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Lecture 19: The Nature of Ideas

Introduction

Last week, we looked at a specific example of the Idea – Geoffroy's unity of composition. As we saw, the unity of composition allowed us to talk about the connections between different organisms without resorting to analogy. We further saw how the three moments of Geoffroy's theory could be mapped on to the structure of the Kant's Idea (the bones as undetermined, the unity of composition as determinable, and the actual organism as determination). This week, I want to focus on two questions. First, what is the nature of Ideas more generally? In particular, I want to compare them to two competing notions that we could use to try to explain the nature of the world. The first is essence, which we looked at last term when we looked as Aristotle. The second is possibility, which we looked at earlier this term. Finally, I want to talk a little about Deleuze's obscure account of the origin of Ideas themselves.

We have now seen Deleuze provide both a formal account of the Idea, in the form of his reflections on the metaphysics (or better, dialectics) of the calculus. The question I want to begin with is, what is the structure of the Idea? As Deleuze notes, Ideas are neither structured like Platonic forms, nor related to one another like Platonic forms. Deleuze notes that 'they combine the greatest power of being differen*t*iated with an inability to be differen*c*iated.' (DR 235) The neologism, differenciation, is necessary because in English, to differentiate means both to distinguish (what Deleuze calls differenciation), and to apply an operation of the calculus to a function (what Deleuze calls differentiation). Now, we can see that for Deleuze, these terms have almost opposite meanings. To differenciate, or distinguish, involves determining a difference between two things. In order to be able to do this, we have to be able to determine which properties the two objects have so we can find a property possessed by one but lacking in the other by which we can tell them apart. To differentiate, on the other hand, is to put an equation into a form where it possesses elements that on their own are simply incapable of being determined. The differential, *dx*, is simply not an object: it has no determinate magnitude. As Ideas are based on differentials, they are therefore differentiated, without being differenciated. While an Idea can be actualised, or expressed in a given situation (the real relations of a society, for instance), it is not this given situation.

Given the claim that Ideas find their expression in actual entities, we might be tempted to claim that an Idea is a kind of essence of a thing. Deleuze, however, is adamant that 'Ideas are by no means essences,' (DR 236) or perhaps more precisely, that we can call it an essence 'only on condition of saying that the essence is precisely the accident, the event, the sense.' (DR 241) This claim is inseparable for his claim that Ideas 'perplicate,' (DR 236) that is, interpenetrate one another. At several points in his analysis, Deleuze likens the Idea of colour to white light, (DR 230, 258) and similarly likens the Idea of sound to white noise. (DR 258) This is a reference to a discussion by Bergson on the nature of essence in his essay, 'The Life and Work of Ravaisson.' In this text, Bergson considers the question of determining what is it that different colours have in common, and hence, how we are to think, philosophically the notion of colour. In effect, we are therefore asking the question 'what is X?' for colour, the question Deleuze takes to be 'the question of essences'. (DR 236) Now, according to Bergson, there are two ways of answering this question. The first is the

traditional answer to the question of essences provided by Aristotle. In order to determine the essence of something, we abstract from it those properties that are inessential (or accidental), to arrive at purely those properties that every individual in the class has. Thus, 'we obtain this general idea of colour only by removing from the red that which makes it red, from the blue what makes it blue, from the green what makes it green.' (CM 225) If we try to answer the question, 'what is colour?', by this means, we end up with a concept that is abstract and empty, as we have proceeded 'by gradual extinction of the light which brought out the differences between the colours.' (CM 225)

The alternative is what Deleuze takes up with his concept of perplication. Bergson suggests that rather than proceeding by abstraction, we proceed by 'taking the thousand and one different shades of blue, violet, green, yellow and red, and passing them through a converging lens, bringing them to a single point. Then appears in all its radiance the pure white light which, perceived here below in the shades which disperse it, enclosed above, in its undivided unity, the indefinite variety of multicoloured rays.' (CM 225) Such an approach can only be an analogy, as light is still seen in this case too much along the lines of actual phenomena, but it makes clear the interpenetrative notion of the Idea clear. Just as the conjunction of the two terms of the differential relation allow us to specify all of the points on a curve, the differentials of the Idea together specify all of the states of the state of affairs that a given system can be in. Rather than achieving this by excluding what is non-essential, it does so by positively specifying the genetic conditions for each of these states. In this sense, for Deleuze, the Idea does not so much contain the essence of a state of affairs, but the grounds for the totality of possible accidents a system can exhibit Depending on how the elements are related to one another, different states of affairs will be generated. Thus, rather than being an *essential* structure, what Deleuze is proposing is an *accidental* structure.

