Reversing Platonism

Gilles Deleuze and Paul Ricoeur on the genetic power of events and actions

Presented at the 52nd Annual Conference of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (SPEP), University of Oregon, 24-26 October. Part of the panel Events, Actions and the Problem of Agency in the Wake of Deleuze's Logic of Sense, organized in collaboration with Sean Bowden and James Williams (whose comments greatly improved this paper).

In this paper I will bring the positions of Gilles Deleuze and Paul Ricoeur into proximity with each other in order to draw out points of conflict. I do not aim to solve these conflicts, nor to develop them into a full clash. Rather, I will show that both Ricoeur and Deleuze develop a theory of novelty that can be characterized as a reversal of Platonism. These theories are not opposed *per se*, but they differ in orientation. Deleuze situates novelty in the virtual event. This virtual event can be understood as a singular point of transition that transforms one system into another. Or to catch the event in a somewhat more concrete image, it is a kind of metamorphosis (in Kafka's sense). In contrast, Ricoeur situates novelty in human actions that are played out as a fruitful tension between two poles. This tension opens up a field of potentiality in which new ideas and novel meanings can emerge. Ricoeur has analysed this tension on many levels. Its most basic structure can be found in what Ricoeur calls a *living metaphor*. This living metaphor is itself something 'in action'; it brings two opposed semantic fields into a fruitful tension with each other. This tension reveals a previously unnoticed proximity between these two semantic fields, without destroying their distance. In this way a new, third semantic field is opened up that is only given in potential.[1] Ricoeur argues that it is within tensions like this that generative differences arise, resulting in new ideas and novel meanings. The main point of divergence between Deleuze and Ricoeur can therefore be framed in two contrasting pairs: virtual event versus human action; point of transition versus tension (or: metamorphosis versus metaphor).[2]

A first reversal of Platonism: Deleuze on the genetic power of events

In the Preface to *Logic of Sense*, Deleuze gives a privileged position to the Stoics who initiated a "new image of the philosopher".[3] In Deleuze's view, Plato's theory of Ideas is based on a repetition of the same. By participating in the Idea, the true image repeats the Idea as a copy. For Deleuze, Platonism is unfruitful, because it gives priority to universal identities and therefore cannot account for the creative force of concrete differences. For that reason, Deleuze argues for the reversal of Platonism, as set in motion by the Stoics. In the '18th Series of the Three Images of Philosophers', Deleuze states that for the Stoics it "is always a matter of unseating the Ideas, of showing that the incorporeal is not high above, but is rather at the surface, that it is not the highest cause but the superficial effect par excellence, and that it is not Essence but event".[4] I will address this 'unseating of the Ideas' in four steps.

---

[1] Ricoeur develops this theory in *The Rule of Metaphor* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).

[2] This echoes what Deleuze and Guattari state in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986): "Metamorphosis is the contrary of metaphor. There is no longer any proper sense or figurative sense, but only a distribution of states that is part of the range of the word." (22) This opposition between metamorphosis and metaphor introduces an interesting framework for contrasting Deleuze and Ricoeur. However, it should be noted here that Ricoeur develops a much more nuanced and rich understanding of metaphor than the more traditional accounts of metaphor to which Deleuze and Guattari refer.

[3] Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, xiii.

[4] Ibid., 130.

As a first step, Deleuze refers to one of "the boldest moments of Stoic thought",[5] the splitting of the causal relation. The Stoics introduced a distinction between two domains of being: corporeal causes that exist (*actuality*) and incorporeal effects that only subsist (*virtuality*). To the domain of corporeal causes belongs everything that 'exists' in the sense that it is capable of acting or being acted upon (including 'things' like virtue or the soul). In contrast, the domain of incorporeal effects encloses non-existing entities that only subsist as impassive effects, without having any causal efficacy. Sextus Empiricus gives a nice illustration of these two domains of being:

> The Stoics say that every cause is a body which becomes the cause to a body of something incorporeal. For instance the scalpel, a body, becomes the cause to the flesh, a body, of the incorporeal predicate 'being cut'.[6]

A powerful body, the scalpel, becomes a cause to a less powerful body, the flesh. This results in an incorporeal effect: the predicate 'being cut' that is expressed in language. For Deleuze, it is of particular importance that the corporeal cause differs in nature from the incorporeal effect. In this way the effect does not resemble the cause, as was the case with the Platonic copies that participated in the Ideas. As such, it creates the possibility of difference and novelty. However, this first step in the reversal of Platonism is not enough, because it does not dispose of another kind of Idealism: an Idealism of language in which abstract universals are used as models of truth.

