

## **Deleuze: Concepts as Continuous Variation**

*(Justin S. Litaker interviewed Daniel W. Smith. Mr. Litaker focused his questions on continuous variation of concepts in Deleuze).*

**JSL:** How did you come to be interested in the work of Gilles Deleuze, and what sustains your interest?

**DWS:** I first became interested in Deleuze when I was in graduate school. I was reading Nietzsche when the English translation of Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy* came out. So I read the book and was amazed at the way Deleuze had systematized Nietzsche's thought. At the time, there weren't many translations of Deleuze's works available, so I went to the library at the University of Chicago and discovered *Difference and Repetition* on the shelves. I thought it must contain the secret of Deleuze's work, which was only hinted at in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. So right at the start, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* instilled in me a kind of conviction that Deleuze was worth reading, and that there was much more in his work that I needed to find out about. I had also been reading Vincent Descombes' book *Modern French Philosophy*, and he had isolated Derrida and Deleuze as the focal points of contemporary French philosophy. So I knew that Deleuze was more than a historian of philosophy, and that he had a project of his own, which was, at the very least, oriented around the concept of difference. There and then, I decided that I needed to learn French in order to read *Difference and Repetition*.



You asked what has sustained my interest in Deleuze through the years. For one, I've never tired of reading Deleuze. Even now, I don't think I have a complete sense of what Deleuze is up to. I think this is partly because of his manner of writing, which has been described as "free indirect discourse." Deleuze has written numerous monographs in the history of philosophy—on Hume, Nietzsche, Kant, Leibniz, Bergson, and so on—but in each book he is also reading and using these thinkers toward his own philosophical ends, so that in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, for instance, there is a becoming-Nietzsche of Deleuze as well as a becoming-Deleuze of Nietzsche. Readers are thus caught up in what Deleuze would call a becoming, or a zone of indiscernibility. Reading Deleuze is more like following a trajectory or a continuous movement that you never have done with, rather than arriving at a set of doctrines or positions that would lie at the heart of Deleuze's thought.

**JSL:** Has this process of becoming or continuous movement affected your own reading of Deleuze?

**DWS:** Absolutely. Right now I'm trying to write a book on Deleuze. At one point, Deleuze says that he still believes in philosophy as a system, and I initially thought, well great, I'll try to elucidate Deleuze's system of philosophy. I thought I'd approach Deleuze's system using Kant as a model, since Kant has a very architectonic idea of what philosophy is. So I borrowed five rubrics from Kant's system: aesthetics (the theory of space and time, the theory of art, the theory of sensibility), analytics (the theory of concepts in the Transcendental Deduction), Dialectics (the theory of the idea), ethics, and politics. I figured I would start from Kant, then show how Deleuze modifies Kant, and in the process of doing that I would be able to produce some version of what Deleuze's system is. That, at least, was my initial idea for the book.

But of course it has all turned out to be much more complicated than that. Although Deleuze says he is interested in philosophy as a system, he also says he thinks of his own system as being "heterogenetic," that is, it is itself a genesis of the heterogeneous, the production of the new, the production of difference. What this means is that Deleuze's own system modifies itself over the course of its development. Deleuze gives an example of this in his preface to the Italian translation of his book *Logic of Sense*, where he takes as one of his examples his own concept of intensity. He more or less says, "In *Difference and Repetition* I developed a concept of intensity that was related to a notion of depth. In *Logic of Sense*, I retained the concept of intensity, but the concept was transformed because it was related to a new problem, the problem of surfaces. Now I'm writing a new book with Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, in which the concept of intensity no longer refers to *either* depth or surface, but instead refers to something that takes place on a 'body without organs.'" So here we have three books by Deleuze that utilize the concept of intensity, but the concept changes in each of those books. There is a kind of 'becoming' of the concept, which is marked by its own internal variations, depending on the problematic it is responding to. In *What is Philosophy?*, which is the last book Deleuze wrote with Guattari, he utilizes the concept of intensity yet again, but now in a fourth sense, where it designates the internal components of a concept.

