego. As this is prior to habit and memory, it can be equated with the intensive difference which is actualised in both of them. This account is incomplete without a discussion of the fracture of the ego, which, I take it, occurs through the Oedipus complex, and mirrors Kant's paralogisms, but it does at least give the basic outline at least.