This is remedied by a second step, which Deleuze again attributes to the Stoics. Not only did the Stoics split the causal relation, they also separated the incorporeal effect from the linguistic propositions in which this effect is expressed. On the one hand, this incorporeal effect can only subsist in propositions and has no reality without it. On the other hand, it does not merge with the proposition. Thus the incorporeal effect does not only differ in nature from the cause that brings it about; it also differs in nature from the proposition in which it is expressed. In this sense, the incorporeal effect is both an event that happens to a body and a sense that subsists in a proposition. In other words, the incorporeal effect is a sense-event with two sides: one that is turned towards the domain of corporeal causes and another that is turned towards the domain of propositions. This is why Deleuze describes the incorporeal effect – the sense-event – as a surface-effect. It does not take place in the depth of bodies, nor in the height of abstract language, but at the surface between them. Therefore, Deleuze argues, this sense-event cannot be judged by the measures of the depth (it is neither active nor passive, but impassive). Nor can the sense-event be judged by the measures of the height (it does neither affirm nor negate, but is neutral). In this way, the autonomy of the incorporeal effect is established. However, this autonomy is fragile and needs to be protected and assured.

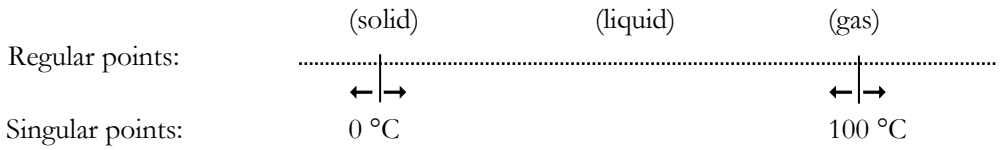
As a third step, Deleuze therefore introduces the notion of 'quasi-causality' as the genetic power of the sense-event that protects it from being swallowed up by the corporeal cause. We saw earlier that incorporeal effects are subject to causality, to the extent that they are produced by them. "But", as Deleuze points out, "to the extent that they differ in nature from these causes, they enter, with one another, into relations of quasi-causality. Together they enter into a relation with a quasi-cause which is itself incorporeal and assures them a very special independence".[7] Deleuze makes clear that this incorporeal quasi-cause differs in at least three respects from normal corporeal causes. First, the quasi-cause does not bring about incorporeal effects, but only operates on them.

---

[5] Ibid., 169.
[6] Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors,* 9.211. In: A. A. Long & D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Volume 1. Translations of the Principal Sources with Philosophical Commentary.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 333.
[7] Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 169.

Second, the quasi cause is a mobile and endlessly displaced instant that constantly divides and subdivides the current state of affairs in two directions at once. Third, the relations of quasi-causality are reversible. Taken together, these three aspects constitute the quasi-cause as differentiator. In its capacity as differentiator, the quasi-cause organizes the relations between incorporeal effects in "an aggregate of non-causal correspondences which form a system of echoes, of resumptions and resonances, a system of signs".[8] Although, Deleuze does not explicitly define what it means to operate on incorporeal effects, he suggests that it is about extracting singular points from an actual state of affairs and placing them in creative relations to each other. This can be illustrated by a simple example. For instance consider the changes in temperature in water. Most of these changes are insignificant. However, there are two singular points that stand out: 0 °C and 100 °C. It is at these two points that a phase transition occurs which changes the state of the system as a whole (Solid←|→Liquid or Liquid←|→Gas). For that reason, it is at these two points that an effect takes place, comparable to the incorporeal effects that Deleuze is talking about. Such an effect does not occur at any of the other, regular points (like 56 °C or 127 °C).

Figure 1



If we take this temperature example to be a simplified model of Deleuze's sense-events, then it is clear that the events that take place at the two phase transitions are not created by the quasi-cause. Rather, the quasi-cause extracts these singular points from the actual situations in which they occur. Moreover, it is also clear that the sense-event that takes place at the transition point 100 °C cannot be named 'the boiling of water' (Liquid→Gas) or 'the condensation of gas' (Liquid←Gas); rather, this sense-event includes both directions at the same time.