All this has indeed changed my understanding of how to approach Deleuze, since his "system" is in a perpetual state of becoming, and his concepts are all marked by internal mutations and variations—which makes it very difficult to "plot out" the system, as it were. It's far more complicated than the movement of contradiction and negation that one finds in Hegel's system, which is why Deleuze is both indebted to Hegel and breaks decisively from him. Moreover, when you write on Deleuze, you get caught up in that becoming yourself: there is a becoming-Smith of Deleuze and a becoming-Deleuze of Smith. In writing on Deleuze, you yourself become something other and his work becomes something other, and you never get to the end of the process. As Nelson Goodman might say, Deleuze's writing *exemplifies* what it *refers* to: the idea of rhizomes and multiplicities, with their infinite connections and transformations. That's why writing a book on Deleuze is so challenging: at best, it's going to be a snapshot of a movement of thought that is a continuous and never-ending process.

**JSL:** Given this internal variation, doesn't there still have to be some sort of continuity or consistency in Deleuze's concepts? If so, what accounts for this consistency?

**DWS:** There is a consistency to a concept like intensity, but consistency is not the same as identity. In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari provide, as an example of this, an analysis of Descartes' concept of the *cogito*, which, they suggest, has three fundamental components: doubting, thinking, and existing. In order to doubt I have to be thinking, and to think I have to exist. But obviously doubting, thinking, and being are themselves complicated concepts, which the concept of the *cogito* simply gives consistency to, given the context of Descartes' problematic concerning the search for certainty. But then Kant comes along and says, ok, I understand what Descartes is doing, but Descartes has forgotten an essential component of the concept of the *cogito*. He neglected to ask the question: What are the conditions under which the *cogito* is *determinable* as an existing being? For Kant, the answer to this question is time, and Kant therefore introduces a mutation into the concept of the *cogito* by adding the component of temporality. There is indeed a continuity between the two concepts, but this continuity is something that is

*produced*. So you get this image of philosophy as a proliferating network of concepts, in which internal variation is the condition for the consistency of concepts.

I think a key notion here, in trying to trace out the trajectory of these Deleuzian concepts –or for that matter, *any* concept in the history of philosophy–is the notion of *problematics*. The creation of concepts for Deleuze is always linked to a problem. In Leibnizian terms, the problematic is the sufficient reason for the creation of concepts. Put crudely, you create new concepts because the old concepts have been problematized in some way. Kant is forced to transform the concept of the *cogito* because his problem is no longer the search for certainty but rather the search for the conditions of possible experience.

**JSL:** You seem to be suggesting this idea of “heterogenesis” characterizes not only Deleuze’s work, but the entire history of philosophy as well.

**DWS:** Yes, I would agree with this, at least to a certain degree. Kant himself was a master of conceptual innovation. There’s a wonderful passage, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, at the beginning of the Transcendental Dialectic, where Kant introduces his concept of an *Idea*. The concept of an *Idea* was, of course, created by Plato in response to a particular problem, namely, Socrates posing of the “What is. . .?” question–What is Justice? What is Courage? What is Beauty? Socrates never gives a response to these questions, but Plato’s genius lies in having *constructed* a response, which is precisely his creation of the concept of the *Idea*. Only the *Idea* is what it is; only the *Idea* *is* the beautiful in and of itself, for instance, which examples of beautiful things participate in. Kant comes along and discovers that he has a similar problem–it’s not the same problem, but it’s not unrelated. Kant’s problem is that we seem to have certain concepts–such as the Self, the World, and God–that by their very nature go beyond the possibility of us ever having any experience of them whatsoever. We can *think* these concepts, he says, but we can never *know* them. We can easily think of the World as the totality of what is, but we can have no experience of this totality, and thus no knowledge of it, in Kant’s sense.