Clearly if an Idea is to be understood as forming a multiplicity of interpenetrating elements, then it cannot have the same nature as states of affairs. Elements in states of affairs are determined in an opposite manner to the interpenetrative structure of perplication, namely by determining their limits (what they are not). Furthermore, we can see that just as problems were immanent to their solutions, the genetic conditions for states of affairs (Ideas) are actually simultaneous with states of affairs themselves. The unity of composition in Geoffroy's case does not simply *become* determinate, but determines while itself remaining undifferenciated. We thus have two series that differ in kind: actual events that occur within the world, and the ideal events of 'sections, ablations, adjunctions' (DR 237) that engender them.

Now, this characteristic of coexisting with the states of affairs it engenders means that it also differs from possibility. We have already seen that the Idea can give rise to different actual situations, so for instance, Geoffroy's unity of composition provides the rules for generating the anatomical structure of different animals. Deleuze defines the structure of the Idea as being *virtual*. Now, Deleuze introduces three claims about the nature of the virtual that need to be explored. It is 'real without being actual, differentiated without being differenciated, and complete without being entire.' (DR 266) In this section, I want to go through these different claims, contrasting them with the structure of possibility, which appears at first glance to be a closely aligned concept. In fact, Deleuze claims that 'the only danger in all this is that the virtual could be confused with the possible.' (DR 263)

What does it mean to say that the virtual is real without being actual? If we return to the notion of possibility, we can ask, what happens when something which is merely possible is realised? We can begin by following Kant in noting that there is no difference in structure between a possible object and a real object: 'A hundred real thalers do not contain the least coin more than a hundred possible thalers.' (find reference) Rather, the difference is purely in the existential status of the two objects. In order to distinguish a hundred real thalers from a hundred possible thalers, we need to note that the former exist whereas the latter do not. Possibility is therefore distinguished from actuality in terms of existence. Now, the virtual is instead 'Real without being actual, ideal without being abstract.' (DR 260) Throughout this chapter, we have seen that Ideas are different in kind from actual states of affairs, just as differentials differ from actual numbers. In this sense, we do not need to distinguish possibility from actuality in terms of reality, as they can be distinguished by this difference in kind itself. More than this, however, the virtual is real to the extent that it provides the structure responsible for the genesis of the qualities we find in actual entities. 'The reality of the virtual is structure.' (DR 260) It provides a complete account of the structure of the actual state of affairs that results from it, and is no less a real part of the object than the actual object itself. Here Deleuze takes up a distinction between completeness and wholeness that Descartes introduces to characterise the mind-body problem in his *Meditations*. In his replies to the objections of Arnauld, Descartes makes a distinction between the terms complete and whole. 'Now someone who says that a man's arm is a substance that is really distinct from the rest of his body does not thereby deny that the arm belongs to the nature the whole man. And saying that the arm belongs to the nature of the whole man does not give rise to the suspicion that it cannot subsist in its own right.' (CWD vol 2, 160) His point here, essentially is that we can conceive of the (complete) arm in separation from conceiving of the body as a whole, because the notion of the arm does not rely conceptually on the structure of the body as a whole. This does not imply that the arm is *in fact* separate from the body. Deleuze's point is that the virtual does not rely on any reference to the actual, although in actual fact it is always found to be associated with the object which it engenders. In this sense, it escapes from the limitation of possibility we discussed in the previous chapter. There, we saw that the concept of possibility could not give us the sense of an object, because it merely reduplicated it at a higher transcendental level of analysis. As such, a possible object is not complete, since it is dependent on the notion of a real object to which we add the concept of non-being. The completeness of the virtual is thus what allows us to understand it as giving the sense of a proposition, even though it is not whole, since 'every object is double.' (DR 261)

Finally, the virtual is differentiated without being differenciated. That is, it operates according to an entirely different procedure of determination to that of the possible. As Deleuze puts it, 'one [the possible] refers to the form of identity in the concept, whereas the other designates a pure multiplicity in the Idea which radically excludes the identical as a prior condition.' (DR 263) We saw that chapter one of *Difference and Repetition* deals at length with the claim that in order to determine something through the properties it possesses, we need some kind of concept of identity. This is because we describe an object by ascribing predicates to a subject. The other generates structural properties by bringing into relation with each other elements which are in themselves undetermined. We have covered this difference between being differentiated (the virtual) and being differenciated (the actual) before, but here, Deleuze characterises it in terms of Leibniz's distinctions between the clear and confused, and the distinct and obscure. We saw in chapter one that Leibniz's understanding of the world ultimately traces it back to the notion of

possibility, as God chooses the best of all possible worlds. Nevertheless, in his claim that perception of spatio-temporal objects is a confused perception of conceptual relations, we have an important insight into the relationship between virtuality and actuality. In the *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Leibniz puts forward the claim that perception of objects that can be sensed is based upon microperceptions below the threshold of the senses. In support of this theory, he gives the following analogy:

> To give a clearer example of these minute perceptions which we are unable to pick out from the crowd, I like to use the example of the roaring noise of the sea which impresses itself on us when we are standing on the shore. To hear this noise as we do, we must hear the parts which make up this whole, that is the noise of each wave, although each of these little noises makes itself known only when combined confusedly with all the others, and would not be noticed if the wave which made it were by itself. (NEU, Cambridge, 54)

Deleuze interprets this passage (against Leibniz's reading) as presenting 'two languages which are encoded in the language of philosophy and directed at the divergent exercise of the faculties.' (DR 266). On the one hand, we have the language of the roaring noise of the sea. This is the language of the clear-confused. It is clear, insofar as I am able recognise the roar of the sea as a whole and take it up as an object, but it is confused as I only do so insofar as I do not take account of the elements (the waves) which together determine it as an object. On the other hand, we have the language of the waves themselves, which is the language of the virtual, and of the distinct-obscure. If we, on the contrary, focus on the noise of the waves themselves, the waves are perceived distinctly, as we grasp the differential relations that make up the noise as a whole but also obscurely, as our focus on these particular relations precludes our comprehension of the 'white noise' of the sea as a whole. In contrast to Descartes' notion of clear and distinct ideas, Deleuze's claim is that 'the clear is confused by itself, in so far as it is clear.' (DR 316) It is this radical divergence between the two languages of philosophy that allows us to give the sense of a proposition, or the conditions of experience, without simply falling into a banal reiteration of the structure of actuality. Now, here we can draw a sharp distinction between what Deleuze is doing and what Descartes did. Descartes built his argument on the notion of clear and distinct Ideas. What this implies is that the nature of the thing (its clarity) was the same as the elements that made it up (its distinctness). We can see this claim as essentially being that the appearance of a thing as an extended body is equivalent to its essence as an extended body. For Deleuze, the appearance of a thing (insofar as it is a representation) is different in kind from what makes it up.

We are now in a position to ask what the origin of Ideas themselves are. Deleuze begins this section by noting that what we have encountered so far is a reorientation of the nature of a problem. Rather than a problem being seen as a purely subjective matter, we have seen that exploring the nature of the problem is a properly ontological, or metaphysical matter. Thus, as he notes, the organism can be seen as a solution to a problem. In fact, the question-problem complex is 'the only instance to which, properly speaking, Being answers without the question thereby becoming lost or overtaken.' (DR 244) Now, even if modern ontology engages with the question, it 'remains inadequate' (DR 245) because of two common misunderstandings. First, 'it sometimes plays upon the indeterminate as an objective power of the question, only to introduce a subjective emptiness which is then attributed to Being.' (DR 246) Deleuze is perhaps talking here of Kierkegaard, and in particular, the figure of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*. Abraham's willingness

to sacrifice his son Isaac is for Kierkegaard incomprehensible, and places Abraham outside of the ethical imperatives of a philosophy such as Hegel's, with its basis in representation. Nonetheless, this incomprehensibility is ultimately grounded in the fact that Abraham has an immediate relationship with the absolute, which transcends the mediated relationships of representation. As such, Kierkegaard's understanding of the problem ultimately remains within the subjective sphere for Deleuze. Alternatively, it may manage to 'dissociate the complex, thereby entrusting questions to the religiosity of the beautiful soul while relegating problems to the status of external obstacles.' (DR 246) In this case, the Idea is no longer seen as a problem that impels us to find a solution, and thus impels us to specify its relation to an actual domain of solutions. To make this mistake would be to read Deleuze as a kind of religious thinker who espouses a rejection of actual states of affairs. The danger is thus that by not exploring the relationship between questions and problems, we risk ignoring the fact that thinking relates both to the actual and to the Ideas that engender it, and not to one at the expense of the other.
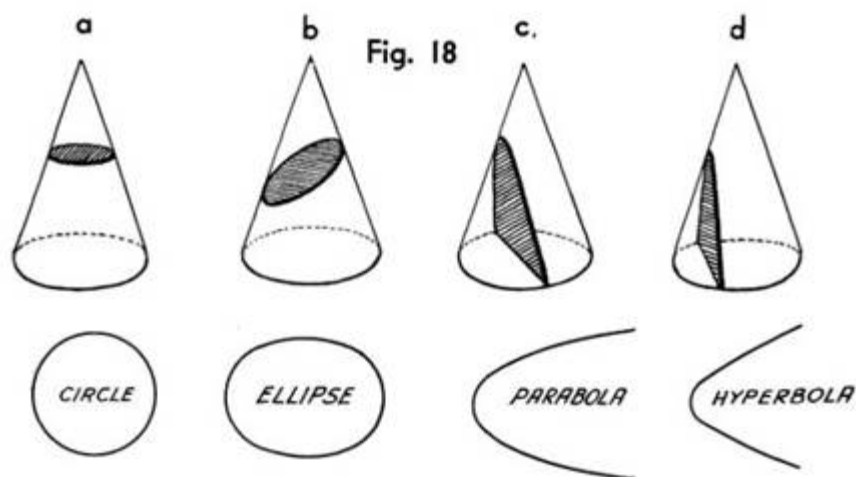
What, therefore, is the relationship between a problem and a question? Deleuze presents his answer to this question in the following manner: 'Problems or Ideas emanate from imperatives of adventure or from events which appear in the form of questions.' (DR 247) Such an imperative would be the kind of encounter that we discussed earlier this term, such as Socrates' discovery of the incommensurability of his categories of thought (the large, the small) with the purely relative determinations found within the world of becoming, or even an encounter with Socrates himself who uncovers the presence of *aporias* within the current image of thought. These encounters raise the faculties to a transcendental operation, and hence allow them to engage with Ideas. Such an account of the question would lead us into scepticism if it did not also include a reference beyond the state of affairs. As such, 'questions express the relation between problems and the imperatives from which they proceed.' (DR 247) So far, therefore, the account provided by Deleuze parallels the Platonic account quite closely. Whereas for Plato, Deleuze claims that this process leads to a ground in an apodictic principle, for Deleuze, it instead leads to an unground in the problem. Rather than invoking 'the moral imperative of predetermined rules,' (DR 248) Deleuze instead therefore invokes the notion of the dice-throw and decision:

> It is rather a question of a throw of the dice, of the whole sky as open space and of throwing as the only rule. The singular points are on the die; the questions are the dice themselves; the imperative is to throw. Ideas are the problematic combinations which result from throws. (DR 248)

The conclusion of this analogy is straightforward. The question and the imperative relate to one another as the problematic instance within the state of affairs (the contradictions that Socrates discovers, for instance), that point beyond themselves, through the imperative, to the problem that engenders them. The Ideas result from this process as the result of our going beyond the state of affairs to find its conditions. The remaining moment of the analogy to explain is the significance of the points on the dice themselves. We can explain this by introducing the moment of decision. As we saw in the first case of learning, we move to the sub-representational level by combining 'adjunct fields,' or similar cases to reach the problem (in Bergson's example, we relate walking to swimming). Now, depending on which cases we condense to form the problem, our understanding of it will differ. How we relate together different encounters, and which encounters we relate, will give a different emphasis to the problem (a different set of singularities), and hence to our Ideas. If the

relation of different adjunct fields gives us different Ideas, then how is it that a given throw is able to 'affirm the whole of chance' (DR 248) (to provide an objective Idea)? When we looked at the example of the conic section, we saw that depending on how we took a section on the cone, we would derive a different curve, and with it, a different set of singularities. Each of these curves was, nonetheless, an objective characterisation of the cone. In a similar way, each enquiry gives us an objective problem, but these are not exclusive, as different enquiries will take a different section of the cone, and hence derive different singularities.

This is the reason why in spite of each throw being an objective constitution of the problem, 'there are nevertheless several throws of the dice: the throw of the dice is repeated.' (DR 251) In this sense, there is no ultimate characterisation possible, as there would be with knowledge, but rather a whole series of questions, each of which generates its own field of singularities. Each philosophical enquiry therefore puts forth its own question, in the basis of an imperative, which constitutes its own field of singularities. Remaining true to the encounter does not, therefore, lead us to one apodictic principle, but rather to an objective organisation of a problem. Deleuze gives the example of conic sections to explain this fact. In geometry, we can generate a curve by cutting a cone with a plane, just as if we cut a cylinder in half, we would find, on the surface of the cut (the section), a circle. Now, if we take a section of a cone, depending on the angle to the cone at which we take the section, we will have a different type of curve:

Fig. 18

Each of these has curves has different singular points (points where the gradient is 0, null or infinite), despite the fact that all of the curves are created from the same fundamental shape. Just as each conic section gives us a different curve, each question gives us a different distribution of singularities. But as each conic section also repeats the structure of the others, each question is also a repetition, albeit a repetition that differs, not just in terms of solutions, but also in terms of its Ideas: 'Repetition is this emission of singularities, always with an echo or resonance which makes each the double of the other, or each constellation the redistribution of another.' (DR 251) At this point, Deleuze notes an affinity with Heidegger's emphasis on the question, while also cautioning that the emphasis on one single question risks covering over the real structure of the dice throw:

Great authors of our time (Heidegger, Blanchot) have exploited this most profound relation between the question and repetition. Not that it is sufficient, however, to repeat a single

question which would remain intact at the end, even if this question is 'What is being?' [*Qu'en est-il de l'etre?*]. (DR 251)