The fourth and final step in Deleuze's reversal of Platonism, involves an ethics of the event, which is concerned with immanent modes of life. As such, it replaces morality, "which always refers to transcendent values"[9] that are laid down in restrictive rules. As Deleuze writes in the '21st Series of the Event', "Either ethics makes no sense at all, or this is what it means and has nothing else to say: not to be unworthy of what happens to us".[10] This sounds rather enigmatic and strange. What does it mean to become worthy of what happens to us? To illustrate this, Deleuze refers to the French poet Joe Bousquet who became paralyzed after WWI. Instead of despairing over his wounds, Bousquet wrote "My wound existed before me, I was born to embody it".[11] In other words, it was not an already defined entity named 'Bousquet' who became wounded; it was the wound that created Bousquet. For Deleuze, it would be wrong to interpret this as an act of resignation; it is rather a creative response. Bousquet actively attuned his own will to the logic of the virtual sense-event produced by the gruesome circumstances of his actual situation.

Nevertheless, in the '29th series – Good Intentions Are Inevitably Punished', Deleuze explicitly comments on human actions and the incorporeal effects that are caused by them. For my purposes, it is of importance that Deleuze makes a strict distinction between human actions that

[8] Ibid., 170.
[9] Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), 23.
[10] Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 149.
[11] Joe Bousquet as cited by Deleuze (*Logic of Sense*, 148).

can be ascribed to a particular person and sense-events that are pre-individual, non-personal, and a-conceptual. As we saw earlier, sense-events are neither passive nor active. For that reason, Deleuze would situate concrete human actions in the domain of corporeal causes and not in the domain of incorporeal effects. Viewed as incorporeal effects, the results of human actions cannot be understood in a framework of two poles: the willed action that starts a sequence (cause) and the accomplished action that concludes it (consequence).[12] Rather, these incorporeal effects must be viewed from the perspective of the quasi-cause that operates on them and relates them to each other. Take, for instance, Deleuze's example of Oedipus who thinks he killed a stranger, but actually killed his own father. In my view, Deleuze argues that this event cannot be judged from the perspectives of the intention and the consequence. These are merely regular points that lead up to the incorporeal effect of the killing, the singular point that changes the Oedipus-system from one state into another. Moreover, this incorporeal effect can only be understood in relation to the other incorporeal effects that are constitutive of Oedipus (the prophecy, the attempted murder on the child Oedipus, etc.). In terms of an ethics of the event, Oedipus cannot hide himself behind circumstances ("I didn't want that"[13]). It was not Oedipus, as a fixed entity, that killed his father. However, it was *the-killing-of-the-father*, as an incorporeal effect, that produced Oedipus. He cannot escape that.

A second reversal of Platonism: Ricoeur on the genetic power of human actions

Ricoeur's philosophy can also be defined as a reversal of Platonism. However, he approaches Plato from a slightly different perspective by focusing on "the *aporia* of the presence of absence".[14] In Ricoeur's' reading, Plato introduced a distinction between two degrees of being: (a) the *pure reality* of the Idea and (b) the *impoverished reality* of the image. Plato considered this second degree of being as impoverished, because it was not completely present. Instead it can be characterized as the 'presence of an absent thing'. In other words, the image gets its reality from the absent thing to which it refers. However, nothing guarantees that the image actually refers to something true; it can easily give rise to falsehood and trickery. To remedy this problem of falsehood, Plato introduced a criterion of truth: faithful resemblance. Ricoeur suggests that on the basis of this criterion, Plato was able to separate two kinds of images: true images or copies that faithfully resemble the original; deceptive images or simulacra that refer to fantastic things that have no prior reality. In Ricoeur's view, the criterion of faithful resemblance is misleading and must be rejected. To his mind, the order of priority between the original and the image must be reversed. This opens up the possibility of an image that creates the absent thing to which it refers. For Ricoeur, a reversal of Platonism means to transform the negative qualification of an image into a positive qualification: the image as an *increased* rather than an *impoverished* reality.