So in this passage, Kant is saying, “I, as a philosopher, am looking for a word to designate these special concepts that go beyond any possible experience.” And he straightforwardly lays out his options: he could borrow a word from everyday language, he could use a technical Latin phrase, he could simply make something up, or he could dip into the history of philosophy and find someone who invented a concept for a similar problem and then modify that concept. Kant opts for this latter option. Plato was saying that the *Ideas* are not something we ever encounter in experience, since what we encounter in experience are only examples or instances of *Ideas*. Since the concepts Kant has in mind (Self, World, God) are never encountered in experience either, he decides to take up Plato’s concept of the *Idea*, and modify it for his our purposes.

So in this sense, what takes place within Deleuze’s philosophy–a constant transformation of concepts, with their internal mutations and variations–simply recapitulates what takes place in the history of philosophy. Plato creates the concept of the *Idea*, and Kant picks up the concept and modifies it. And the story doesn’t end there: Hegel in turn modifies Kant’s notion of *Idea* in his own way by introducing “moments” in *Ideas*. One might say that this is how Deleuze sees the entire history of philosophy: it is a constantly shifting matrix of concepts that are created or modified at particular times and places under the compulsion of an equally shifting set of problematics.

**JSL:** In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze himself will in turn modify the concept of the *Idea* found in Kant and Hegel.

**DWS:** Exactly. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze himself proposes a new and immanent theory of Ideas as problematic, or, as Kant said, “problems without solution.” He distinguishes Ideas from concepts, and interestingly, in *Difference and Repetition* he still interprets concepts in a traditional sense as representational. Even though he is constantly saying that philosophy is the creation of concepts, it is not until late in his career, in *What is Philosophy?*, that Deleuze asks, What do I mean when I use this term. *Difference and Repetition* proposed a “dialectic of Ideas,” to use Kant’s terminology, but it is only in *What is Philosophy?* that he attempts to formulate his own “analytic of concepts.” I know some scholars of Deleuze’s work who think that what Deleuze calls an Idea in *Difference and Repetition* is the same as what he calls a Concept in *What is Philosophy?*, since he talks about them in similar terms, as multiplicities. I myself don’t think this is the case, since Ideas, as problematics, are the conditions through which one creates philosophical concepts. These problematics have an intelligibility of their own that is accessible to thought—which is why Deleuze calls them Ideas. But the concepts that are created, while they are derived from the problematics, as their condition, are nonetheless distinguishable from it. This is why Ideas are both critical and creative: they critique or problematize any given order, but at the same time they are the germ for the genesis of the new.

**JSL:** Why do you think Deleuze was compelled to formulate a new “analytic of concepts,” as you put it, so late in his career? *What is Philosophy?* was one of his last books.

**DWS:** One of the issues that lies at the heart of *What is Philosophy?* is the problem of the categories. Aristotle has a list of ten categories; Kant proposed a new list of twelve categories. For both of them, a category is, roughly speaking, a concept that is applicable to any object whatsoever of our experience (whereas an Idea is a concept of an object we can never have an experience of). The concept of causality is an easy example: any object of experience that we could come across is caused by something else and this in turn causes other things. So causality, Kant would say, is a universal concept applicable to any object of experience; or more precisely, it is the categories that condition any possible experience we can have. Now a philosophy of difference like Deleuze’s cannot, by its very nature, be a philosophy of categories, at least in the Aristotelian or Kantian sense. Categories are universals that condition, in advance, any possible experience. Deleuze, however, is not interested in the conditions of possible experience, but rather, as he says, the conditions of real experience—and the conditions of real experience are the conditions of the new (heterogenesis).

So in *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze was trying to think through a kind of “transcendental deduction” of the categories, but in a new way, so that the concept of a category has itself be transformed. The categories can no longer be universals, but must themselves be capable of transforming themselves—mutating and changing—in order to account for the new. This, in itself, is a revolution in philosophy. In order for the conditions to account for difference, or the new, the conditions must be differential through and through, so that any actualization of these conditions is itself a difference, or something new. The categories must have a consistency of their own and yet contain within themselves a heterogenetic capacity. Deleuze doesn’t talk about all this explicitly in *What is Philosophy?*, but in prior interviews, he says that it was the problems of the categories that motivated his writing of the book.

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