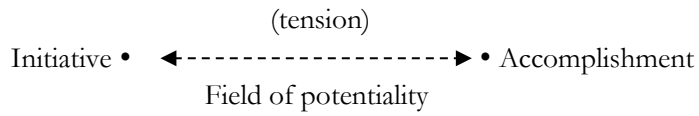
Ricoeur finds the resources for this move in the work of Aristotle. He primarily focuses his attention on Remi Brague's reading of a much debated passage from Aristotle's *Metaphysics Theta.*[15] In this passage, Aristotle makes a distinction between two categories of action. First, a *pure action* that is continuous and finds its end in itself. Seeing, understanding and living would be good examples of this type of action. Second, a *movement* or an *unfinished action* that finds its end in something outside itself and will cease after a while. Examples include building, walking, writing,

---

[12] Cf. Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 207.
[13] Ibid., 206.
[14] Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 10.
[15] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 9: 1048bl8-35. In *Aristote et la question du monde* (Paris: PUF, 1988), Remi Brague gives an original interpretation of this passage which inspired Ricoeur's understanding of the actuality/potentiality distinction. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blarney (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 199-217.

etc.[16] Like the Platonic image, the actions of the second category are not completely present but can be characterized as the 'presence of an absent thing'. However, unlike the Platonic image, this type of non-presence is productive and can introduce genuine novelty. Aristotle even invented a name for this productive non-presence: potentiality. Potentiality is neither given before nor after the action, but is rather inherent in it. That is why, for Ricoeur action takes places as a tension between two poles: (1) the initiative that starts the action and is directed towards an intended outcome; (2) the accomplishment in which the action reaches its intended or unintended end. It is between these two poles that a field of potentiality is opened up in which genuine novelty can emerge.

Figure 2



For Ricoeur, the tension between initiative and accomplishment indicates that novelty emerges within action. However, this novelty is only retrospectively revealed as such, after the action has ended and has been comprehended by human agents. This indicates that Ricoeur advocates a type of retrospectivity (of central importance to the two other papers in this panel).

I began this paper by introducing a contrast between Deleuze's notion of virtual events (structured as transitions) and Ricoeur's notion of human actions (structured as tensions). Now it is time to specify this initial contrast, by drawing out some of the consequences of Ricoeur's theory of action and relating them to Deleuze's theory of the event. I have to restrict myself to just one point of contrast.

This point concerns the relations between action and causality. As we saw earlier, Deleuze followed the Stoics in splitting the causal relation in two separate domains: corporeal causes and incorporeal effects. Ricoeur, however, proposes another solution to the problem of causality. He argues that a human action is both a cause and an intention. As a cause it intervenes in the world, as an intention it is directed towards the actualization of a goal. Moreover, causes are connected to a chain of preceding causes, whereas intentions are directed towards something absent that is yet to come. For Ricoeur, this tension between causality and intentionality makes novelty possible, but it also makes it hard to analyze human actions. If the analysis only focuses on action as a cause it threatens to reduce it to a movement that simply happens but is not intentionally made to happen. However, if the analysis only focuses on action as an intention it threatens to reduce it to a psychological fact that has no impact on the course of the world. According to Ricoeur, it is only after the action has come to an end that it becomes possible to connect causality and intentionality. Then it becomes possible to evaluate the intention in light of the causal consequences. Nevertheless, as Ricoeur makes clear, the search for the intention of the action is an 'interminable investigation' because the chain of motivations gets lost "in the unfathomable haze of internal and external influences".[17] The search for the cause of an action, on the other hand, is "a terminable investigation which stops with the designation of the agent, usually by citing his or her name: 'Who

[16] Aristotle formulates this distinction in terms of fulfilment, for him a pure actuality is *energeia atelès* (literally 'fulfilled actuality'; Brague has 'acte complet') and an unfinished action is *energeia teleia* (literally 'unfulfilled actuality'; Brague has 'acte incomplet'). Cf. Brague, *Aristote*, 497.
[17] Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 95.

did that? So and so.'"[18] In other words, the retrospective understanding that gives meaning to the action and evaluates it in terms of intention can always be taken up again.

Following Georg von Wright, Ricoeur calls the tension between causality and intentionality a form of quasi-causality.[19] For him, quasi-causality makes it possible to evaluate intentions not only in terms of aims but also in terms of (un)intended consequences. Despite the fact that Deleuze and Ricoeur both use the term 'quasi-causality', they differ fundamentally in their understanding of this term. Deleuze understands the quasi-cause as an incorporeal operator that extracts sense-events – as singular points of transition – and connects them with each other. The novelty and importance of a sense-event is determined by the other sense-events to which it relates. This does not imply an act of interpretation after the fact. Ricoeur, on the other hand, views quasi-causality from the perspective of the tension between causality and intentionality that can only be judged retrospectively in an act of interpretation.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 137-142.